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## The office of the future? No desks, no chairs

And all sofas.



BY AILEEN KWUN 5 MINUTE READ

Last week at Orgatec, a leading European trade show for contract and office furniture, the Swiss company Vitra previewed a set of office seating prototypes, called Soft Work, which you might more likely find in a chic hotel lobby or airport lounge. That's exactly what the designers, London studio Barber Osgerby, intended.

Much has been said about the downfall of cubicles and the rise of open-plan offices over the years, with the pendulum of public favor alternating between the two. With Soft Work, the designers argue that the next trend in 21st-century working life will be to do away with the shackles of the desk-and-chair setup altogether. In their vision, offices of the future may consist of sofas—and little more.

It might sound extreme, but consider: The freelance workforce is on the rise—and growing three times faster than the U.S. workforce overall, with studies showing freelancers may become the majority as soon as 2027. More full-time permanent workers are also opting to work remotely, according to a recent survey with 1,000 hiring managers, who expect 38% of their employees to be completely remote in the next decade. In this context, the battle between cubicle and open-plan seems comically shortsighted.

## **THE DEATH OF FORMALITY**

Just two years ago, Barber Osgerby designed its first-ever office chair with Vitra (and the brand's first in years) with the Pacific, both named and styled to speak to a working philosophy that aspires to denote a different, more relaxed class of professional status. The Pacific took all of the function and performance of a modern-day, ergonomic task office seat—height-adjustable back and armrests, automatically synchronizing parts, and padded lumbar support—and packaged it into a svelte, minimalist silhouette with color-coordinated upholstery that suggested a cooler, updated vibe to the standard, sober corporate look that could work just as nicely outside of the office. It was enough to grab the attention of Apple design chief Jonathan Ive, who took to furnishing Apple's campus with the chairs. As partner Jay Osgerby told Fast Company: "To get the best people you have to have an environment with less formality."



[Images: courtesy Vitra]

Subsequent visits to the Apple campus while the Pacific was in development, however, helped the studio realize what the modern-day office was truly in need of: even more casual seating, away from the desk. “We realized that they were going to be putting a large amount of soft seating into [Apple Park], which were effectively residential sofas, very high-end Italian sofas,” says partner Edward Barber. “They were fantastic sofas, there’s no doubt about that, but they weren’t buying them to relax on—they were using them to work on, as an alternative area for working.”

This poses various problems: “You have to prop up or pull up a table,” he says. “You don’t necessarily have access to a power outlet. And you’re not sitting in the most ergonomic environment. It’s fine for a couple of minutes, but if you’re sitting there for a couple of hours, you’re sort of slouched, balancing a laptop on your knee. So that got us all thinking: If they could have the ideal setup, what would it look like?”

### **A NEW AESTHETIC**

An extension of the same thinking that gave the Pacific chair a more welcoming look and feel, Soft Work puts the same premium on a casual aesthetic to suggest a lifestyle in which work and relaxation aren’t at polar odds, but present in nearly every public space we frequent: cafes, airport lounges, hotel lobbies, and corporate and co-working spaces of all kinds. The name of the new collection, too, doesn’t just imply softer seating, but an aesthetic softness that Barber Osgerby and Vitra are betting will overtake the next wave of office design—and maybe a subliminal cue to all of those tech and (ahem) software companies with large campuses that are likely to adopt it.



[Photo: courtesy Vitra]

## **OUR MODULAR FUTURE**

Designed modularly, the Soft Work collection has mix-and-match components that can be used for a variety of setups. Units can be used solo, as lounge chairs, or linked up into larger configurations; combined with rounded corner units, they can form inward or outward-facing circular arrangements to carve out a meeting hub, or spread out all over as a communal work lounge. Built around a spare, steel framework and topped with structured cushions that can be customized with most any color, the sofa system is designed to look stylishly neutral and easily placed.

Would it be realistic for a solid day's work in a real-life office?

Barber says yes, and assures it's been designed with a rigorous eye to ergonomics. Rather than take on an overly low-slung profile, Soft Work's seats are chair height to promote proper posture, with a flexible backrest and cushions for lumbar support. The simple cast-aluminum supporting structure also doubles as utility routing, with plug-in ports that eliminate the need for external outlets and a tangle of wires. Add-on accessories to further customize the sofa-workstation include swiveling clip-on tables, space partitions, and modular surfaces. It's everything needed for the modern-day, couch potato-turned-professional.

"Technology has rapidly changed the way we work over the last 10 years," says Barber, and with the ability to take our devices anywhere and work remotely, the length of time spent working in any one location seems less important than the ability to do it comfortably anywhere—which is the pain point Barber Osgerby's design aims to ease with Soft Work.

## **OFFICE FURNITURE FOR A WORLD WITHOUT OFFICES**

This raises another question: If the future of work is remote work, why do we need office furniture, whether a desk or a sofa? Why show up to a workspace at all, for that matter?

"To be part of an environment where probably like-minded people are working," says Barber, in praise of the old-fashioned water-cooler effect. "You lose a sense of community when you freelance or work remotely—that's regained a bit when you're part of an environment that brings serendipitous meetings with like-minded people." Speaking of his own studio neighborhood in Shoreditch, London, home to the Ace Hotel and a gaggle of creative freelancers, "Just being together in the

same space can spark a friendship or conversation that leads to work or another project.”

Soft Work will be available in spring 2019.