Alternative Design®

Sharing the Office: When Designers Play Matchmaker
Episode 20 Transcript

Episode Description:
Welcome to the future of office spaces, as seen through the eyes of Stanley Sun from Mason Studio. Stanley's innovative approach brings a new perspective on how offices can be co-owned by employees and the community. Stanley's vision goes beyond redefining physical spaces. It's about discovering new revenue streams for businesses that also create meaningful connections and foster community building. We talk about their experience in transforming their office into a cultural hub during Toronto's DesignTO festival, a space that truly reflected their company's values. Get ready for an exciting conversation that challenges the conventional workspace and brings the future of shared office spaces to life.

Stanley Sun: [00:00] So, I think what's important is not so much what does the office become, but how do companies modify and change the way in which they think about what that space does. Is it for work, or is it for engagement, or is it for loyalty? Is it for what? So, I think it's about reinventing that word office to be what it needs to be for that company.

Kaelynn Reid: [00:23] Welcome to the Alternative Design podcast, where we explore the power of foresight and design to create future ready spaces. In each episode, we talk to diverse voices to discover the ways our world is changing and uncover insights that will influence the built environment of tomorrow. I'm your host, Kaelynn Reid, an Interior Designer and Certified Futurist, and I want to help designers think like futurists so we can take actionable steps today to become makers of a better future. On today's show, we're breaking our own rule. While we pride ourselves on finding signals of change from beyond our industry to discuss how we can design the built environment for the future, we found something from the inside that we just have to share. If you've been tuning into this season, we're exploring the future of the workplace. We've been inviting designers to reimagine the office and, more specifically, who owns it. In this episode, we're talking with Stanley Sun from Mason Studio, a design firm in Toronto, who, when faced with the potential downsizing impacts of hybrid work, chose to share the extra office space with the local community. Instead, we'll share a forecast revealing how future workplaces could be co-owned by some unlikely suspects, influencing the way they'll need to be designed to support news stakeholders with different lease durations. This is episode 20, Sharing the Office When Designers Play Matchmaker.

Kaelynn Reid: [02:08] Stanley, thanks for coming on the show today. When we get started talking about your role at Mason Studio, and then a little bit of the history of it as well.

Stanley Sun: [02:12] Sure, thanks for having me. My name is Stanley Sun and I'm one of the cofounders of Mason Studio. We are an interior design firm and really what's at the core of what we do is about empowering people and communities, and the way to do that is through interior design. My background is in interior design, but it's also in human sciences. Really, what we try to find is balance between the emotional impact of spaces, but then also, how does that change us emotionally, physically, physiologically? There's this kind of balance between an emotional response and really what does it do to us as people?

Kaelynn Reid: [02:49] I really think there's something to be said for the science behind design. I know the design community right now is really leaning into more evidence-based design and a more evidence-based approach. It's just really fascinating to see how the body and the mind and just our human

chemistry can be changed by our surrounding environment. It's really fascinating. So, tell us a bit about the redesign of the studio and why it was so unique.

Stanley Sun: [03:12] Absolutely. This is something we love to share, because this space that we work in on the day-to-day is something that's public and open to anybody who wants to come engage with us. And how we got there actually was triggered by COVID, something that we experienced altogether. And at that time we did have a quote "traditional office space", where we're going in every day to work and we thought we don't know what's coming up. So, why don't we take this opportunity when everybody seems to be uprooted a little bit? So, let's take advantage of this and see if we can create a different model and let's see if it works. So, what we did was we took a space and we decided to dedicate only about 20% of it to the traditional working space, so somewhere where you can sit with your laptop, and we decided to create the rest of the spaces, programming opportunities, so flexible space that includes galleries, workshops, lectures, a library, just lounge space, a little café. Because what we wanted to try to figure out is number one how do we get our team to want to come in here? How do we get them to enjoy the space and come in here because they want to, not because we demand them to come in? So, what is it about this space that actually engages our team, our employees? Secondly, we also want to figure out is there a way that we can also create a safe space, not only for our team, but also for their families as well? A lot of our team have kids and elderly parents and we wanted to make sure that this space was not just for the people that were working on the day to day, but in fact, it's actually a space that supports them as well as people, and once we started to see people really enjoying the space and having a positive response to it, we decided to open it up to the bigger community, not getting it the neighborhood, and what we started to do was create programming that would invite them in.

Kaelynn Reid: [04:54] So to get us thinking like futurists, there's a strategy I like to use from the Institute for the Future called "Flip the Future". You basically come up with as many truths about a given topic and then completely flip the script and imagine a future where the exact opposite is true. Let's try that out with the office. Some general truths about the office...offices are usually leased out or owned by leadership, not the employees. They usually aren't family friendly. The space itself is typically only meant for employees or business activities and is almost never considered to be a hub for the public community to engage with. Okay, now flip these truths and consider a future where the opposite of all these statements are true.

Stanley Sun: [05:44] So, just as an example right from the street front on ground level, we have a community gallery that really helps to provide a platform for equity deserving artists and designers and, first off, that is just an opportunity for us to provide back to the community, but it also draws in people who may not otherwise engage with the design firm, and then we've done other workshops. For example, we've taught with a partner how to make small wooden boxes for gardening. So, it's things that are very tangible, very small, but engage people and bring them in and just recognize it as a safe space. That we're going to have these continual events that allow for them to be part of our process. And, as you were saying earlier with the experimentation, is that we're really not only just connecting with the community, but we're also trying to figure out and use this as a bit of a research opportunity to figure out what are people looking for, how do they respond, how do they use the space, so that we can take that information and actually apply it onto our projects and our client work.

Kaelynn Reid: [06:45] Wow, okay, there's so many things in that, so many nuggets. I love how countercultural is to what the traditional office has been business as usual in terms of the office being sheltered. It's just for the team, it's just for the employees, and totally challenging that notion getting out of the box and inviting family members, those that we love. So how do you determine what would be most important for the community to have in that space?

Stanley Sun: [07:11] What we originally thought was going to be important to the community in some parts was and in some parts wasn't. And we recognized and come to the fact that we're just going to try. The only way for us to do this is just to get in there. If we think too hard, we explore too long, we're just going to lose the energy and the flow of it. So, what we've really tried to do is not rely on our own experiences. We try to pull in as many people as we can, who might know the community better than we might, depending on which community we're looking at. So, this could be in the form of partnering with not-for-profit organizations that work with them on the day to day. We've talked to government organizations who provide funding and support so that we understand what channels they're going through. We've been talking to people just on the streets as well, so just asking them as they walk by our storefront what are they looking for? And pass us the observation as we're looking around and we're seeing who's within the space and you have the demographics of the community. We're just looking at what might be of interest. There's a couple of schools in the area too. We're just thinking about, as we talk to go, parents and what they might be interested in, and then being introspective as well. So, one of the communities that we're looking at is the design community, and one of the things we recognized, as we spoke about briefly, is that there are not programs for parents with children. It seems to be an excluded demographic for some reason, yet we design for them every day. We're looking inwards, we're looking outwards, we're asking around. We're never going to get it perfect but what we're trying to do is just try as much as we can and just see every single step that we take. We're just hoping to make a greater positive impact with every single one that we do.

Kaelynn Reid: [08:44] To Stanley's point, there's something I think designers should be keeping an eye on in the evolution of work...working moms. According to a new report from the Hamilton Project at the Brookings Institution, the percentage of women working with young children is significantly higher than it's ever been. And while there were concerns about the pandemic pushing working mothers out of the workforce, the interpretations show that remote work has done the opposite. It's given them the flexibility needed to juggle work and parenting a little bit better. When you couple this fact with what some are calling a mini baby boom as a result of the pandemic, there's a lot of women in the workplace who have children, but we're also seeing childcare options crumble under reduced funding and daycare staff shortages all across the country. Remember that flip the future exercise. These are generally not looked at as good coworkers in our culture. Most employees get one day in April to bring their kids to the office, but what if that was different? Earlier this year, Arkansas Governor Sarah Sanders announced a new pilot program allowing employees of Little Rock's Department of Human Services to bring infants and small children to work. They're going to implement kid friendly spaces to deal with possible distractions and noise. So, if we flip that future to one where children were actually allowed to come to work with you. How would the design of the working environment change? Would daycare centers become a commonly included space type, like mother's rooms are today? I think it's really possible that we could see new partnerships in the workplace that will change the way we design these spaces to support diverse employee needs. After the break, we talked to Stanley about how Mason Studio put a childcare center, an art gallery, a coffee shop, a library, and a meditation room into their office space and what it could mean for the future of work.

Kaelynn Reid: [10:45] This past spring, Kimball International held its first inaugural Future X event, where we invited a cohort of designers ranging in experience, discipline, and location to join us in Detroit for a foresight workshop on the future of belonging and design. One of the questions we asked each designer was what are you most excited or concerned about regarding the future?

Cerrie Gammons: [10:57] Something I'm excited for is just the choice of space that people have adaptability within their own working space, creating that third place within your own office. Concerned

about again following that technology aspect of AI in design and how technology can replace designers in space planning, putting in a program and filling in the space without us having to do that. My name is Cerrie Gammons with Hendrick in Atlanta. I am a Director and FF&E Specialist. You are listening to Alternative Design podcast.

Kaelynn Reid: [11:47] So, Stanley, what's the reaction been from your employees and also from the community?

Stanley Sun: [11:52] I would like to say generally, overall being a very positive response. I think just the conversations, if it just came down to that, is that you're able to meet somebody who might not have met otherwise, people from the community who have come in and just had conversations with people who they would pass on day to day but no opportunity or reason for them to connect just on the street. So as simple as that is just connecting people. And for us I think what was really important with all these programs is, yes, for the community, but also for us is to understand what is the purpose of our work. We are doing the interior design work, but it goes beyond that. So, if we don't make those personal connections, if we don't know the greater purpose of what we're doing with our work and our business, then why am I doing it? So, I think for us it's successful not only for ourselves to get more engaged and to further develop that purpose, but we're giving the opportunity to make those connections.

Kaelynn Reid: [12:43] So I wanted to ask a somewhat controversial question, because I know that much of the project was really altruistic in terms of wanting to serve the community needs, but I did read that there was an opportunity for new revenue streams being opened up for Mason's studio, and so I was hoping that maybe you could talk a little bit about that and really, if there's opportunity for other businesses to sort of find these new opportunities for new business models and revenue streams?

Stanley Sun: [13:07] Oh, absolutely. I think for us, we're absolutely happy to talk about the idea of community and business, because as an entrepreneur, we also have to do good business and as a for-profit organization, we're not a not-for-profit. It's important for us to be able to be responsible to the business as well. What we think is the most important part of this if we are creating a profit or if there is a revenue stream. It's transparent. What are we doing with this? What is happening with this? Why are we charging for certain things and where does it go? For us, what was the most important thing is we were able to generate some revenue from some areas. What's more important for us is that we've been able to connect with the right people, that being clients or team members or people who just believe in what our mission is and just want to be part of our world. I think that has been the most important thing for our business is that we've been able to make connections that we wouldn't have been able to otherwise. So, I think organizations out there who are really trying to reach a target demographic if we can just express things that are so important to us that start to be magnetic attractions to people who are the right fit for organization or the right clients. I think that's the return and something that's measurable and quantifiable.

Kaelynn Reid: [14:16] Yeah, I agree. So how do you see the future of the office maybe unfolding either a bit differently than we had expected, or maybe even just the value prop. How do you see that changing for the office environment in the future?

Stanley Sun: [14:29] I think the office is always, in my mind, going to have value. However, what I think is going to change is what we define as office. I really think that it's just a space. It's a physical manifestation of the brand or the corporate values, and whatever happens at a space, whether it be work or community or just a storage space, whatever it is, I think always has some sort of value, because it's an expression of what the company means and does. And we are humans, we're physical beings and whilst there is that

virtual environment, we still need some sort of connection and some sort of physical place to be, whether it be on the day to day or occasionally or every couple of years. So I think what's important is not so much what does the office become, but how do companies modify and change the way in which they think about what that space does. Is it for work, or is it for engagement, or is it for loyalty? Is it for what? So I think it's about reinventing that word office to be what it needs to be for that company and just trying to really be truthful about how this space responds to the values of what you're trying to do, what your mission is.

Kaelynn Reid: [15:41] Let's talk with the Toronto Design Festival and that exhibition. That really turned your office into this cultural hub and, from what I saw, you hosted these installations where visitors could experience this optimistic view of the future. I don't want to give it away, but maybe you could elaborate more for us, because I was really excited to see that and I'd love to know how you did it and what the response was.

Stanley Sun: [16:02] Sure, this is something that has been really exciting for us, because we really like to think about what is going to happen in the future, and we picked 10 years from now, because 2013 was not that long ago, and so much has changed and we're thinking 2033. There's going to be so much more change than that. So, instead of trying to think about what's going to happen tomorrow as in what's, my next step is how do we jump all the steps and just go towards what we want to achieve, what we want this office to be in 2033. Hopefully we can reconnect in 10 years and hopefully this space will be what our exhibition was. But just to give you some sense of some of the programs that we included there's a bit of a laundry list. I'll just list them out. But in the front we had a gallery marketplace, where we had a display and products of people and organizations that were B Corp certified and, rather than just talking about the product, we also talked about the people behind it, the people who made it the organizations behind it and their thoughts and processes, so that we can really connect with the people behind the products and services that are provided. So, within that gallery space, there was one part education, but of course we also had the opportunity and we gave them the chance, to purchase the services online within our physical stores or physical location as well. So that was a gallery marketplace. We also partnered with another B Corp organization which ran a "pay-what-you-want café", and this café was just part of the engagement where we recognized that food and beverage is always such a binder connecting factors. We just felt like they needed something that gave people purpose to come in but also gave the opportunity for those who may not otherwise have the economic factors to be able to purchase the coffees, to be able to enjoy it if they didn't want to pay them, that's okay. We also had a space, which was as we talked about, for kids programming. So, we created a partnership with another organization that provided children's stories, as well as children's furniture and toys and objects that were handmade, so that kids can engage with the space while the parents were learning or just enjoying their coffees. We had a workshop, which was open and partnered with another organization that was just next door to us where we created these wooden boxes. So, youth and children were taught the skills of woodworking, but then also taught some of the factors that were behind growing your own plants and vegetables indoors. So, there's a bit of education, but also a little bit of design thinking. And then two of the last programs was give one take one library. So, we have a library that has around maybe two to three thousand books a little library that the community can come in as they wish, and they can take one if they should wish to leave one, that's okay too. And finally, we had a space which was for mental health, where we had a couple thousand plants that were in a small room and it was effectively set up as a meditation space where it was about the cleansing of body and mind, where we could just rest. So, whilst all of these programs were happening, our team was working. So, it's about this idea of people coming in and out, being inspired by different things, and if you're working with us and our team, we want you to be engaged. If we're designing well, that means we

understand people, we're empathetic to different perspectives. So that's why we love just having people who want to be part of a world to come in and talk to us and be just energetic about what we're trying to achieve.

Kaelynn Reid: [19:28] Okay, so, if I'm understanding you correctly, all this publicly accessible programming is going on while your employees are trying to work. I know I can't be the only one questioning how that actually translates from a productivity standpoint. How do you get around the distractions?

Stanley Sun: [19:43] That's a really good question, because that's where the interior design comes in. We recognize that not everybody is an extrovert. Myself being a proud introvert, I do need my quiet space. So, interestingly, is what we actually decide to do as the library that I mentioned, the "Leave One Take One" is we designed it off of the stacks of the library so you're actually surrounded by the books and there's this natural inclination to be a little quieter and to be soft spoken when you're around thousands of books. So, we actually used a model of what's existing, what might already be within our cultural vocabulary, to help people be quiet without putting a don't speak here sign. In fact, when there were people in our space generally speaking, when they're at the library or a team was working everybody was very quiet. So, if you didn't want to engage, you weren't interested. These stacks that were calling them actually have enclosures around them so you can block off the world when you need to and even you have a private call. So there's still a sense of safety and we're using design as a way to create those different niches and vignettes for people to find somewhere where they feel comfortable.

Kaelynn Reid: [20:47] Mason Studio isn't the only one forming new alliances to share space. For years we've seen childcare centers and elementary schools share the same building or campus as nursing homes, and recently, in Minnesota Twin Cities, in Motion merged its offices with three other nonprofits and they share conference rooms and common spaces. There's several things outside of the design industry that are shaping these trends, though. We know employers are looking to downsize because of hybrid work and really high rent costs. This is causing a surplus of space. We know that, from an ego-conscious standpoint, utilizing existing buildings is far more sustainable than new builds, prompting a reimagination of how we can leverage space to serve multiple use cases. Technology is poised to very quickly create opportunities for the built environment and for furniture to change on a dime. We're talking walls filled with high-def screens that turn any office into a beach scape, and shape-shifting furniture that, when heated, can change from a chair to a lounger in mere minutes Sound crazy. It's already being done by students at Purdue. So, in all these seemingly disconnected signals and trends, why do they matter to you, a designer? In a future shaped by these concepts and these trends, designers could be looked at as not only subject matter experts in the look and function of space, but as a matchmaker of stakeholders looking to share these corporate office spaces. And you know the old saying, opposites attract. So what are the nuances that would be required to design a conference room that would serve, say, startup company employees and federal employees from the GSA?

Stanley Sun: [22:24] To recognize also that we've, to your point, crammed a lot into the studio. I do not expect other organizations to want to do this, because it's not quite right for them, but, to your point, what if we just took smaller interjections of these cross vertical integrations and made it something and just be a little bit less proactive, but just let it happen and see what happens within that space, without the active programming and the ones that you mentioned, universities are fantastic places for that to happen. I think even thinking about things that we may not otherwise see as a space that might be a workplace, for example, what if we were to go into a care home or something that just needs a little bit more activity and connection? Or bringing people into a daycare and working side-by-side and sometimes there's just ways

that we can think of it different that really provides value to both parties and I think that's a success of both people and both communities, both parties really benefit from it and just throws us off from our day to day and we can learn from one another, but also, I think it's just about the idea of using space. If we need space and we are going to continue to use it off the space, why not try to maximize it, and we all under environmental considerations right now? Why can't we share space and still have it highly operational and functional and all the needs of whatever the organization is that we just happen to be working with somebody else too. So, I think there's so many incredible benefits about this cross collaboration.

Kaelynn Reid: [23:50] Wonderful. So, if somebody wanted to get in touch with Mason Studio or take a look at some of the exhibitions, where would you direct them?

Stanley Sun: [23:56] You can take a look at our website at MasonStudio.com, and we'd also love to hear from you. So, if you want to send an email to info@masonstudio.com, we'd love having guests. So, if you are within the Toronto area, or even if you're not, you're just visiting. Like I mentioned, it's a public space, so please come on in and we'd love to have a coffee with you and chat some more.

Kaelynn Reid: [24:16] We're already seeing these small integration Stanley is referring to in the workplace, like designers including classrooms in the design to support upskilling needs. Be on the lookout for these small integrations to scale into bigger and more unusual partnerships in the future of the office. We may see daycare centers or hotel spaces needing to be meshed together in a recently downsized corporate office with a prime location. Mixed use spaces continue to be on the rise in commercial real estate and could continue to be bolstered by the convenience of centrally locating services and experiences, especially when the average commute time to the office is 50 minutes. Another thing to consider is the longevity of these new partnerships that could be co-owning the working space, with business leaders being shy about signing long term leases. Right now we may see more of what Mason Studio is doing, where temporary partnerships form as a way to leverage shared space for a limited time. When we talk about flexible design, what does that really mean in this potential future? Well, we could see more rapid installation and de-installation of furniture, or even the demand for portable office furniture. I, for one, have yet to see a portable workstation, and laptop tables don't count. But thinking beyond casters for just a second, what opportunities exist to think about the way we specify furniture and embrace the future of work. We could see things like furniture subscriptions come into play, serving these newly shared spaces in more temporary ways, and to prepare for this kind of future we need to continue exploring how technology can make both spaces and furniture more adaptable to different needs and begin thinking about how those different needs will need to be met all in the same space. That's it for this episode. A big thank you to Senior Foresight Manager Mark Bryan at Future Today Institute for helping us learn and adapt their signal collection, trend development, and scenario frameworks as we develop the content for these episodes. This episode was produced by myself, Andrew Reid, and Brandy Small. Audio production and scoring done by Andrew Reid. Alternative Design podcast is, of course, brought to you by Kimball International. Thanks for listening.