



SCOTT NORSWORTHY

LOCAL RESOURCES

TEXT Elsa Lam

AN ARCHITECT-OWNED AND -OPERATED COWORKING HUB ANTICIPATES THE FUTURE OF WORKPLACES.

Like many architects whose portfolio includes commercial office design, Heather Dubbeldam spent a good deal of last year speculating on the future of the workplace. But the stakes were higher for Dubbeldam—who not only designs offices for others, but also owns her own office space—along with owning and operating a coworking space called Lokaal (Dutch for local).

Just before the pandemic, Dubbeldam Architecture + Design acquired and renovated a three-storey brick building on Toronto's busy St. Clair West, transforming the graffiti-ridden corner property into a mixed-use creative hub. Besides their own offices and coworking space, each of which occupies a full floor, the building contains a ground-floor marketing agency and indie coffee shop, as well as a residential unit in a raised basement.

Many of these spaces emptied out when the pandemic hit. Luckily, the marketing agency's work remained stable, and they even renewed their lease mid-pandemic. But only one of Lokaal's members—a building envelope consultant, with a staff of four—stayed put. "They had the whole floor to themselves," says Kevin McIntosh, Dubbeldam's business and life partner.

Dubbeldam, McIntosh, and their seven staff all returned to their office in August, as soon as everyone was fully vaccinated. They have also seen interest pick up in Lokaal. As people negotiate the changing landscape of work-from-office and work-from-home, the need for a third space—not home and not office—has made Lokaal busier now than pre-pandemic. The space hosts small businesses and start-ups, and its occupants have also included several medical students who came to study for exams away from their partners and young children at home, but use Local for a change of scene. Recently, a Montreal architect worked out of Lokaal for a few days with his intern, who lives nearby.

On a wintery Monday in December, the space was pleasantly abuzz, but not uncomfortably crowded. The organizers of a Latin American film festival conversed around a table in the kitchen, a marketer went over the week's social media content with a colleague, an architect who recently took an office chat over coffee with a hot-desker about the recent snow—it was the hot-desker's first winter in Canada. About two dozen people from some 20 businesses currently have access to the space, though not everyone comes in every day.

ABOVE Sitting atop Dubbeldam Architecture's own offices, a community-oriented co-working suite offers a "third space" for start-up businesses and locals working from home.

Mandatory vaccination, social distancing, and masking policies are in place. There are also marbled white-and-grey felt dividers between workstations, which complement a bespoke red felt pendant light in the lounge and a pleated felt entrance wall. The dividers, called desk-PETs, are designed by Dubbeldam; both the luminaire and wall feature are by felt artist Kathryn Walter (whose studio is nearby). By design, there is flexibility built into the space—if the meeting room is occupied, members sometimes use Dubbeldam's meeting room upstairs; conversely, as Dubbeldam's own office grows, they'll use some of Lokaal's desks for overflow. Outside, painted drop-shadows around the windows animate the façade, giving the brick building a dynamic presence on the street.

"Almost all of the members of Lokaal are from our neighbourhood," says Dubbeldam, recalling how several members were drawn to the space by its lively façade. As post-pandemic models of online and hybrid work settle into place, Dubbeldam and McIntosh are confident that places like Lokaal will become even more essential to the urban fabric—flexible, community-oriented spaces that allow people to work together, even when their formal work arrangements might otherwise keep them apart. ◀▲