

Jennifer Janus Discusses How Pophouse Designs Workplaces That Centers Flexibility and Integrates Work-From-Home Possibilities

Pophouse is a Detroit-based interior design studio focused on strategic, unconventional, and human-centric design.. Today, we will discuss how research influences Pophouse's design strategy. We will also touch on how COVID-19 is impacting the future of workspaces.

Olga: [00:00:00] I'm Olga Stella, the Executive Director of Design Core Detroit. Thank you for joining us for Season Two of the Detroit City of Design Podcast. As stewards of Detroit's UNESCO City of Design designation, we aim to raise your awareness of how design can create conditions for better quality of life and economic opportunity for all.

Designers are professional problem solvers. And in Season Two, we will discuss the value of [Pophouse](#), a Detroit-based interior design studio, focused on strategic unconventional and human-centric design. Pophouse leverages research and business intelligence to create spaces that increase productivity, optimize business outcomes, and change the way people work, live, and interact with each other.

Today we will discuss the future of work and the integral role of research in designing workplaces that can withstand shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic or other future disruptions that may affect needs of businesses and employees. Jennifer, I'm so glad to be talking with you today. Thanks for joining us.

Jennifer: [00:01:10] Thank you for having me Olga. I'm really excited to be here.

Olga: [00:01:14] I know we've been talking a lot about, you know, just what's happening these days. And I think Pophouse has been a really important part of the resurgence of downtown, especially as businesses have started to come back into downtown office buildings and to reanimate the streets.

And I think most people in Detroit at least would know Pophouse for its eye-catching designs. But I don't think a lot of people know about your research focus or even just the industrial design expertise you have on staff. And I was hoping you'd tell us a little bit more about how these strengths contribute to Pophouse's approach.

Jennifer: [00:01:51] Absolutely. So Pophouse has been in business for six and a half years. And when we started the business, we were very much focused on culture-driven design. And so we made a conscious effort at that time to really go deep on design. And that would be interior design, industrial design, and environmental design.

Whereas a lot of other firms focus on the architectural aspect as well, we really made sure that we were laser focused on design to create spaces that really connect with the businesses that we're working with. So with that, as you mentioned, as we've evolved over the years, we've really brought this component of research into our work because we feel that good design really has to function for the people that are in the space. So we know that

design has the ability to improve people's lives. And in the workplace, good design can positively impact a number of things like wellbeing, focus, and productivity. We spend a significant amount of time at work, and if our environment supports our needs that benefit extends beyond the hours, we're in the office into other aspects of our lives.

So our mission really is to understand prior to working on the design, how people are using space and what they can need to make sure that that redesigned space works the best for them.

Olga: [00:03:25] Jennifer, tell me a little bit more about how these different strengths then translate into your approach. I know you've, through the research, have developed a density measure, and you've had this relationship with an acoustic panel manufacturer. Tell us a little bit about how it shows up in the client work that you've been doing.

Jennifer: [00:03:45] So density is a censoring tool that helps businesses measure how space is being used. So what we do is really when we're initially working with a client on a workspace, the first thing that we want to do is understand how are they currently using the space. And there's a number of ways that we do that. One is putting tools in the space, like density, where we're measuring, how frequently people use a conference room, how often during the day, how many people are in that space at any given time.

In addition to that, there are tools that measure how often people sit at their desk, how they're coming and going from the office space. So all of those are data inputs and facts. And then we combine those with conversations with team members, with focus groups, and that really provides that full 360 picture of what is needed to design a space that's going to function better for team members. So that's kind of the science piece of the business that we brought in to make sure we're really analyzing, because the interesting thing that we found in our work is sometimes when you're talking to people about what they need they may think one thing, but then when you layer in the facts and the data with it as well, it shows a different picture. It can help guide teams in a different direction. So those tools really help layer the work in.

And then you had mentioned, Olga, as well, the [Acoufelt](#) relationship. And that's one of the ways where we have leveraged our environmental graphics team and partnered with Acoufelt to design fabric panels that don't just look like fabric panels. They actually look like beautiful pieces of wallpaper. And so layering in the sound properties of the felts in addition to the design aspects really could create a custom space that feels like it fits the culture of the team that is in that space.

Olga: [00:05:56] It sounds like given where we are today in this, I know it's been said right, "unprecedented time," and just the disruption that I'm sure many of your clients are facing, that having that insight into how people were using their office spaces and how people were working, you know, prior to the stay at home orders that went out throughout the country, gave you a little bit of a jump, right.

And how to start to counsel your clients for what it means to continue working, you know, while we're staying at home, and what it looks like to come back to work once we're able to. And that would be just great to talk a little bit more about what some of those insights have been and what your team has found and has been advising.

Jennifer: [00:06:43] You're absolutely right. And that as we have layered this research aspect into our business, we have gained so much additional information in how people work, what impacts their wellbeing, and how they can help be most productive when they're in office space. So we were already working down that path. And a couple of our larger scale projects in the city we had really worked to create more collaborative space for team members to create environments where people can change the way they're working throughout the day. So research tells us that, you know, you may like to sit at a desk in the morning, and you might like to sit in a lounge chair in the afternoon.

And many office spaces have really gone to high density of workstations without a lot of variety in that space. So we were moving down that path and we worked very closely with [Quicken Loans](#) and redesigning two buildings in the city, the One Campus Martius building and then also the Chase Building, that are right downtown, to create spaces where teams would be more effective working together.

And then to your point, the pandemic came and in early March we were sent to work from home, and these projects were right on the cusp of construction. And we said, well, wait a minute. What are the changes that are happening? You know, when you're making that investment to redesign space, you want to make sure that it is really going to work for a long period of time. So we halted those projects, and working with our clients and making this decision to say, we need to quickly analyze what we're learning. And even though the pandemic has been very difficult for so many people, and we don't want to minimize that at all, we also saw this tremendous opportunity to understand and learn very quickly how people could work from home better.

So we kind of looked at it as those great work from home experience where it was opening the eyes of a lot of business leaders to say, wow, my team actually can be effective even when they're not together. And so with that learning, then how do you transition the office space to make sure that it's going to be effective in the future when people don't need to be sitting at a desk 40, 50 hours a week in their office space. So that really caused us to start changing the trajectory of how design can impact what we are calling the future of work.

Olga: [00:09:34] I know one of the things, Jennifer, I've been loving, the articles that Pophouse has put out on Medium, and this idea of going virtual first. That as businesses start to think about their office space now and into the future, really designing with a virtual-first mindset. Tell our audience a little bit more about what that means.

Jennifer: [00:09:54] I think prior to everybody working from home at the same time, Zoom existed, Microsoft Teams existed, GoToMeeting — there were a number of different video conferencing solutions, but on the whole businesses were not forced to use them. So I know for us, I said, Pophouse, you know, if you were not in the office, you would dial into a meeting, and it would be the most miserable experience because there'd be 10 people in a conference room. You're the lone person on the phone. You can't hear anybody, you can't see anybody. And it was just very, very difficult. So I think the benefit that we've gained during this period of time is, although we have these video conferencing tools at our disposal, we weren't using them. So immediately, everybody had to quickly ramp up the learning curve.

Our team uses Microsoft Teams and really we are on the video at our meetings all day long. And because everybody has been working virtually, it really levels the playing field. So you're no longer that lone person who doesn't know what's going on in the room. Well, taking that learning and then saying we are back in the office and we're adjusting to what this new normal looks like, it's developing and designing the office space and the home office environment to ensure that you're set up with those video conferencing protocols.

So making sure everybody's on the same page of what the rules are, but then also designing the space to support that. So as opposed to large conference rooms and an office, having a higher number of four-person rooms that have proper acoustics, as well as the ability to connect with the touch of a button to share documents on your screen versus in paper and in person can create that virtual-first mindset. So we called it that because we're really trying to get around the idea that in the future there will always be some percentage of team members who are not physically present with the rest of the team.

So how do we put their needs first and foremost, above the people in the office? It's really sort of flipping the perspective to the way that we were working before.

Olga: [00:12:25] Yeah, I know you and I, and we participate in a lot of our inclusive design conversations was this idea of who gets to participate. And in a way, this idea that you've come up with around virtual first is, well, we're making sure the people can't physically be here, get to participate fully.

They're not the afterthought, we're starting with them. And then of course, if they can participate, everyone else can participate too.

Jennifer: [00:12:49] Right. And it opens up really a world of flexibility. So one of the things that we've been aware of is that team members who are entering the workplace, you know, from college or in the first few years of their career, they're very open minded about working anywhere, anytime, and that flexibility. You know, other team members who have been in the working world for a longer period of time, maybe feel like, no, we need to be in person to be effective. And so allowing that ability for flexibility has so many benefits for

businesses and business leaders, because they have the ability to attract talent and retain talent.

And that's such a complicated topic for businesses right now. And the more that we can support that flexibility, the better outcome you can have and kind of creating a team that's engaged and happy.

Olga: [00:13:48] Well, especially as our workforce ages, and their parents age, and more people in the workforce become caregivers in different ways and just have different needs, it makes a lot of sense as we think about down the road, just making sure that we're tapping into all the talent that we have and not just the talent who can physically show up the way that we're used to. I mean, some of the other things that your team has written about, I've really appreciated thinking about this interaction between virtual working and the physical space, on mental health and wellbeing, and mood and productivity. And it'd be great to delve into that a little bit deeper.

Jennifer: [00:14:26] Absolutely. And so, as we were talking about, a lot of our research has told us that people are most effective, most productive in different ways at different times of the day. So creating spaces where people can work differently, where they can select in different areas than an office space is really important. In addition to that, having those spaces where you can step away and take a moment and regroup or take a few deep breaths and prepare for a meeting is really important. And it's even more important now, as we consider all the other mental and cognitive things that people will be going through as they return to the workplace.

And so understanding that there was a heightened level of stress, of concern, how do we support team members as they return into the office and give them spaces where they can feel safe and supported? One of the things that our industrial design team was working on prior to the pandemic was designing meditation pods. And these are spaces that team members could just take a moment away and have some of that quiet time to regroup. What we did is we pivoted though, because understanding that some of these small spaces could become a concern for team members in terms of germs and sharing that space. How would we incorporate this new reality into that? So we have been redesigning those meditation pods to be virtually touchless, as well as having materials that have antimicrobial properties so that it reduces the volume of germs. And so really looking at how do you take some of these spaces that can support wellbeing and change them for what our reality is moving forward.

Olga: [00:16:35] Even beyond the COVID epidemic, you think about so many people that we may not have considered previously, you know, who might be immune compromised in some way. And just, I think that thoughtfulness really has long-ranging impacts, you know, even beyond this moment on our heightened awareness. What are business owners thinking about? As you're talking to your clients and you're helping them begin adjusting to coming

back, what are the top concerns that they're expressing to you? And what's some of the counsel that you're offering them?

Jennifer: [00:17:08] So it's been really interesting, because from the standpoint of the business leader, I would say it is the entire range of thought process. So, as I mentioned, we really pivoted on a couple large projects to say, how can we take this opportunity to make these spaces work differently in the future?

And that was a very fast change in thinking. For other business leaders, I think the conversations today have been more around, I'm waiting to see when things will return to normal. And so what's been interesting about that is sort of walking through that process of how things will change and have changed. And how do we make those adjustments moving forward?

And I think some of those businesses just aren't ready yet to talk about the larger scale design changes. So one of the things that we've really been helping support them with is the thought process for short term things that they need to do to return to the office space.

And a lot of these are economical, easy changes to just safely get people back into the workplace, such as reducing density of furniture. Adding wayfinding and signage is a tremendous way to help people understand when they enter a space where they need to go, what the protocols are. And those things are easy additions to any space that help bring team members back.

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And then once that is sorted out, then it's really shifting the conversation to say, what are the long term changes that are going to make sense for the changes that your team is making in the way they're going to work moving forward.

Olga: [00:19:00] So, Jennifer, do you think we're ever going back to the way that it was before? What does the future of work really hold for us?

Jennifer: [00:19:09] I don't think that we're going to return to what was, because we have learned a tremendous amount. And I think that's, I would say the positive side of a crisis is that you learn a tremendous amount in a very short period of time. And I don't think we can take away that learning.

So knowing that it is possible and that actually some teams have been more productive working from home. I think we all need to consider that opportunity in the future. And while some people may be just, can't wait to get back to the office, others are having a positive experience or it's allowing them the flexibility they may need for other aspects of their lives. So from that standpoint, I think we have to define that new normal. And really the business world was moving in the direction of more flexibility. And people will get 10 years ago or 20 years ago, there was more people working in the office full time.

So we've been moving in this direction. I think this experience has just sped up that progress very rapidly. And depending on the type of business you're in, you're trying to catch up or at what rate will you accept that change?

Olga: [00:20:33] If we're in a downtown office in Detroit, four years from now, what should I expect to see you in our new, normal, down the road?

Jennifer: [00:20:42] For the new normal it's really redefining the reason that people come into an office. So an office is a really important connector, and it is a place where the culture of a company is developed. We have determined that it's not about working virtually a hundred percent of the time, and I think we've all experienced that we're missing our teammates, and we want to see them in person.

But it's looking at what type of work do I do in the office versus what type of work can I do at home? Really looking at if possible that heads down work, where you're sitting at a desk, that may happen at home moving forward. So you make plans to go into the office to see your teammates to collaborate on work, to have large meetings or cultural events. So it's redefining why you go in, and it's really to be with other people. That connection is what is going to keep the business strong. And I think the loss of those cultural elements is something that business leaders have been concerned about. When you have team members that are spread out more broadly and connecting virtually. You can strike that balance between the two, we believe that's the sweet spot of how businesses can increase their performance.

Olga: [00:22:09] And so what are those ripple effects look like when we don't have all the downtown office workers coming from 9 to 5? Or we're just even the ripple effect in our home environment. How do you imagine, we might feel those ripple effects, you know, in our public spaces and in our homes as the office is redefined and why we go in is redefined?

Jennifer: [00:22:31] So in the downtown area, I think there's still going to be a high density of people going into the office. One of the benefits of this is that you can foresee growing your team without growing your real estate footprint, which is tremendously beneficial to businesses at this time and also in the future.

So it's how that space is shared, but still looking at people using that space all the time. So the attention is still bringing people downtown into areas where they can be together and use those public spaces that we all love so much and are so excited to get back to. And then in the home, it's really making sure that everyone is set up properly. We have the opportunity to participate in a survey of 16,000 team members. And the number one complaint that people have is they don't have a good chair to work in at home. I mean, that is real.

Olga: [00:23:39] That is real.

Jennifer: [00:23:41] You're not sitting in a comfortable chair, it's back pain, you can't focus. And so it's really also, and this is another thing that we are working on, is getting team members properly set up at home. With ergonomic furniture in a space that makes it easy for them to connect on video calls and easy to see their teams and making sure that their technology is set up properly so that there aren't those glitches that make things so difficult.

Olga: [00:24:12] You know, so interesting, even just as we're having this conversation, I'm just reflecting on how the outcome of this disruption might actually be a more humane workplace. Cause I know we've talked a lot, you know, over the last few months, as all of this has been unfolding about the digital divide, the unevenness in people's home environments and how that shows up in work calls or school calls.

This lack, I mean, I'm working at a dining room, you know, on a chair that it's definitely not made to be sat in for over eight hours a day. And there's just this unevenness. And just recognizing that lots of people are coming to work every day with a whole other life than most of their teammates never really see into or know about.

And, you know, maybe as a result of this, we're all going to have a little bit more grace for each other. We're all going to have a little bit more understanding as team members and employers about how to help support each other in the workplace because we've been through this together.

Jennifer: [00:25:14] Absolutely. I think that we have gained a level of empathy for each other that we never had before, and even team members that we've worked with for years. I think we've learned things about them, you know, about, their, maybe we don't want to know those things, but we've learned things about them, right, help us to be more, like you said, more gracious to each other and understanding that we all have these different circumstances. And really everyone has different challenges and everyone has different things that has been a little bit easier for them. And just understanding that full range, I think, has been really eye opening for us.

Olga: [00:25:56] Well, I'm so glad that we had a chance to talk. I'm hoping as we close you'll offer our audience a piece of free advice as if you'd counsel a small business owner or landlord on how to navigate this period of time between the short term and the long term, what would be that piece of free advice you might offer?

Jennifer: [00:26:14] I would say my advice would be to try and look past that short term period of time. I think that all of us are trying to figure out what this time means and how we're going to overcome it. But I think we know that the future is out there and while it may not be a return to what was, it's this new opportunity that can be even better than it was before.

And we're trying to keep that focus on the future because we do believe there's this tremendous opportunity to make things better. And to, really from a design standpoint, help people improve their work life and the way that they are working together, which I think has an impact that goes far beyond just the working hours and can extend into your life as a whole.

Olga: [00:27:13] Well, I couldn't agree with that more and I really appreciate your time today, Jennifer, and just the ability to have this conversation. Thank you so much.

Jennifer: [00:27:20] Thank you, Olga. I really appreciate the time as well. And it was a great conversation. Thank you so much.

Olga: [00:27:27] This has been the Detroit City of Design podcast. If you like what you just heard, please share this episode on social media via email or by any other means. For more information on Design Core Detroit visit design.org or search the hashtag #DesignCoreDET. That's Design, C O R E D E T. Keep up with the show by subscribing for free in your favorite podcast app. Just search Detroit City of Design.

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