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# Homes that Work

## Residential architecture must adapt to the needs of home-workers, says Frances Holliss



**Words**  
Frances Holliss

The way we inhabit our buildings and our cities is changing radically and rapidly. More than one in seven of the UK working population now works mainly from home – and millions

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more part-time. Ninety-five per cent of UK businesses employ fewer than ten people. Though these represent a third of all employment and a fifth of all turnover, most are – or have been at some point – run from their owners' homes. This hidden workforce has nearly doubled in the past 20 years in the UK and continues to grow. But we don't design for it at the urban or the building scale. Mainstream housing is still designed as somewhere we can cook, eat, bathe, sleep, watch television, bring up children, and nothing else.

Working in the home – or living at the workplace – poses real challenges, but an analysis of the disadvantages identified by more than 100 home-based workers (from across the social spectrum, in a wide variety of occupations from urban, suburban and rural contexts, internationally) shows that they could almost all be solved through design. Inappropriate space, problems with occupational identity and social isolation are prominent issues. If designers could think about these ideas it would help overcome some of the problems.

**“More than one in seven of the UK working population now works mainly from home – but we don't design for it at the urban or the building scale”**

Operating in a wide range of



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occupations, from car mechanic to senior software manager, journalist to architect, baker to childminder, home-based workers' spatial and environmental needs are extremely varied and not generally easily accommodated in standard one-, two- or three-bedroom flats. Squeezing work into inappropriately designed home spaces, or home into workplace, often leads to frustration, inefficiency and stress. Home-workers need agency over the design of their space. Self-build provides one route to achieving this. Eighty per cent of the 360 modest terraced houses in Nieuw Leyden, a Dutch self-build scheme planned by MVRDV, include a studio, workshop, shop or office.

Designed-in flexibility and adaptability offers a second route. In Maastricht's Piazza Céramique workhome development by Jo Janssen Architects (pictured above), each office-apartment has two front doors, generous floor-to-ceiling heights, non-structural internal walls and carefully placed circulation and service zones, allowing people to inhabit space as they choose, and change it over time.

Most home-based workers, inhabiting buildings designed purely as dwellings, are invisible in the city. For some this is bad for their sense of themselves in the world, but design can counter this. Functional representation, where the dual function of a workhome development is expressed architecturally, as in the traditional

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weaver's house, can support a sense of occupational identity, allowing both home and workspace to be legible in the city.

Piazza Céramique adopts a diametrically opposite approach: functional neutrality, its facade inscrutable. Any of the identical pairs of French windows could open onto a dentist's surgery or a family home, an architect's office or a small apartment, and this – maybe counter-intuitively – also relieves the home-worker's sense of invisibility.

### **“Home-based workers’ most common and urgently reported problem is social isolation”**

Home-based workers' most common and urgently reported problem, however, is social isolation. Often inhabiting homes designed primarily as a series of private interior spaces, people working at home can easily develop depression. This is less of an issue for those who are part of larger households, or those whose work involves interactions with the public, like child-minders or therapists. For the solitary home-worker, however, the sense of isolation can be devastating. Workhome developments that create immediately accessible (and free) public or collective spaces can alleviate this. At Nieuw Leyden, for example, single-aspect houses open onto shared

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paved and landscaped pedestrian courts littered with picnic tables that buzz with neighbours chatting at coffee and teatime. Maastricht's Piazza Céramique is organised around a central atrium with a slightly hotel-like ground floor lounge that is often populated with clients waiting for appointments and occupants taking a break. Parties happen in each shared space, building local social networks and a sense of neighbourliness.

With home-working only set to grow, such thinking should be a feature of all residential architecture.

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