

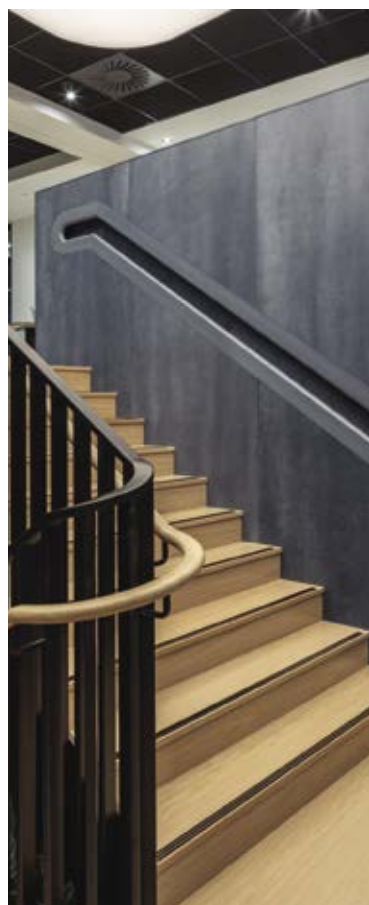
The ICG project

Specialist Group recently completed the Joinery fit out at the ICG Headquarters. We meet the lead designers on the project, HLW's Fleur Peck and Ashley Thomas-Pate, for an industry insight.



Fleur Peck (Top)
Senior Associate,
Project Leader
HLW

Ashley Thomas-Pate
Interior Designer
HLW



The appeal of a faster moving architectural process with shorter projects and the opportunity to really engage with the client and the ultimate users of a building is a strong draw for architects like Fleur Peck and Ashley Thomas-Pate. Their personalities and professional roles are totally focused on designing for people in a way which delivers a better working experience. To achieve this they need to be closely dialled into both current and future trends, something which has never been more fluid as the world adapts to the constraints of working through a pandemic. While the traditional 1-1 desk ratio had remained the default approach pre-pandemic in so many corporate spaces, the various hybrids of home or office working have finally caused every employer to re-consider their approach.

The post Covid landscape

With majors like Google and Apple announcing that home working will continue into 2022, it is clear that a degree of home working will remain with us for the long term. Despite this, many employers are urging for a full return while others are embracing home working and are actively promoting flexibility as a popular recruitment tool. In reality, not everyone wants to work at home so employers will increasingly be forced to find alternative solutions. No one can predict just where this will level out but HLW are already seeing sharing ratios of 1:4 appearing, suggesting that some employers will seek to use this as an opportunity to work their floorspaces harder

than ever, as Fleur explains: "We are seeing a big demand from clients who want to create work settings that are flexible and can be easily re-formatted within each space. To meet this demand, in the last 12 months, a surprising number of manufacturers have really come on board, creating pieces that are actually flexible and adaptable so that you can move spaces around to be different things and suit different activities."

"Many also see the importance of bringing people to the office to maintain and build upon their organisation's culture and to keep establishing that connection between people, because ultimately we are all human beings and connection is so important. Also you can't over estimate the value of those accidental conversations that arise and may cross fertilise something else in the business. It doesn't always have to be work related, sometimes it's just about building that team morale and the relationships between people."

The ICG Building

ICG's London Office was originally set up to support 1:1 working. As the teams return to work, this concept has remained in place, however the design has built in flexibility and support spaces to sustain agile and flexible working practices in the future. What really brought this building to life for them was to maximise the use of space away from the desk areas, like the clubhouse and collaboration zone. These spaces create opportunities for working as a team in different environments and the potential for



high value interaction, ideal in a hybrid working environment and when staff fully return to the office. We are seeing more and more clients putting this new balance of space allocation at the top of their design briefs."

The next big thing

Prior to the pandemic, it's fair to say that the next big thing occupying the news and professional debates was "Sustainability". Now as we head towards the third pandemic year and with some semblance of control afforded by the vaccines, the sustainability issue is fast resurfacing as a leading global issue, something

Ashley has already experienced. "We are already facing the challenge of a project aiming for net zero Carbon and this ICG project was an example where they wanted sustainability certification and had already addressed sustainability in the base build. For the interiors we advised them on what approach would be the best for their project including sustainable timber. We also introduced more unique ideas, like the material produced with recycled yogurt pots which we incorporated into the design! Using new materials can be challenging for designers and contractors but can be overcome when





we all work with an open approach to change. Our job is increasingly to set a sustainable baseline and give clients advice on why we select certain materials and inform them of the sustainable options which they might not have initially thought of."

“Climate change is a real crisis, so we have to do something right now.”

Fleur Peck
HLW

Fleur comments: "Obviously full net zero focuses on the important targets for carbon reduction but we must also remember that we

are creating experiences and designing with the user's wellness in mind. Biophilic design is certainly the way to go and we aren't just talking about live plants. The same benefits can be achieved in many ways through features such as organic shapes and access to natural light or finishes and even images reflecting the natural world. Overall, in terms of net zero, HLW has a sustainability action plan and we've signed up for the AIA 2030s, so all of our new projects are going to try and be Net Zero by 2030. Our approach to this needs to be at the start of every new project and even if clients aren't going for certification, we still need to make sure the project is sustainable all the way. Climate change is a real crisis and we can't turn back time, so we have to do something right now.

Tell the Story

It might be assumed that corporate design trends follow one of a number of trends. Cities are made distinctive by their skylines so should we expect the location to exercise a design trend

in individual cities, or alternatively is it unrealistic to expect multi-national organisations to adopt a different interior vibe for each new opening? Interestingly the experience at HLW is that the business is driven by a passion expressed as "Our work tells your story". Fleur explains 'It doesn't matter whether we're working on a project in London, Paris or Israel, or wherever, it's always about the client not the city. Or what our last design was or what we perceive the latest trends to be, ultimately every project we undertake is a direct reflection of our understanding of our client, their culture, future vision and where they want to be at that time and in that place. But ultimately every project is different because of the client more than the location and draws on each client's unique character and personality. The same applies of course to finding the right solution for differing regulations, climates and cultures." So obviously the process of

letting the client express themselves is a vital part of the design process at HLW. Informally this often involves the client revealing the buildings they really like, perhaps even those of their competitors in relation to the level of detailing and experience they want to achieve in their new working environment. There are so many prime examples in London to inspire both the designer and the client, but the designer's role is to dig deeper into what will work best for the client and use this as the catalyst to reflect their difference. Invariably, to be able to gain this sort of insight will involve HLW running workshops and focus groups with the client's leadership group at the beginning of the process to really get under the skin of who they are. Taking the time to get to know your client, asking the right questions and engaging in a level that really unravels the opportunities and challenges they face today and need to solve tomorrow is fundamental to creating a robust and solid brief from which to build the design.

Ashley:

"So, the big story of this building is that it builds connections. ICG was previously split across a number of London offices but they wanted to bring everyone together in the one location. Coincidentally this site is a former bridge on the London, Chatham and Dover railway and the train previously ran through here. The columns we left exposed are a nod towards the old railway bridge and the physical connections it provided which is what the office is now all about. The new collaborative spaces allow ICG's people to come together in one site, connect and have the conversations that they couldn't previously have."

Fleur:

"The atrium creates strong visual connection across the building with lots of natural light. We wanted to maximise the effect and limit built areas around the perimeter, giving staff the opportunity to create visual links to colleagues and spaces across the floor plate. The Bridge area along the South side of the Atrium acts as a connector, linking people together and drawing them up and down the new internal stair, to the Club room and beyond to the terrace."



Working with Specialist

The complexity of a project like ICG should not be understated and that is before you factor in the restraints brought about by the pandemic during the project. This provided additional challenges and the ability of a fit out team to overcome this was a true test of its organisational and communications strengths as the design team explained.

Ashley:

"Working with Specialist was great. I had a few face to face meetings with them right at the beginning and we got through quite a lot of the workshops before the pandemic hit. We established really clear communications where they would identify issues that could negatively affect the design and discuss options with us in depth rather than just calling me up and asking me what did I prefer. Their response rates were impressive, Conor always picked up the phone even when he was driving or in another meeting, he was always available and was just great. Having again the extra knowledge and expertise of multiple materials in house rather than having to go to a third party sub-contractor helps the whole process when you're trying to evolve the design and come to a final solution."

Fleur:

"Specialist invested time to understand what our vision was. They are the experts in building these things as they do it every day so we were able to trust them to know how things go together and how things work best. To have that joint collaboration and shared knowledge worked brilliantly, both face to face and when we had to meet on Teams with the camera on and using our screens to work through the drawings. They ensured we were able to maintain a continuous conversation. I also think that there's a real advantage from them having joinery, glass and metal manufacturing, particularly when all of those components go together in something like a complex staircase. To have that all in house with one person organising it is so valuable because there's so many pieces of the puzzle."

“Specialist's expertise across multiple materials helped the whole process.”

Ashley Thomas-Pate
HLW