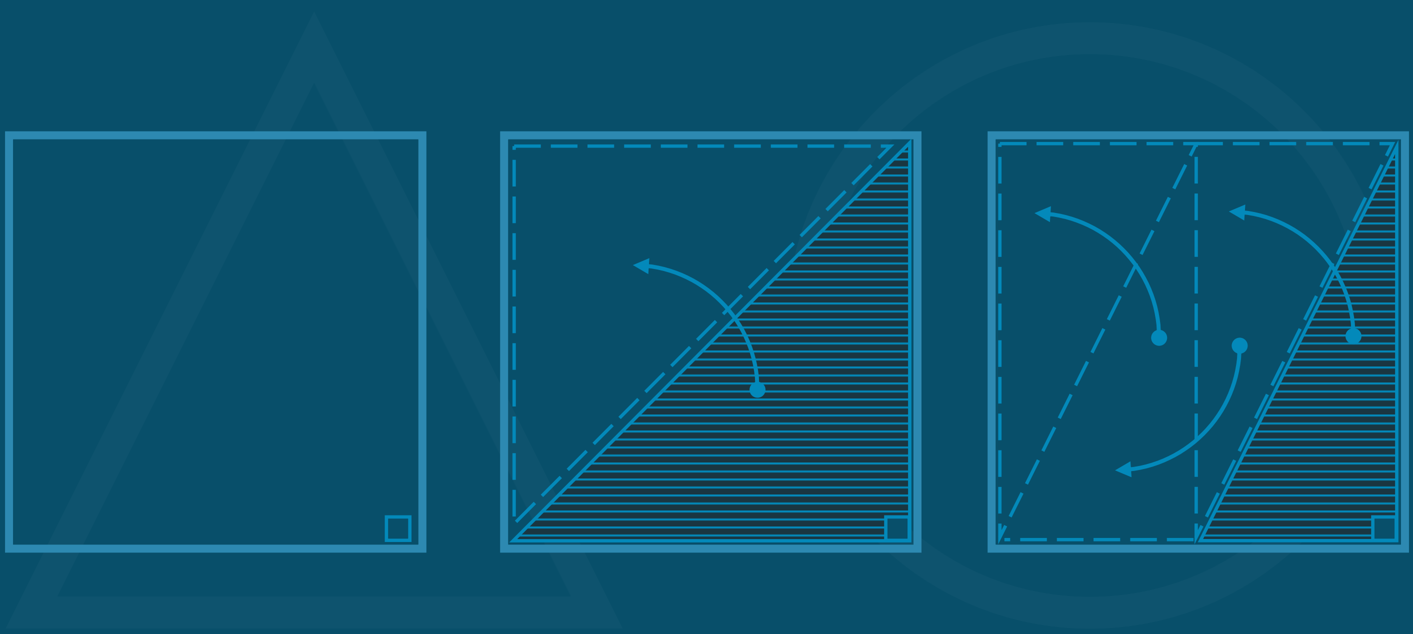
Sameness by Design

An exploration of similarity in workplace design: its causes, its effects and how to innovate in a converging context.



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ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

Sameness by Design draws on a range of publicly available sources, including published project information, design awards, certification programs and other industry materials. Although this information is not confidential, design firms, projects, organisations and institutions discussed in the research have been anonymised.

The purpose of the study is not to single out individual practices or projects, nor to comment on the organisations behind the awards and certifications. Rather, it seeks to identify broader patterns in design that extend beyond any individual example.

The research also incorporates 12 interviews with designers, workplace strategists, researchers, design award jurors and tenants, as well as service and product providers. These participants have also been anonymised to protect their privacy and encourage open discussion.

Although the study focuses on Australian corporate workplaces, its findings may also be relevant internationally when considered in relation to local procurement models, market conditions, professional practices and cultural contexts.

Design practitioners in sectors other than workplace design may also find the concepts developed in this research useful for examining similarity and convergence within their own fields.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Agustin Chevez is an architect, researcher, author and speaker who has dedicated his career to understanding the nature of work and the environments that best support it.

His research has been presented at international forums and published across both industry and academia. His work includes *The Pilgrim's Guide to the Workplace* (Springer) and the TEDx talk *Soufflés, Gymnasts and the Workplace of the Future*, alongside a broader body of research exploring workplace design and the changing nature of work.

After working with leading design firms in Australia, sharing insights with audiences around the world and lecturing in design at university, he now advises organisations on how to navigate the evolving context of work and the workplace.

Agustin is a Workplace Provocateur at aChevez Advisory, where he combines research, strategy and critical thinking to challenge outdated assumptions about how workplaces are understood and designed.

SUMMARY

Why do workplaces look the same?

That is the personal question that sparked Sameness by Design. The research explores what may be producing this apparent similarity, whether it is a problem, and what purposeful innovation might look like in a context where workplaces may increasingly resemble one another.

The research draws on publicly available sources as well as interviews with a range of workplace stakeholders.

What began as a question about visual similarity gradually became a broader investigation into how shared language, practices, benchmarks, technologies and market expectations can make sameness self-reinforcing.

A Workplace Design Sameness (WDS) model is proposed to identify the forces contributing to design convergence. This model reframes sameness not as a failure of creativity, but as a possible outcome of competition itself.

A five-year analysis of Australian workplace interior design awards (2021-2025) found that the majority of winning workplaces were designed by the design firms that occupied them. The research explores possible reasons behind this finding and its implications for design. Recognition was also concentrated among a relatively small number of firms, increasing the visibility of particular examples of what the profession considers good design.

An unexpected insight was that the behaviours leading to sameness can persist even when people recognise them and question their value. Individuals may continue to reproduce these patterns simply because they align with what they perceive their clients and the industry expect. In this sense, sameness can endure without anyone deliberately choosing it.

The research also found little overlap between different understandings of what is a ‘good workplace’. This reveals a paradox whereby ideas of what constitutes a good workplace converge within individual professional lenses, while the lenses themselves remain quite different from one another, each celebrating and promoting a different interpretation of a good place to work.

Sameness, however, is not necessarily detrimental. Familiar workplaces can communicate identity and belonging, reduce the effort required to navigate and understand a new environment, and support more adaptable and reusable fit-outs.

The challenge, therefore, is not simply to make workplaces different, but to understand when to benefit from sameness, when to challenge it, and how to innovate with purpose.

The research concludes by considering what innovation might look like in a market shaped by best practice. It argues that innovation can be confused with the pursuit of difference, where design firms seek differentiation to compete for projects. However, such innovations may do little to improve outcomes for the organisations occupying the workplace. The term "competitive overshoot" is introduced to describe how the pursuit of novelty might help design firms stand apart from their competitors without necessarily producing a better workplace.

In contrast, a conceptual model of purposeful innovation is proposed, based on recognising when a change in context means that yesterday’s “best” no longer answers today’s problem. Innovation, seen this way, is about working on a new design problem rather than decorating an old answer.

A FEELING OF SAMENESS

The premise of this research is simple: I felt that workplaces looked the same. "*Felt*" is the key word here, because I could not clearly explain what I meant by that. Nor could I say what a genuinely distinctive workplace should look like. It was mainly an ongoing sense of disappointment at a missed opportunity to create something different.

However, I noticed that this hard-to-define sameness was wrapped in very different narratives. Designers behind these "*same*" workplaces described varied client needs, unique conceptual starting points and individual constraints. Yet, somehow, the resulting solutions often appeared similar.

Then, there are the workplaces that try too hard to look different. In an earlier co-authored article, we asked when a red beanbag, or whatever happens to convey workplace coolness at the time, serves genuine organisational purpose, and when it was little more than window dressing. We argued that the distinction did not lie in the object itself, even when, as it happened, that object was an inflatable shark floating through the office. What mattered was whether objects or design at large reinforced the organisation's culture, identity or desired behaviours.

This was an early version of the question at the heart of *Sameness by Design*: when is difference meaningful, and when is it merely cosmetic?

Although the topic had interested me for years, two obstacles kept me from moving past my ill-defined sense of sameness. The first was actually defining what I meant when I said that workplaces looked the same. The second was methodological. Even if I could define sameness, how could it be studied? I suspected that turning this intuition into a structured study would be difficult. And I was not wrong.

What encouraged me to push through these obstacles was that this feeling did not appear to be mine alone. When I shared these intuitions with peers, many immediately recognised the sameness I was struggling to describe.

I later quantified this agreement when I presented this research at WORKTECH[1] Melbourne 2026. In a live audience poll, 78% of respondents agreed that workplaces tend to feel like variations of the same template, Figure 1.

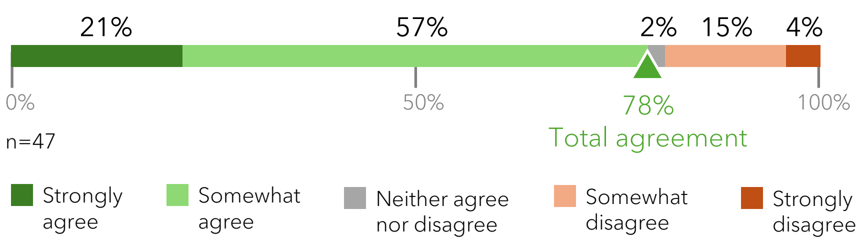


Fig. 1 Level of agreement with the statement:
Workplaces tend to feel like a variation of the same template.
Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

The poll does little to prove that workplaces are alike. However, it suggests that the perception of sameness is widely recognisable and that the question at the centre of this report is shared by others.

HAVE YOUR SAY

Click here or **scan the QR code** below to share your own answers to these polls and provide additional comments.

The website will periodically update the results as new responses are received.

[1] WORKTECH is a global conference series dedicated to exploring the future of work and workplace intelligence.

DEFINING SAMENESS

I eventually came to define sameness in workplace design as follows:

> **Different design firms, working for different clients, produce solutions that are more like each other than the diversity of clients' needs would predict.**

Consider two design firms, Design Firm A and Design Firm B, each designing a workplace for a different client, Organisation 1 and Organisation 2, as illustrated in Figure 2. For these workplaces to be considered similar in the context of this research, Workplace A1 and Workplace B2 (bold squares) would need to be more like each other than the differing needs of Organisations 1 and 2 would justify (dashed lines).

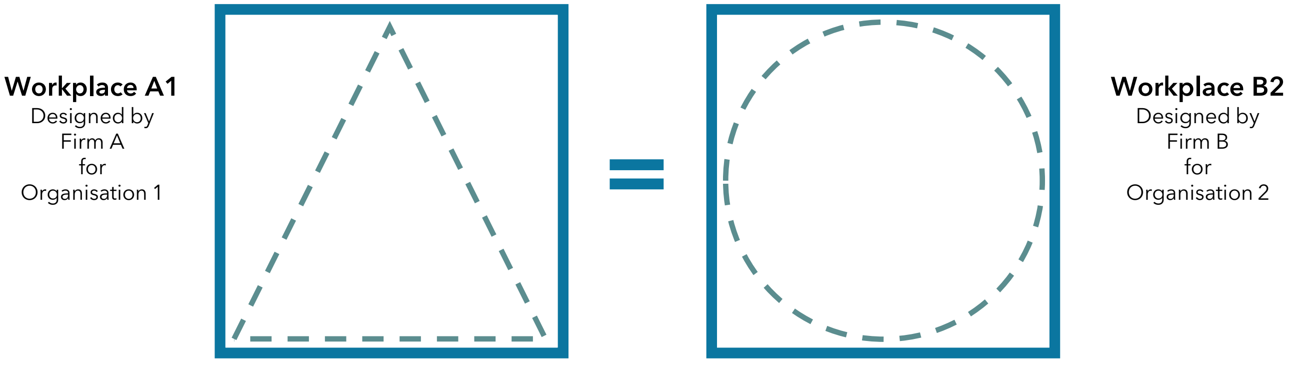


Fig. 2 Defining sameness. The bold squares represent the similarity of workplace design, contrasting with the variations expected from organisations with different needs represented by the triangle and circle.

That last part is important because it states that there must be a reason for workplaces to look different. The argument is not that workplaces should be different for the sake of being different, but that organisations with genuinely different needs should require different workplace designs.

However, in one of my first interviews, a participant argued that clients' needs "*are not radically different*" and that in fact their "*functional diversity is low*." They argued that, for example, a law firm might require more client rooms, while a regulatory body might need more training rooms, but beyond such differences, workplace requirements were largely variations in the ratios of standard elements such as workstations, meeting rooms and other fit-out components. They concluded that organisations differ more in how they engage with the outside world than in how they operate internally.

Just as I began questioning this definition, another interviewee offered the opposite view. They described working with two clients in the same industry whose distinct organisational cultures resulted in fundamentally different approaches to the workplace, arguing that differences in culture resulted in different solutions even when faced with similar problems.

These were only two of the comments that surfaced during the interviews, each adding some nuanced perspective to the concept of sameness.

For more than half a century, organisational theory has challenged the idea that there is a single best way for organisations to structure themselves. Contingency theory argues that effective organisational configurations depend on the circumstances in which an organisation operates. That is, what works well for one organisation may not work for another because effectiveness depends on how well its internal arrangements align with the circumstances in which it operates.

A similar logic appeared early in workplace research. In the 1970s, Frank Duffy's pioneer work explored whether variations in organisational structure corresponded with variations in office layout. Two decades later, Becker and Steele's Workplace by Design further positioned the workplace as something that should support an organisation's business strategy and evolving ways of working.

Together, these arguments from organisational theory and workplace strategy suggest that organisational differences matter, that workplace design should respond to them and that, because of this, we should expect meaningful differences between workplaces.

Another live poll at the conference showed that the majority of delegates (69%) agreed, to some extent, that organisations are different enough to need different workplaces, Figure 3.

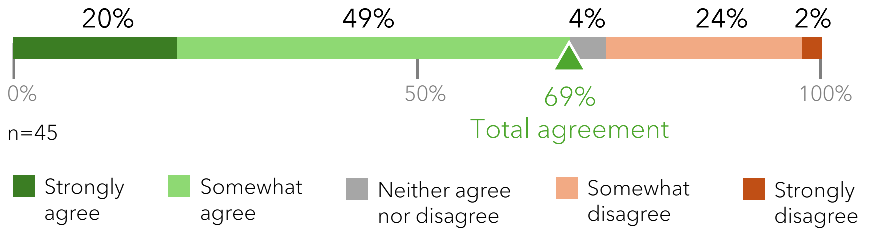


Fig. 3 Level of agreement with the statement:
Organisations are different enough to need different workplaces.
Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

But what lies behind the 26% who disagreed? And why did some interviewees argue that organisations share many of the same functional requirements, making a degree of similarity between their workplaces almost inevitable?

It did not take long for workplace sameness to reveal itself as more complex than my initial gut feeling suggested. Trying to understand whether workplaces were becoming more alike, and what might be driving that similarity, became the next challenge.

STUDYING SAMENESS

The definition of workplace sameness purposely reads as a testable proposition, because I wanted to test it.

However, testing it required access to project briefs, workplace strategies, design documentation and potentially sensitive client information. It soon became evident that design firms had little incentive to share so much material just to learn whether their allegedly distinctive projects were less unique than they might hope.

Also, early interviews suggested that simply comparing workplaces in search of signs of sameness would miss much of the richness of the topic. I therefore kept the definition, but shifted to a more exploratory approach. This included dropping my initial assumption that sameness was inherently bad, opening the study to explore how sameness might benefit organisations and design as a practice.

I also wanted to understand how innovation fitted into all this. But in particular, I wanted to explore how design firms compete when many of their solutions appear remarkably similar. To this end, the concept of competitive convergence became quite useful.

Competitive convergence is defined as a narrowing of the strategic distance between competing firms over time.

Interestingly, firms may become trapped in a form of prisoner's dilemma in which both might benefit from greater differentiation, yet neither has sufficient incentive to move first. In this sense, competitive convergence reframes sameness from a failure of creativity to a possible outcome of competition.

I have adapted some of the underpinning concepts of competitive convergence into a Workplace Design Sameness (WDS) model, Figure 4.

Consider again our two hypothetical Design Firms A and B. While they initially rely on unique capabilities to create distinct workplaces for Organisations 1 and 2, over time, three processes make these previously distinct workplaces more and more alike. These three processes are:

1. **Normative:** Similarity arising from professional standards, education, qualifications and networks that shape shared ideas of practice.

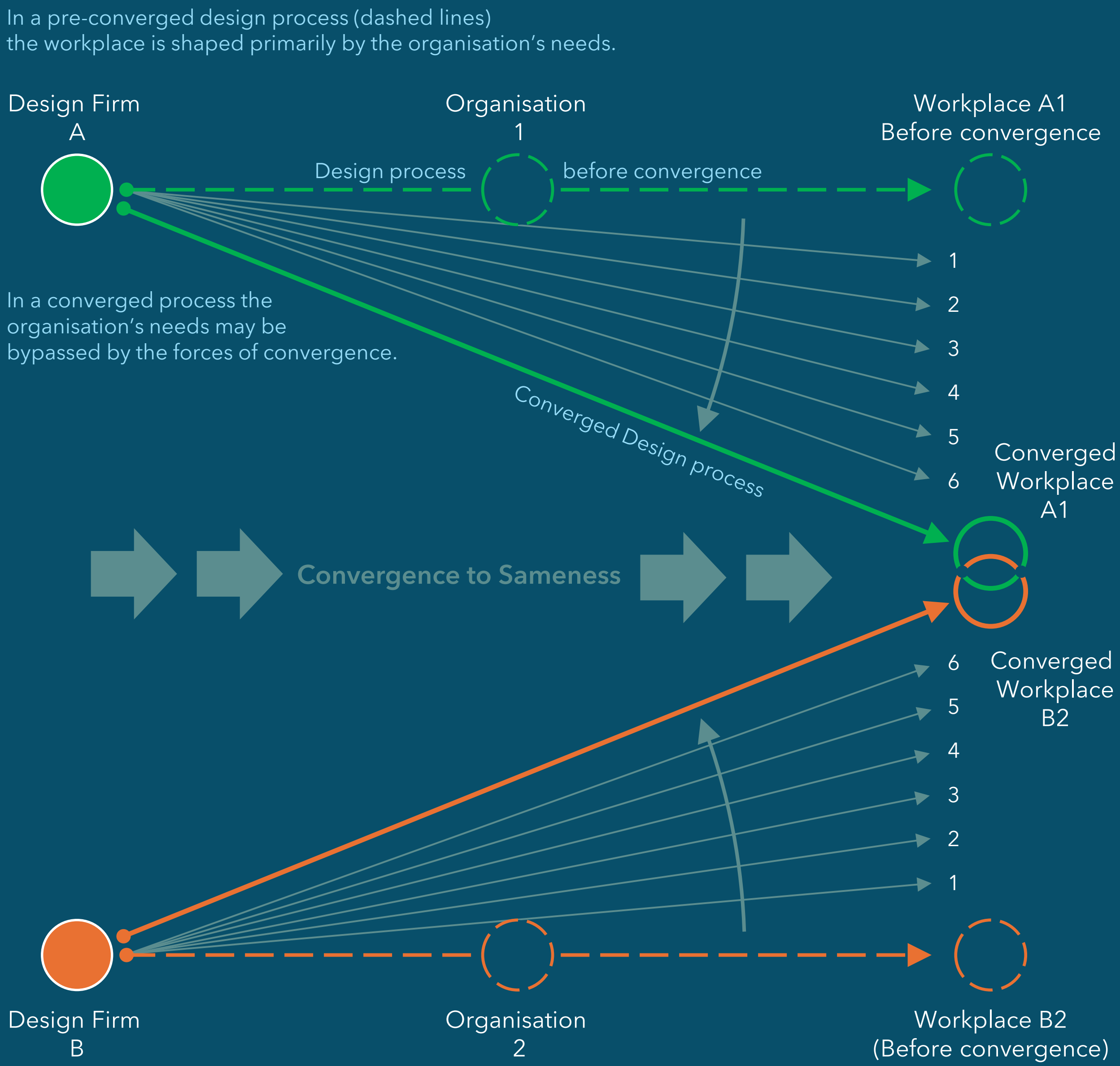
2. **Coercive:** Formal or informal demands imposed by governments, regulators, clients, funding bodies or other organisations on which an organisation depends.

3. **Mimetic:** The tendency to imitate organisations perceived as successful or legitimate.

Based on these, I propose six factors that may lead to workplace design sameness:

1) How it looks: Design publications and social media shape expectations of what a contemporary workplace should look like. These influences are mostly mimetic, as designers and clients reference projects perceived as successful, but also normative, as professional institutions and industry awards help define what counts as good design. More on this later.

In *To Be (Alike) or Not to Be (at All)*, the author describes how two organisations from different fields, with different purposes, came to "*look alike and talk alike.*" These organisations tried to align themselves with the symbols and conventions considered acceptable within their respective fields, even when those conventions did not reflect what made the organisations distinctive. In this context, sameness can be a way of communicating legitimacy and credibility, and being different can carry risks.



Convergence factors:

1. How it looks: Design media, professional institutions and industry awards establish shared expectations of what a contemporary workplace should look like.

2. How it works: Management models, benchmarks and workplace strategies spread across organisations, producing increasingly similar spatial requirements.

3. How *we* work: Designers can become anchored to familiar precedents and solutions, carrying established ideas into new projects even when these may not fit.

4. Shared metrics of success: Common measures of sustainability, wellbeing, experience, efficiency and utilisation lead projects towards similar priorities.

5. Democratisation of technology: Widely available design technologies reduce competitive advantage and promote similar solutions.

6. What the market expects: Clients and design firms reinforce shared assumptions about which problems matter, the ways in which design firms compete and what design is or should be.

Fig. 4 Workplace Design Sameness (WDS) Model

2) How it works: This happens in two related ways. First, design firms themselves adopt similar management structures, processes and ways of working in response to mimetic, normative and, at times, coercive pressures that shape expectations of how a professional design practice should operate.

Second, client organisations may also become more alike as management practices such as Activity-Based Working (ABW), agile methods and hybrid-work policies spread across organisations. As these practices become popular models of work, they can lead to similar workplace strategies and design solutions.

Benchmarking can also reinforce this tendency. These generic ratios and space standards can become default answers before an organisation's specific needs have been properly tested.

This helps explain why some interviewees believed that increasingly similar ways of working (low functional differentiation) may justify increasingly similar workplaces.

3) How *we* work: Convergence may also arise from within designers themselves. In *Fixation and Creativity in Concept Development*, the author describes how designers can become anchored to existing ideas or early interpretations of a problem. This fixation may lead them to carry features from previous projects into new ones, even when those features are inappropriate.

This is primarily a cognitive mechanism. However, it can be reinforced by mimetic and normative forces when designers repeatedly encounter the same celebrated precedents.

4) Shared metrics of success: Workplaces are increasingly assessed through common measures of sustainability, wellbeing, experience, and utilisation. While pursuing shared metrics does not directly lead to sameness, it might lead designers to adopt similar solutions to reach similar goals.

This factor is driven by the three processes of convergence. It is normative when rating systems and professional bodies define accepted standards of good performance; coercive, when certification targets or performance thresholds are mandated through regulations or client briefs; and mimetic when design firms adopt these metrics because they are used by competitors.

5) Democratisation of technology: Design firms tend to share the same creative and drafting software packages, Building Information Modelling (BIM) platforms and other industry-standard technologies.

Shared technologies contribute to design convergence not just through the tools themselves, but through the workflows they promote. I find it useful to think of this metaphorically as if design firms were bakers *cooking* their projects in the same oven (technology), with shared expectations of how a cake should look and taste. Sure, the recipe and the baker's skill still matter, but the range of possible outcomes narrows.

Also, from a Resource-Based View (RBV) perspective, resources and capabilities are less likely to provide a sustained competitive advantage when they are widely accessible.

This factor can be mimetic when firms follow successful competitors in their adoption of technology; normative when particular tools become embedded in the education of designers and industry practice; and coercive when clients or project partners mandate specific platforms.

6) What the market expects: Expectations of what good design is or should be are reinforced by a professional context in which topics such as hybrid work, biophilia, neurodiversity, AI readiness, and First Nations narratives, among many others, signal what matters and, by omission, what doesn't.

Also, the services offered to a shared client pool gradually shape expectations of what workplace design should be. In *Creating New Market Space*, the authors argue that companies within an industry often share implicit assumptions about how competition works, who their customers are, what they value, and which products or services should be offered.

Therefore, competition does not simply influence which design firm gets the next project, but it also helps define what Design becomes and which types of processes and solutions are considered legitimate.

Here, I would like to invite designers to consider which practices embedded in our profession genuinely improve outcomes, and which ones are followed mainly because they have become accepted industry habits.

This cycle is driven primarily by normative and mimetic processes. It is normative because services and themes gradually become embedded in professional practice and accepted as indicators of legitimate design. And it is mimetic because firms observe competitors and replicate familiar offerings.

*

These six factors of the WDS model aim to provide a conceptual framework for understanding the range of factors that may contribute to sameness in workplace design, but it is not intended to be exhaustive.

COMPETITIVE MARKETS

To explore the ideas behind the WDS model, I looked at areas where design firms compete. For the purpose of this research, I define these areas as 1) the commercial market, where projects are won, and 2) the creative market, where projects are recognised.

1) The Commercial market

Here, design firms compete to design their clients' workplaces. They do so through procurement processes such as open or selective tenders, Expressions of Interest (EOIs), Requests for Proposal (RFPs) and Requests for Tender (RFTs).

A detailed comparison of these processes is beyond the scope of this research. However, they are not exempt from the three convergence pressures. Coercive pressures may come from contractual conditions and scoring systems in tenders; normative pressures can emerge through prequalification criteria and shared expectations about what a credible proposal should contain and even how it should look like; and mimetic pressures may arise when clients repeat briefs and selection criteria and then design firms themselves draw on proposals that have worked well for them in the past.

Although I couldn't find research directly looking into how different methods of tendering contribute to design sameness, research into public procurement and innovation has identified that prescriptive specifications, risk aversion, complex procedures, and limited interaction with suppliers can be barriers to innovation and promote sameness.

2) The Creative market

In this market, design firms compete for industry recognition, for creative success of their ideas and execution. For this, design firms submit what they consider their strongest workplace projects for assessment by award juries, often highly regarded peers.

However, awards are not simply a measure of creative success. MIT research found that Manhattan office buildings associated with awarded architects and design firms attracted an average transaction price premium of 23.1%, linking success in the creative market with the commercial market.

Testing the commercial market

I tested the commercial market first. I wanted to see whether any of the six factors in the WDS model, or any other patterns leading to sameness, could be observed in the way design firms compete for projects.

After several attempts, I can summarise what I found in one word:

Nothing.

I found almost no information. The firms invited to compete, their submissions, the evaluation criteria, the deliberations behind the decision and the unsuccessful proposals were generally confidential, commercially sensitive or simply not publicly documented.

If true that shortlisted firms are perhaps the industry's worst kept secret, with competitors usually the first to know who they are competing against, this information is shared informally through professional networks, making it difficult to analyse formally.

Nevertheless, researchers with their own interest in design competitions got further than I was able to. They examined competitions through the City of Sydney's planning system by combining public records with interviews, project appraisals and direct observation. Even in this structured setting, they found that full competition documentation was not readily accessible. In fact, participants criticised the competitions for their lack of transparency. Entries were not required to be publicly examined, clients regarded the competitions as private procurement processes, and documentation was not freely available.

The researchers also found that clients carefully selected firms they believed could deliver an acceptable outcome. While this does not indicate convergence, it suggests that the range of possibilities may begin to narrow before a design is even proposed through decisions about who is invited and who is not.

However, I did come away with one lesson of my own out of this process: all this secrecy disappears once the project is awarded. Suddenly, there is no shortage of media describing the newly found perfect match between the client, the designer, and the project.

After reading several of these publications with grandiose statements from both the client and the designer, it became apparent that the language itself seemed to converge. In *How we talk(ed) about it* the authors argue that the words used to describe architecture help shape how the field understands and develops its work. In other words, project descriptions do not simply communicate design, but they can also reproduce the established vocabulary through which design becomes recognisable and legitimate.

I undertook a thematic analysis of three 2025 articles published in popular online design magazines in Australia. These were from three workplace projects designed by different design firms, for different clients, each in a different sector: legal services, coworking and property development. Despite these differences, the language used to describe the projects was remarkably similar, Figure 5.

Fig. 5 Word cloud of three different workplace articles in design magazines.

The interviewees were not surprised when I shared the above word cloud with them. They recognised the words immediately, with some designers acknowledging using them to describe their own projects. That surprised me because they saw the language as formulaic and recognised the disadvantages of its sameness, yet they used it themselves because it was what they thought their clients and the industry expected. Importantly, none appeared particularly pleased by the situation, which made me wonder, if individually they recognise the problem, why do they continue to do it collectively?

In trying to answer this question, I learnt a new concept: pluralistic ignorance. It describes situations in which people privately question a norm but continue to enact it because they believe others expect or support it.

Applied here, repeated use of the same words reinforces the impression that this is how workplace design must be presented, encouraging others to do the same. The language may therefore persist not because anyone particularly values it, but because departing from it feels commercially riskier than repeating it.

Testing the creative market

Studying the creative market was almost the exact opposite. I found a detailed, public online archive of all shortlisted, commended, and winning projects in an interior design awards program in Australia.

This level of transparency allowed me to build a five-year network of workplace design awards from 2021 to 2025. As shown in Figure 6, the network connects each design firm (yellow) with its project (blue) and the award outcome (green).

The network includes 181 unique projects produced by 116 design firms, working either independently or collaboratively. Of these projects, 23 (13%) were workplaces designed by the firms that occupied them. In other words, these were projects from design firms designing their own workplaces and submitting them to the awards.

On its own, 13% may not appear particularly remarkable. However, these projects accounted for four of the seven winners, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Breakdown of projects by designer's own workplaces vs other organisations' workplaces.

Award outcome	Designer's own workplace	Other organisations' workplaces	Sub-Total
Winner	4 (57% of winners)	3	7*
Commendation	4 (24% of commendations)	13	17
Shortlisted	15 (10% of shortlisted)	142	157
Total	23 (13% of total projects)	158	**181**

* In 2024 and 2025 there were two winning projects in each year, explaining the seven winners in five years.

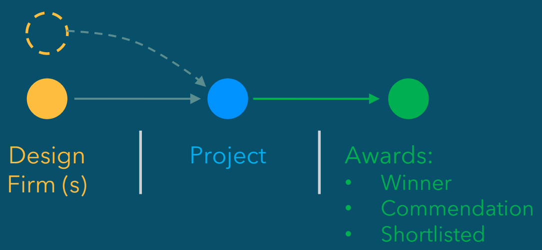
Interviewees interpreted these results in different ways. One put it plainly: "*They* [designers] *know themselves better and can design something better.*" This echoes with *The Reflective Practitioner* whereby the tacit and experiential knowledge that designer-occupants have about their organisation and the way they work is applied directly rather than translated into a brief where much of such intangible knowledge can be lost.

Others attributed it to creative autonomy, suggesting that experts work best when left alone, arguing that "*the client can get in the way of an optimal solution*" and that "[designers] *are the experts and they don't need to compromise nor design by panel.*" Indeed, in *Participatory Design in Housing*, the authors note that designers can be sceptical of broad participation, partly from a concern that too many competing voices may dilute a coherent design vision and compromise design quality, what they refer to as "*design by committee*."

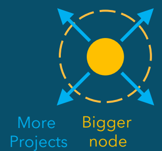
However, research into architect–client relationships suggests that while involving others can bring competing priorities, such engagement can increase alignment with users' needs. Thus, having a panel, committee, or input from others might be less problematic than the structure of the interaction.

An interesting case surfaced in which a designer regarded the client's involvement in the awards process as an inconvenience, believing the client's main contribution of providing a canvas (organisation) for their design had already been fulfilled.

When design firms collaborate, multiple firms become associated with a single project.



Unique Design Firms	Unique Projects	Award Groups
116	181	15



The size of the design firm node is determined by the number of projects.

Fig. 6 Five years of workplace interior design awards in Australia (2021-2025).

One interviewee had a very different view. They argued that when designers design their own workplaces "*there is less compromise that needs to be made between function and aesthetic… and aesthetics wins*" and because of that "[designers aim to] *create a jewellery box of a workplace, not a high performing, future oriented work environment that takes its cues from the needs of the* project, *but to adhere to concept of aesthetics and win future work*." From this perspective, the absence of a client removes a source of challenge that would otherwise keep the design accountable to operational needs.

Further, the same interviewee noted a misalignment between what the profession celebrates through awards and what actually benefits the occupying organisation. On that basis, they concluded that "*designers are not the best people to design workplaces*."

I wanted to test this sentiment through another live poll at the conference. Delegates were asked whether the incentives of workplace design, what drives designers to design workplaces, are well aligned with what organisations need, Figure 7.

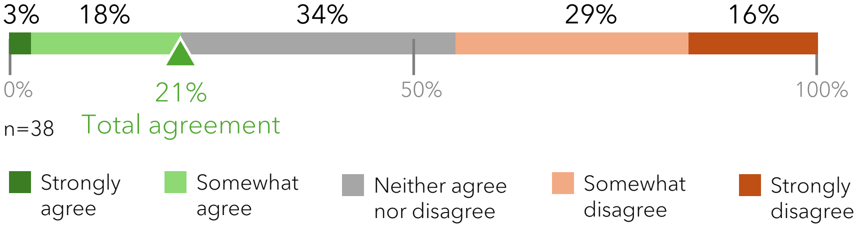


Fig. 7 Level of agreement with the statement:
The incentives of workplace design are well aligned with what organisations need.

This appeared to be a difficult question. It attracted the fewest responses and the highest level of neutrality of any question in the poll, with 34% neither agreeing nor disagreeing. Even so, disagreement outweighed agreement by more than two to one, pointing to a perceived misalignment between the incentives of design and what is good for the organisation occupying the resulting workplace.

More than two thousand years ago, the ancient Roman architect Vitruvius argued that good architecture should combine *firmitas, utilitas and venustas*: strength, utility and beauty. These were not competing definitions of good design, but qualities to be achieved together. A contemporary parallel can be found in *Instrumentality, Aesthetics, and Symbolism of Office Design*, which distinguishes between how well a workplace functions, how it looks and feels, and what it communicates. Both arguments recognise that design has several dimensions and cannot be judged through one alone.

The problem may be that aesthetic qualities are immediately visible and relatively easy to judge, while organisational benefits are less evident and take longer to emerge. In an awards context, this means that *venustas* (beauty) is more readily recognised and rewarded than *utilitas* (utility).

"A soft, gentle place that looks like a nice place to work."

I was particularly interested in understanding why the winning projects won, so I looked at the jury citations. But rather than limiting the analysis to the five-year period covered by the network, I traced the citations as far back as 2006, when the awards started, to conduct a larger thematic analysis. I also analysed the project descriptions.

The latter were largely declarative, explaining what was designed and why. Descriptions used phrases such as "*presented an opportunity to*…" and "*designed to support*…".

The jury citations were different. Their language was more emotive, suggesting an affective judgement rather than an assessment against measurable outcomes. Projects were described as *delightful, playful, warm, rich, refined, calm, engaging, sophisticated* and *intriguing*. The citations were also aspirational, often describing what a workplace represented or stood for. In this sense, the workplace was treated as a cultural and moral artefact. Perhaps unsurprisingly for design awards, there was also a strong emphasis on materiality and execution, using terms such as "*exquisite detailing*", "*crafted*" and "*robust materials*".

What I found particularly interesting was the way the jury's voice was used as a proxy for the experiences of employees. One citation stated that "*each member of the jury agreed they would happily work*" in the project being judged. Such a statement is clearly subjective, but it also conflates the visual appeal of a workplace with what it might actually be like to work for the organisation occupying it. It implies that the way a workplace looks can indicate the quality of the employment experience, without any knowledge about the organisation, its culture or indeed, the experiences of its employees. It is as if *utilitas* doesn't matter, only *venustas*.

Another project was described as "*a soft, gentle place that looks like a nice place to work*". This piqued my curiosity and I wanted to know how many of these design award-winning workplaces would also appear in a survey-based employee experience benchmark listing organisations ranked by their employees as particularly good places to work.

It is important to note that this benchmark is index-based, not an awards program. Still, there is value in comparing both datasets in search of an intersection between the 181 projects in the design awards and the organisations identified in the index as places where it is *great* to work.

Figure 8 shows the highest-ranked Australian organisations listed in this index over the same period covered by the design awards. Across the five years, 15 unique organisations are listed, identified as A to O. Some organisations stay at the top, others fluctuate and some appear more frequently than others, but do any of these also appear in the design awards?

The answer is no.

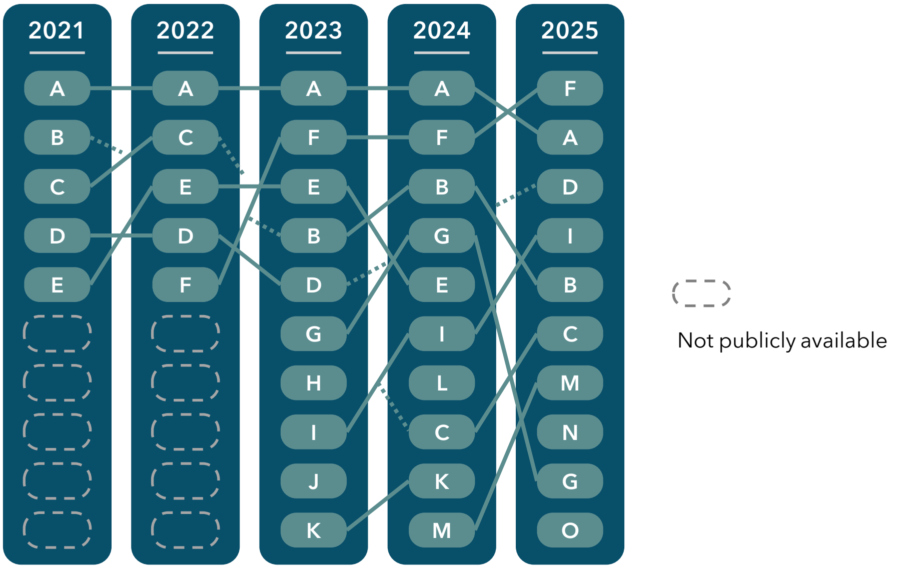


Fig. 8 List of the 15 anonymised organisations (A-O), based on publicly available data from the index ranking organisations where it is great to work at (2021-2025).

There is another widely used global benchmark of employee workplace experience, which measures how effectively workplaces support the people who use them. I reviewed its publicly available index to see whether any organisations also appeared in the other two datasets. The process of comparing this benchmark is explained in the side textbox.

The result: only one overlap. One organisation shortlisted in the design awards also appeared in the employee workplace experience benchmark in 2023. There was no overlap with the index listing organisations where it was great to work.

At one level, this little-to-no overlap across the three programs is unsurprising. Each assesses the workplace through a different professional lens and values different aspects of workplace performance. Designers submit projects for recognition by their peers. The workplace culture ranking is led by the organisation based on employee feedback coordinated by the HR team. And the employee experience index is commissioned by the organisation, usually by the property or facilities team, and measures employees' experience of how well the workplace supports them.

But that is also the point. Each one of them presents a different account of what makes a workplace good, yet those accounts rarely meet. Research on the plurality of organisational evaluation shows that industries often contain multiple awards, ratings and rankings, each constructed around a different notion of value. And that raises an important question.

Ask yourself, as an employee, would you rather work in the workplace that won a design award, the one deemed great to work at, or the one employees say supports them best?

Ideally, these would not be different choices.

There is another layer to this. Would the same differences appear between two award programs that both claim to recognise "*design excellence*", but assess it through different disciplinary lenses? Such is the case of the interior design awards and the architecture awards.

Table 2 lists the nine workplace projects that appeared in both awards across the same 2021-2025 period.

The workplace experience benchmark is an international index. In the April 2026 public listing, only three Australian workplaces appeared, ranked 44th, 50th and 60th, with the organisation at 60th anonymised.

This limited the comparison to two identifiable Australian workplaces.

Also, the April 2026 dataset falls outside the 2021-2025 period used for the other analyses.

However, workplace experience surveys are typically conducted some time after occupation and commonly ongoingly, whereas design awards recognise projects soon after completion.

It is reasonable for projects completed in earlier years to appear in later experience data. But none did.

A review of historical records of the index identified just one workplace that appeared in both the design awards and the workplace experience benchmark in 2023.

Once again, the majority (6 out of 9, 67%) of awarded workplaces were designed by the same designers who occupy them.

These two awards showed the highest level of overlap, perhaps unsurprisingly given the similarity of criteria. Even so, the nine overlapping projects represent just 5% of the 181 workplace projects in the interior design awards. From the architecture side, they account for 14% of the 64 projects recognised across the Commercial Architecture and Interior Architecture categories.

It could also be argued that these figures, and indeed the awards, are not directly comparable, as they differ in several ways, including that the interior design awards are open to interior designers and other design professionals, whereas the architecture counterpart requires the entrant to be a registered architect and a member of the professional institute.

Table 2 List of projects that were shortlisted, commended or won in the interior design and architects awards programs. Includes the two categories within the architecture awards: Commercial Architecture and Interior Architecture.

Year	Design firm(s) / project	Interior Design Awards	Architects Awards
2021	**A/1**w	Winner	Award Commercial Architecture & Interior Architecture
2022	**B/2**	Shortlisted	Shortlisted Interior Architecture*
	C/3w	Commendation	Award Interior Architecture
2023	**D/4**w	Commendation	Award Commercial Architecture
	E/5	Shortlisted	Commendation Commercial Architecture
	F/6w	Winner	Commendation Commercial Architecture
2024	**G/7**	Winner	Shortlisted Interior Architecture
2025	**H/8**w	Winner	Award Interior Architecture
	I/9w	Winner	Shortlisted Interior Architecture

w = workplace designed by the occupying design firm

* = 2021 in Architects awards

Bureaucracies aside, they are similar in a more important way. They both claim to recognise and celebrate "*design excellence*". And so, I ask you again, as an employee, would you rather work at a workplace awarded by interior designers or by architects? And why should there be different interpretations of design excellence between the two?

Figure 9 summarises the intersection between the four awards and indices.

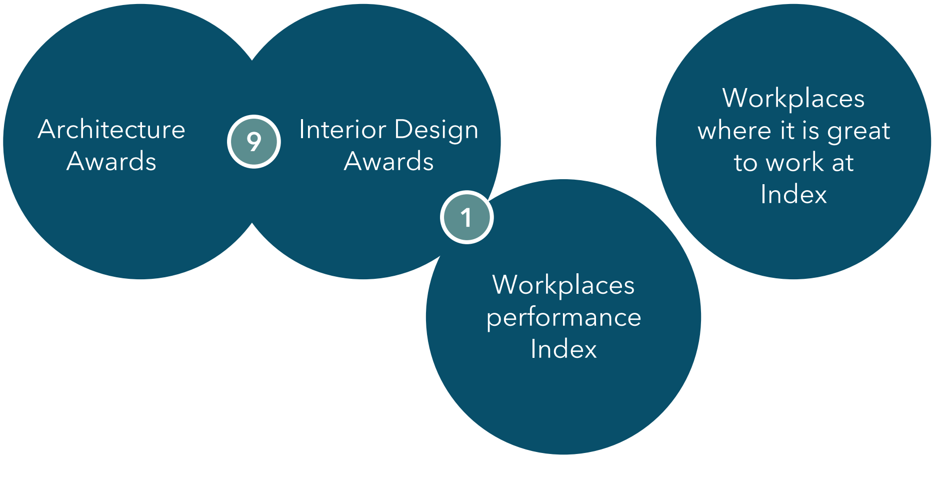


Fig. 9 Overlap across the reviewed awards and indices (2021–2025).

Something that became clear from reviewing these awards and indices was the number of ways by which workplaces can be assessed, ranked and recognised. They are evaluated through lenses including design, sustainability, wellbeing, property, real estate, employee experience and even happiness.

The proliferation of awards reflects the value they create for those who enter them. *Collecting Badges: Understanding the Gold Rush for Business Excellence Awards* describes awards as forms of third-party endorsement that can build visibility, credibility and reputation, motivate employees and provide external benchmarks.

Although I only formally analysed the four programs discussed before, an informal scan of others where public data is available suggests that they do not necessarily recognise the same workplaces either. While this was not done systematically, the pattern was noticeable enough to mention.

This creates an interesting paradox. Within each framework, ideas about what constitutes a "good" workplace may converge around a relatively consistent set of criteria and expectations. Yet across frameworks, those definitions can be quite different. What counts as good design may not be the same workplace recognised for employee experience, sustainability or culture. Nor do different lenses within design necessarily recognise the same workplace.

Rather than converging on a single idea of what makes a good workplace, the industry may therefore be producing multiple, increasingly specialised versions of it. *Toward a Comparative Sociology of Valuation and Evaluation* is not an easy read, but it discusses how different evaluative settings use processes such as categorisation and legitimation to determine what is considered worthy, and how multiple systems of evaluation can coexist rather than resolving into a single hierarchy.

The limited overlap between workplace awards and indices may be more than a curiosity. Each program does not simply view the same workplace through a different lens, through what it chooses to value, it also help define what a "good" workplace is. Figure 10 illustrates this distinction, while the next section looks more closely at convergence within the interior design awards.

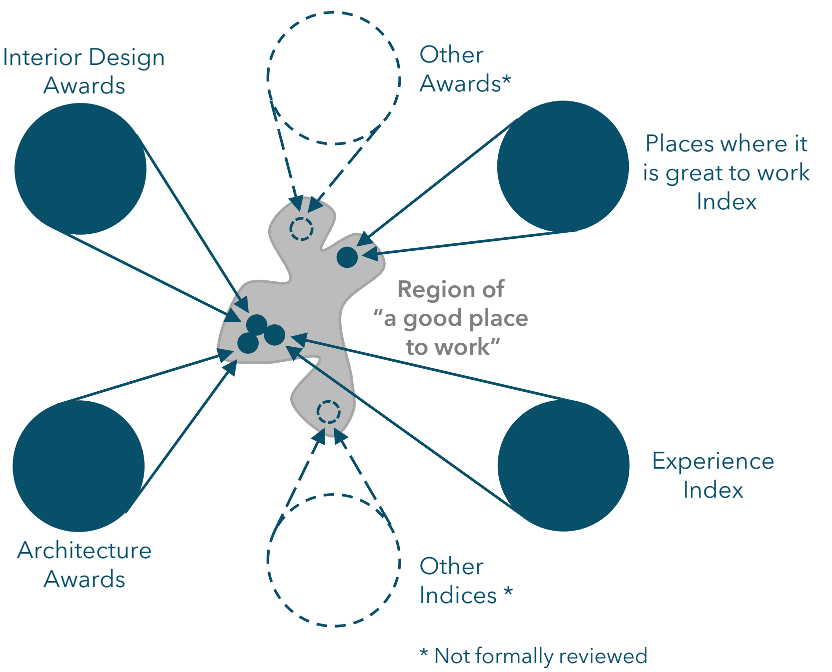


Fig. 10 Convergence by discipline or lens leading to differing interpretations of what is considered "a good place to work".

Recognition and Convergence

Figure 11 shows the five design firms with the most projects in the network. The top part highlights Design Firm A, the one with the most projects, in the context of the wider network and identifies where Design Firms B to E are located. Below are the isolated ego-networks of these last four firms showing their individual projects more clearly.

I then used a simple scoring system to compare recognition across the network: 1 point for a shortlist, 2 for a commendation, and 3 for a winner. This gives Design Firm A 16 points. Across Design Firms A to E, this method produces a combined score of 52 points. This is equivalent to the points that 52 firms would receive from one shortlisted project each.

The purpose of this scoring is to illustrate how recognition seems to focus within a relatively small number of firms. This matters because awards do more than recognise design excellence, they also make particular firms and their projects more visible.

Recognition is not the same as competitive convergence. However, when a small number of design firms and their projects receive repeated recognition, they become particularly visible examples of what is being rewarded. The interior awards themselves amplify this further by providing entrants with "*considerable media recognition*."

This repeated recognition may reinforce both normative and mimetic pressures. Normative pressure comes from peer judging, which indicates what the profession values, while mimetic pressure comes from repeated recognition and exposure, which provide visible examples of what good design looks like for others to benchmark against.

The Frankenworkplace

"*After having spent some months in successfully collecting and arranging my materials, I began*."

- Frankenstein, Mary Shelley

As a small experiment, I took the photographs from different awarded workplaces and put them side by side. Rather than looking like a collection of unrelated projects designed by different firms, as they were, the result was surprisingly cohesive, as though they were photographs from the same place.

I called it the Frankenworkplace. It does not exactly roll off the tongue, but the analogy has some merit. In Frankenstein, Victor recalls how he "*collected bones from charnel-houses*" to put his creature together. Importantly, although such creature is assembled from human parts, he struggles with whether he can ever truly belong among humans.

I have to admit that I initially viewed today's Frankenworkplace in much the same way: assembled from familiar and recognisable parts, yet somehow not belonging among the workplaces we should aspire to design. But the Frankenworkplace, more precisely sameness, might actually have some benefits.

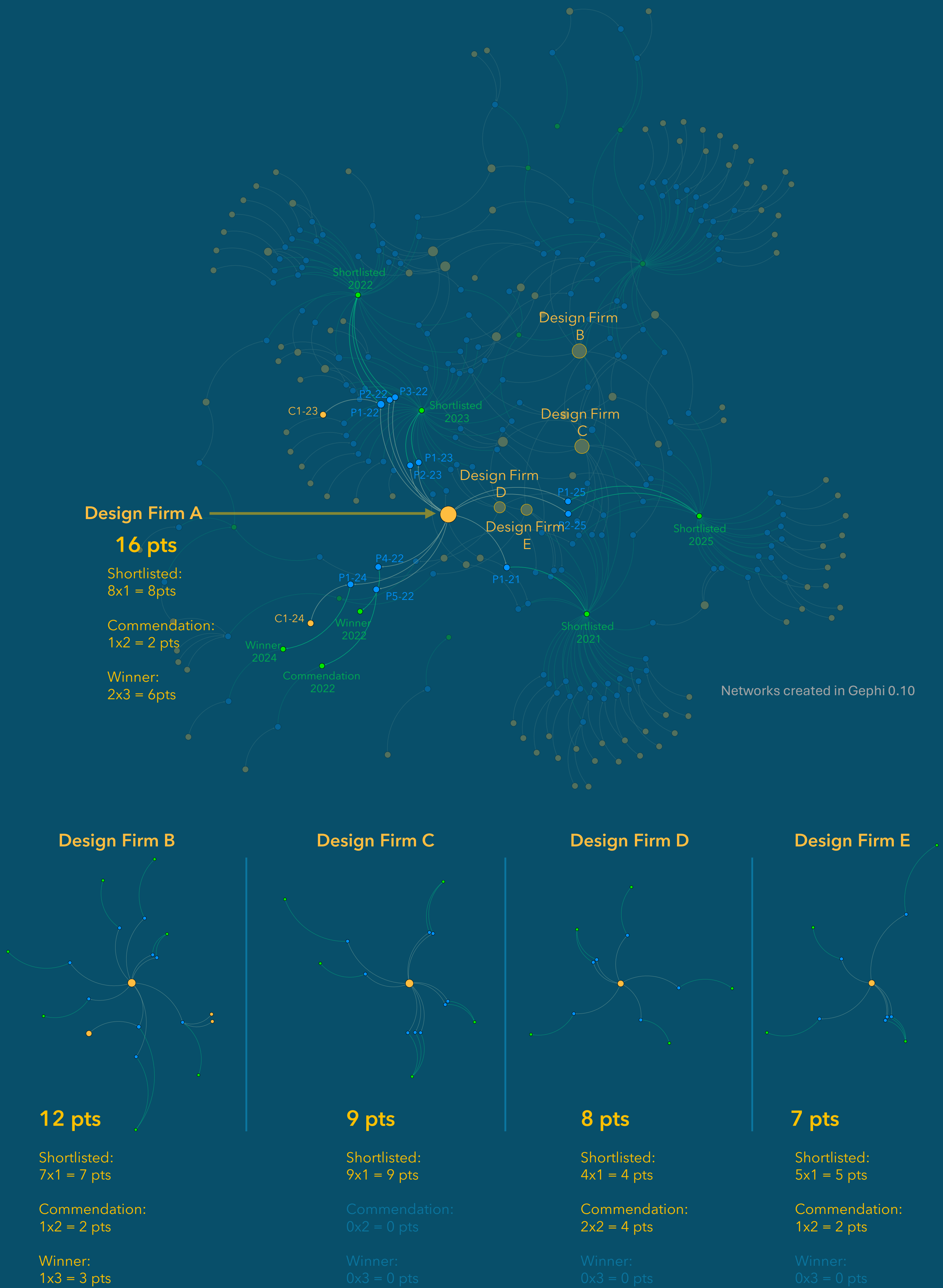


Fig. 11 Top five design firms by number of projects in the network.

In the live audience poll, 74% of delegates disagreed with the statement that workplace similarity is a problem, Figure 12. The interviews offered some interesting explanations as to why.

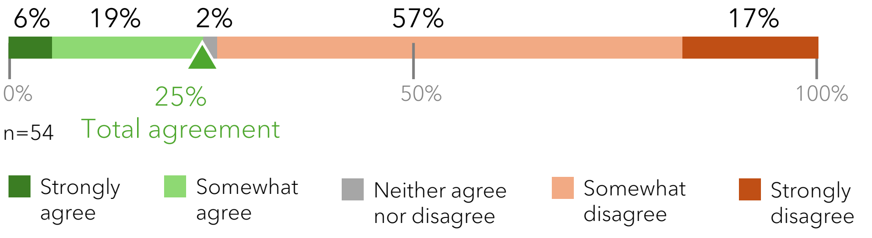


Fig. 12 Level of agreement with the statement:
Workplace similarity is a problem.
Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

One interviewee mentioned the book *Identity Economics*, in which the authors describe how people understand themselves and how these identities can influence behaviour even when conventional economic incentives remain unchanged. In *Identity and the Economics of Organizations*, the same authors apply this idea specifically to work, arguing that a person's self-image as a particular kind of worker can itself become an important source of motivation.

The interviewee gave this example: imagine a lawyer is offered two otherwise equivalent positions with identical remuneration packages. If one workplace looks more "*lawyery*", reinforcing the candidate's sense of what being a lawyer looks and feels like, it may make that organisation more attractive to them. In *Saw the Office, Want the Job,* the researchers tested whether workspace design affects prospective employees and found that creative workplace design can increase organisational attractiveness.

Seen this way, a workplace that resembles what people expect of a profession or sector may help communicate that people like them not only work there but also belong there. If this type of sameness creates an advantage in attracting candidates, other law firms may have an incentive to use similar cues, hence the Frankenworkplace.

Another interviewee, this time from the tenant's perspective, argued that there may also be value in organisations looking alike, but from a different angle. They suggested that when employees move from one organisation to another and encounter a familiar workplace setup, they already understand how the space works, allowing for a softer landing and faster integration into their new workplace.

This made me think of the workplace as a kind of operating system, which in some ways it is. Moving from one PC to another PC is relatively seamless because the underlying system is the same, whereas moving from a PC to a Mac requires some relearning. In much the same way, a degree of similarity between workplaces may reduce friction for new employees by making the environment easier to understand and navigate.

Another interviewee provided a more provocative argument, predicting that "*the idea of delivering an authentic workplace is going to disappear.*" By authentic, they meant a workplace designed to communicate the particular brand, culture and identity of the organisation occupying it.

They gave two reasons. First, as previously discussed, "*organisations themselves converge*". Second, "*landlords are the one holding to the carbon on their balance sheets when the tenants walk away*".

There is good evidence that this repeated turnover of tenants matters. In Measuring office fit-out changes to determine recurring embodied energy in building life cycle assessment, the authors used building permit data from Melbourne CBD and found that between 46% and 70% of floors in high-rise office buildings could undergo fit-out changes within only five years. They describe this office fit-out as behaving more like "*a short-term consumable rather than a long-term durable*" asset, arguing that this raises the life-cycle carbon implications of shorter leases and repeated fit-outs.

From that perspective, the interviewee argued that "*developers and landlords will prefer designs that are more reusable to a wider cohort of future tenants, and because of that, there will no longer be a need for briefing or strategy*", ultimately predicting that "*workplace design will no longer be a bespoke installation for a tenant*."

Works such as Circular value chain transition in office fit-outs, and Mitigating fit-out waste in rentable offices make a compelling case for reducing fit-out waste by designing interiors for multiple cycles of use rather than a single occupation. An alternative to short-lived, tenant-specific fit-outs, but also one contributing to sameness.

I also tested this proposition with the audience, asking whether they agreed that workplace design will focus less on individual organisations and more on solutions that appeal to a broad range of tenants. 63% agreed, Figure 13.

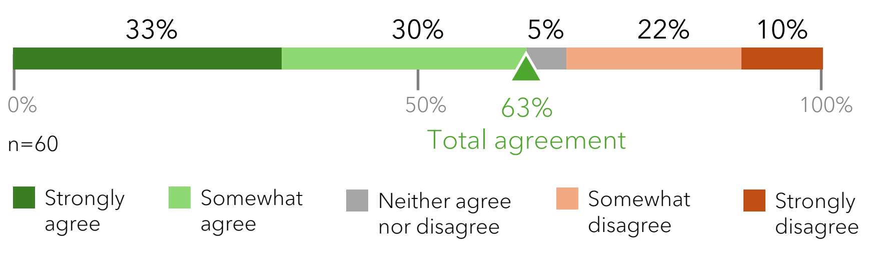


Fig. 13 Level of agreement with the statement:
Workplace design will focus less on individual organisations and more on solutions that appeal to a broad range of tenants.

What these arguments suggest is that convergence may offer an advantage by making the workplace familiar enough to attract people and adaptable enough to attract the next tenant.

However, these potential benefits should not be understood as reasons to abandon organisational specificity. Instead, briefing and workplace strategy may need to evolve, incorporating circularity, adaptability and future reuse alongside the needs of the organisation. Otherwise, there is a risk that workplaces become simply the residue of property and construction constraints, rather than environments designed to help organisations achieve their objectives.

BEYOND SAMENESS, TOWARDS PURPOSEFUL INNOVATION

In this last section, I explore how innovation in a converging context might look like.

What follows pushes the insights of this research into a conceptual model and, although grounded in the work of others, it is deliberately speculative and is offered as a proposition for further exploration.

The model builds on the WDS convergence framework and adds one more mechanism: best practice.

As design firms learn what works, they repeat it and drop what does not. Over time, this means that design solutions from Design Firm A and Design Firm B can become more and more alike as they move from creating 'good' workplaces to 'better' and eventually towards the 'best' workplace, as shown in Figure 14, left. A similar pattern as Figure 4.

"Best" here marks a performance frontier. It is the point at which capable firms have built up enough knowledge and skill to produce similar optimal results. For clients, that's good news as multiple firms can now deliver the "best" workplace. For the firms themselves, it's a problem. If others can deliver "best," what makes any one of them different?

This is where the '>' on the left becomes an 'X' on the right of Figure 14.

Design firms do not stop competing once they reach the intersection. They still need to distinguish themselves from their competitors to win the next project. Extending the trajectories beyond the point of convergence produces divergence. This is consistent with Competitive Convergence and Divergence, which shows how firms may diverge and specialise when continuing to compete for the same position becomes less attractive.

Much as the original study began with a feeling of sameness, I now wonder whether workplace design firms might diverge not through meaningful specialisation, but through what I refer to as competitive overshoot.

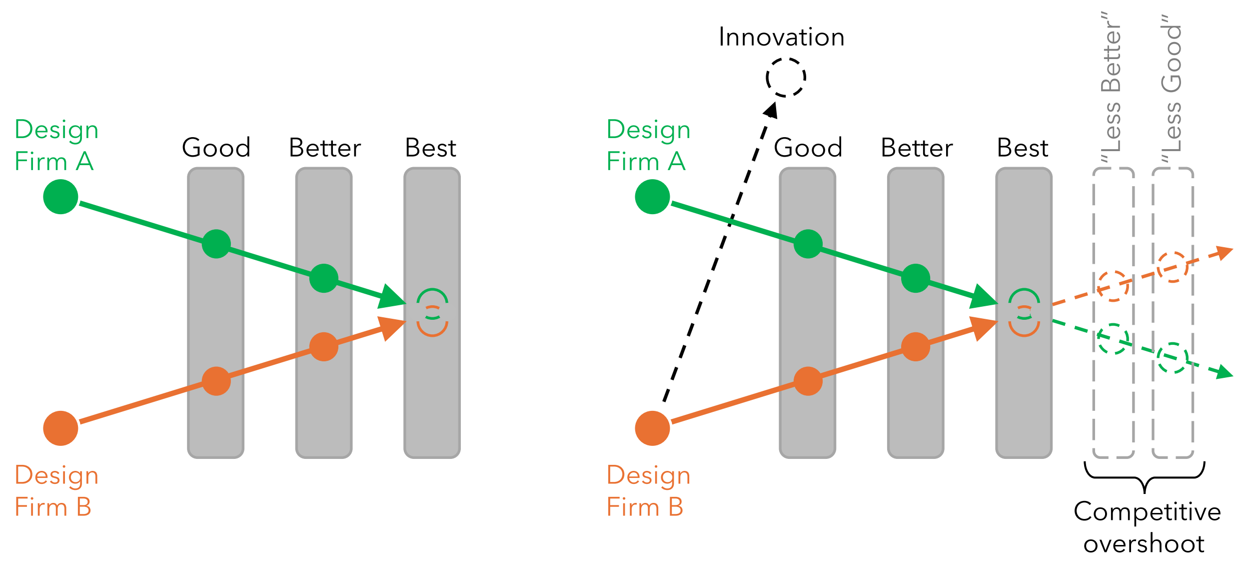


Fig. 14 (left) Convergence through best practice, (right) Conceptualisation of "Competitive overshoot" and misplaced innovation.

By competitive overshoot I mean the hypothetical point at which difference is pursued mainly to remain different rather than to produce a better outcome for the organisation. Here, differentiation becomes an end in itself, and unusual features or experiences may surface to help differentiate one design firm from another without necessarily improving the workplace for those who use it. In this case, "innovative" workplaces can feel more like statements of difference than meaningful responses to how work should be supported by design.

The challenge is also not to avoid overshooting the "best" workplace in pursuit of differentiation. Innovating too early may mean diverging before reaching that point of best practice, as suggested by the dashed trajectory in Figure 14, right. The question becomes how to innovate purposefully without stopping short of what works or pushing beyond it merely to be different.

This is where the 'X' needs another dimension, Figure 15.

The first X exists in a plane within a particular context, shaped by current technologies, economic conditions, regulations, organisational practices and market structures.

But the context does not stay still.

As conditions change, so does what the "best" workplace could be. Therefore, the genuine innovation opportunity may reside in not keep moving horizontally within the same context past yesterday's best, but to recognise that the context itself has moved, and with it, what "best workplace" means.

When that context changes, another plane appears with a new version of 'best' workplace. Even the leading firms may once again find themselves some distance from its centre as they grapple with what "good" looks like, let alone "better" or "best".

Dynamic Capabilities and Strategic Management provides a good foundation for this idea. It argues that changing environments require firms to integrate, build and reconfigure their capabilities rather than simply becoming more efficient at what they already do. Also, *Adaptation on Rugged Landscapes* conceptualises organisational adaptation as a search across a performance landscape containing multiple peaks rather than movement towards one permanent optimum. In the same way, the "best" workplace in this model is better understood as a temporary peak within a particular context.

The opportunity is then not to compete by producing increasingly distinctive variations of an already mature solution in an obsolete context, but to recognise when the problem itself has changed and begin searching again for what "best" means in workplace design.

Innovative design firms may initially know less as they move into the emerging context, experiment more and produce solutions that appear imperfect compared with those refined under the previous notion of "best".

Seen this way, innovation is working on a new design problem rather than decorating an old answer.

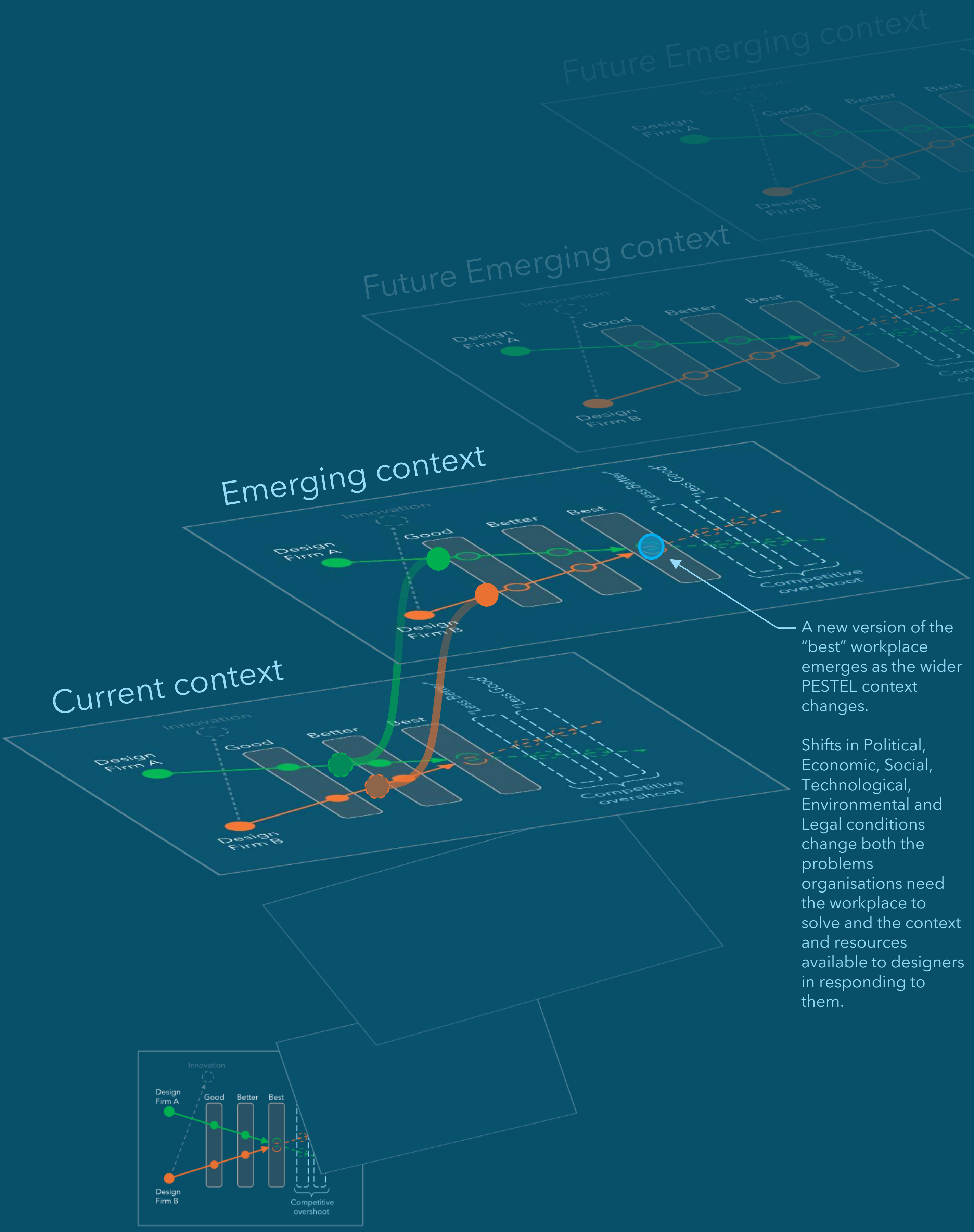


Fig. 15 Purposeful innovation as changing contexts create new versions of the 'best' workplace.

MAKING SENSE OF SAMENESS

This research began with a personal frustration: the feeling that workplaces looked the same. It has since shifted that frustration towards understanding. It helped develop a clearer definition of sameness and, more importantly, recognise that similarity is not necessarily something to be avoided, but something to be understood.

Perhaps the most useful test for sameness is a simple one. If two workplaces look alike, can we explain why they should? And if they look different, can we explain what such difference achieves?

Some convergence can be useful. Best practices spread because they can produce better workplaces. Similarity can also make environments easier to understand, while standardisation can support adaptability and reuse. Convergence, and ultimately sameness, becomes questionable when inherited assumptions, benchmarks, technologies and market expectations start shaping the answer before the organisation's needs have been identified.

Designers should be able to distinguish between conventions that provide genuine value and those reproduced simply because they are expected or celebrated, rather than because they serve the purpose of the workplace.

The limited overlap between the awards and indices raises a different question. Differences in criteria, eligibility and which workplaces are submitted to each award can help explain the scarce overlap, but they do not explain the very different interpretations of what a good workplace is or should be. If almost none of these definitions intersect, it raises a deeper question about whether any one of them captures "good" in a sufficiently complete way.

There is a risk that multiple specialised criteria turn the idea of a good workplace into a series of parallel games, each with its own rules, measures and winners. Yet employees do not experience workplaces through separate lenses of design, culture, experience, sustainability or wellbeing. They experience the workplace as a whole.

Finally, purposeful innovation should not be about escaping sameness. It should be about knowing what is worth retaining, what should be challenged, and when a changing context means that even yesterday's best answer is no longer enough.

WHAT'S NEXT?

This report can only touch briefly on some of the concepts opened by sameness, including the small portion of the perspectives raised through the interviews. While the report concludes here, the research does not.

I intend to keep exploring these questions, testing the ideas developed here and adding new insights as they emerge.

Click here or **scan the QR code** below to follow the research online.