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WORDS JAN HOWLIN  
PORTRAIT ANTHONY BROWELL

# JAMES CALDER

ARCHITECT, WORKPLACE CONSULTANT AND TEACHER, JAMES CALDER IS CHANGING THE WAY WE THINK ABOUT WORKPLACE DESIGN AND STRATEGY

One of the leading global consultants in a highly specialised field, James Calder is an expert in the design and design potential of the workplace. With experience in the UK, Europe, America and the Asia-Pacific region, Calder has worked at the highest level with clients such as Brookfield internationally, Fuji Xerox in Japan, ABN AMRO in Europe, and National Australia Bank (NAB) and the Macquarie Group in Australia. He regularly speaks on workplace design at international conferences. He co-wrote and edited *Work Life*, a book on the subject of workplace, and having taught at various universities throughout his career, he is currently a Senior Academic Fellow at the University of Melbourne.

Initially trained as an architect, for the last six years Calder has been Director of Research and Consulting at Woods Bagot, where his role as a researcher, strategist, brief-writer, advisor, concept designer and facilitator, working in conjunction with architects, has helped major organisations use their people, technology and office space more effectively. Having recently left Woods Bagot to establish his own consultancy, Calder sees workplace design as the final untapped frontier of management consulting and as

a powerful corporate communication tool. When he talks about the significant evolutionary changes that are currently underway in workplace design, and how Australia is one of the countries at the forefront of that change, we have to ask, what is happening, and why?

#### BEGINNINGS

On finishing school, Calder had no idea his working life would lead him to the workplace. In 1981, he began studying civil engineering at the University of Adelaide, but later switched to architecture, with which he clicked immediately. "I learned about the creative design process, and was fascinated by it," he says. Unfortunately, "it was in that awful postmodern era where you just stuck a bit of cheap triangular tubing onto a façade, and there you go – that was architecture! I hated that with a passion because there was no logic or rationale to it," he says. "I loved understanding the reason for things." He then went on to complete an Honours year, studying urban history, learning why London, Paris and New York are the way they are, how they are always evolving, and how business is one of the key drivers of that change.

By that stage, Calder realised that a straightforward career in architecture wasn't for him, and he opened a café. But in 1989, when a colleague suggested he apply for a job in strategic facility planning (SFP) at Woods Bagot, he says he was just dead lucky. "In the first week," he says, "I knew that this was what I was going to do. I was always interested in business – it was like I was made to do it."

SFP was a relatively new field at the time and the directors at Woods Bagot had engaged an American, Chak Bautista, to oversee its introduction into the firm. The idea, essentially, was that through direct contact with company executives, strategic facility planners would understand the client's industry, business sector and company strategy, researching how things worked and how they could work better. They would identify the firm's particular culture, contribute the latest research and information on workplace trends from around the world, then help write the client's design brief to the architects. Calder immersed himself in the thinking and theory of SFP, and Bautista became a friend and mentor.

#### UK AND EUROPE

Much of the research and writing on SFP at the time was produced by DEGW architects in London. In 1991, Calder moved to London and secured a job at DEGW, developing strong bonds with company principals, Frank Duffy and John Worthington. "They were at the forefront of these ideas," says Calder. "They were giants in my small world and I was very lucky to spend a lot of time working with them."

Here he worked on Broadgate, the largest office development in London at the time (prior to Canary Wharf), and other leading projects, including British Airways, Waterside, and Baltic Flour Mills, Gateshead. "In the early '90s, this whole idea called New Ways of Working developed, based on the thinking that with mobile technology you wouldn't be tied to your desk."

DEGW was operating throughout Europe and Calder was also involved in workplace projects in Holland, where an allied approach called Activity Based Working (ABW) was coming to the fore. In 1996, a project designed by Erik Veldhoen of Veldhoen + Company for insurance company Interpolis in the Netherlands, created a benchmark example of ABW, in that it offered a variety of different workspaces and settings in a technologically advanced building

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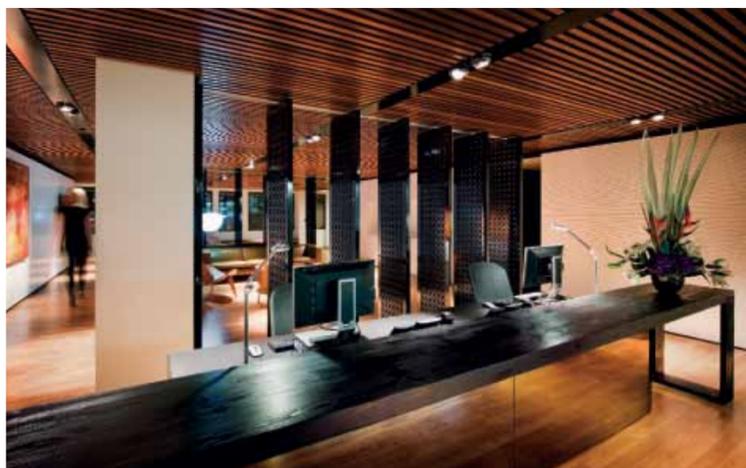
that freed people from their desks and allowed them to choose the kind of workspace that best suited their needs at a particular time.

#### DEVELOPMENTS IN AUSTRALIA

Having been at this hotspot of innovation and change in the UK and Europe, Calder returned to Australia in 1996 as a director of DEGW and was entrusted with establishing the firm in the Asia-Pacific region. In this role, he worked with many different architects. He wrote strategic briefs, for instance, for Aurora Place, the Renzo Piano-designed building on Macquarie Street in Sydney, and for 126 Phillip Street, Sydney, by Sir Norman Foster. He was also employed by insurance company MLC to consult on Campus MLC, in North Sydney, collaborating with James Grose and architects Bligh Voller Nield (now BVN Architecture). Completed in 2001, Campus MLC was described by Australian architectural academic, Philip Goad, as representing, "one of the most profound shifts in the history of post-War Australian office design". With its open planning and workstations, central staircase, playful design, café community and home comforts, the project signalled a new business culture for a changing world. As Calder says, "It set the bar."

When it opened in 2004, the colourful NAB building in Melbourne's Docklands (also created by James Grose and BVN Architecture) raised that benchmark higher. Then, in 2009, the new Macquarie Group building at One Shelley Street, King Street Wharf, Sydney, continued the evolution and pushed the scope of workplace design further again.

Notable for the extensive team responsible for its creation, One Shelley Street became another of Calder's projects, and was produced through Woods Bagot as executive architects, together with fitzpatrick+partners designing the base building, Clive Wilkinson Architects creating interiors, Veldhoen + Company as ABW consultant, and with technology and sustainability specialists involved as well. With its completion, Australia was now the site



**PREVIOUS PAGES** James Calder in the Woods Bagot studio in Melbourne  
**OPPOSITE TOP** Various settings at NAB in Docklands (2004)  
**OPPOSITE BOTTOM** NAB in Docklands (2004)  
**ABOVE** Macquarie Group's One Shelley Street (2009)



of a succession of innovative major office projects that placed it, along with the Netherlands and Scandinavia, at the leading edge of international workplace design.

“It is globally relevant what we’re doing down here. You ask people in New York what the top projects in the world are and they say, One Shelley Street! And I think NAB at Bourke Street will be the next example – a level on from Shelley Street,” he says of the building currently under construction by Brookfield Multiplex at 700 Bourke Street, Melbourne, on which he has worked from its inception.

While this year Calder has been consulting on workplaces in Canada and New York, he also has another project under way in Australia. Having recently established his own company, Calder Consultants, he will be working with Macquarie Group on new premises the company has purchased in Martin Place, Sydney, and is extremely excited by the prospect. He even suggests that this one example could anticipate a new era in corporate property management in which large organisations will once again own their own buildings, because they are finding, as he puts it, “that it’s so damned important to their business.”

#### OPTIMISING SPACE AND DESIGN

If there were a catchword currently attached to innovation in workplace design, it would have to be ‘collaboration’. In shamelessly simplified terms, the idea of collaboration seems to cover an organisation’s objectives to enhance its effectiveness through openness, a dynamic process of sharing information and of generating ideas fast, in a situation that encourages staff to feel more engaged, included and motivated. So, with collaboration as the aim, and human behaviour as the medium to be massaged, office space, design and technology are co-opted to the cause.

In spatial terms, Calder describes the traditional tall, skinny office tower with a central core as the enemy of collaboration, as people on each floor, even on each side of each floor, tend to keep to themselves. The new breed of workplaces, by contrast, is built with larger floor plates and pedestrian traffic-flow systems that specifically encourage regular and chance encounters. Gone, too, are the days of rigid grids and uniformity. The new office delivers a multiplicity of rich and varied spaces suited to different working styles and activities, in which colour, design and ergonomic comfort are used to create individuality and character, that could be anything from the wild to the whimsical.

With this wealth of possible spaces available to them, staff choose where and when they want to work. While ABW is the generic term – “It’s the jargon for giving up your desk,” Calder says – he believes certain work styles should have desks dedicated to them, and that ABW can too easily be commodified into one-size-fits-all solutions rather than custom-designed to work strategically in each instance. Calder prefers



terms such as the Inclusive Workplace and Real-Time Working, the latter describing the outcome of current technology that allows business processes to happen concurrently, in real time, in contrast to industrial-age processes, which were sequential. “The reality of work today is that we can work much more in parallel, and do things collaboratively, so you can do within a day what it would have taken three months to do in the past. And the key thing from a management point of view is that, say, you’ve got 20 projects on, if you’ve got the right design solution you can manage them in real time. The CEO can walk around his organisation and see precisely what’s going on – that’s what the new NAB building is all about.”

#### THE POTENTIAL OF TECHNOLOGY

But if collaboration is the driving force, technology is the enabling tool, and interest in its application continues to increase. With the advent of cloud computing, Calder says, “We’ll be totally freed up, so you can literally work anywhere.

“The next generation of buildings is what people are calling ‘device-agnostic’, so whatever piece of technology you choose to use, you can just bring it in and it will work.” He talks about businesses providing staff with technology as good as they have at home. “Now, there’s a radical idea!”

To date, however, Calder believes the great promise of information technology has not been fully realised – that while the technology for interconnection might exist within an organisation, areas such as human resources, technology and corporate real estate generally still operate independently. “Getting these conventional departmental silos talking to each other is one of the biggest issues in workplace design.”

#### POTENTIAL OF DESIGN

Another challenge corporations face today is their capacity to adapt to continuing change and an unknown future. Calder sees the strategic use of space in the workplace as the most effective way to help staff understand the kind of change that is required of them, and to help them embrace change quickly. He suggests we could be on the cusp of a new way of thinking about design, in which the word comes to mean a “much more rigorous understanding of how people are working and using technology”. In this way, he says, “Design can help drive the top line of business – which makes it a form of management consulting.”

“I’ve always been interested in the business world,” says Calder. “I like reading about business theory and I like delivering business outcomes. It’s not good enough, I think, to be postulating ideas and being academic about it. You want to be able to measure things. I’m not motivated by wanting my name on the building or that I want it to look like X, I’m much more motivated by saying, ‘Wow, this building works, and it works for the long term.’” This kind of long term vision of the workplace is where, he says, sustainability is really delivered in a commercial project.

“And I think it’s a fabulous time to be doing this. I can almost look at the last twenty years as being groundwork,” he says. “The future in this discipline is terribly exciting.”

#### JAMES CALDER - TIMELINE

- 1964** Born in Adelaide, raised both in Adelaide and in rural South Australia
- 1981-1983** Studied civil engineering, University of Adelaide
- 1984-1988** Transferred to Architecture faculty and graduated from the University of Adelaide, B Arch (Hons)
- 1989** Joined Woods Bagot’s Adelaide Strategic Facility Planning unit
- 1989-1991** Transferred to Woods Bagot, Melbourne, in strategic facility planning
- 1991** Joined DEGW London, Building Appraisal unit, working on Broadgate, London
- 1992** Rejoined Woods Bagot, Adelaide, in strategic facility planning
- 1993-1996** Returned to DEGW London, Worked on British Airways’ Waterside building
- 1994** Gained a Certificate for Teachers of Architecture, The Bartlett, University College, London
- 1994-1996** Consultant on Baltic Flour Mills, Gateshead, UK
- 1995-1996** Consulted on Australia Square for Lend Lease
- 1996** Established DEGW Asia-Pacific
- 1996-2005** Founded and became Managing Director of DEGW Asia-Pacific, made board member and director, DEGW
- 1996-1998** Worked on Aurora Place, Sydney
- 1998-2000** Consultant to Campus MLC, Sydney
- 1998-2003** Visiting Lecturer at the University of Technology, Sydney
- 1999** Consultant to Arup, Hong Kong
- 2000-2001** Consultant to Ernst & Young, nationally, Worked on 126 Phillip Street, Sydney
- 2000-2005** Knowledge-management research conducted for Fuji Xerox, Tokyo
- 2003** Conducted ABW pilot for ANZ Banking Group
- 2003-2004** Key projects for Woolworths Norwest, Maddocks Lawyers, Westpac, Sydney
- 2005** Won BRW Client Choice Award for Best Small Consulting Firm and Best Professional Services Firm of the Year (100m), Senior Academic Fellow at the University of Melbourne, consultant to Suncorp, Brisbane
- 2006-2009** Worked on One Shelley Street, Sydney, for Macquarie Group
- 2006-2012** Rejoined Woods Bagot as Global Director of Consulting & Research and board member
- 2007** Edited and contributed to *Work Life*, published by WB Research Press
- 2009-2012** Consultant to National Australia Bank at 700 Bourke Street, Melbourne
- 2012** Consultant to Brookfield New York and Deloitte, Canada. Established Calder Consultants. Engaged by Macquarie Group to consult on 48-50 Martin Place, Sydney

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**OPPOSITE (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP)** Lockers at One Shelley Street; Collaborative work pod at One Shelley Street; Casual work settings at One Shelley Street  
**ABOVE** Rendering of NAB building, under construction on Bourke Street, Melbourne