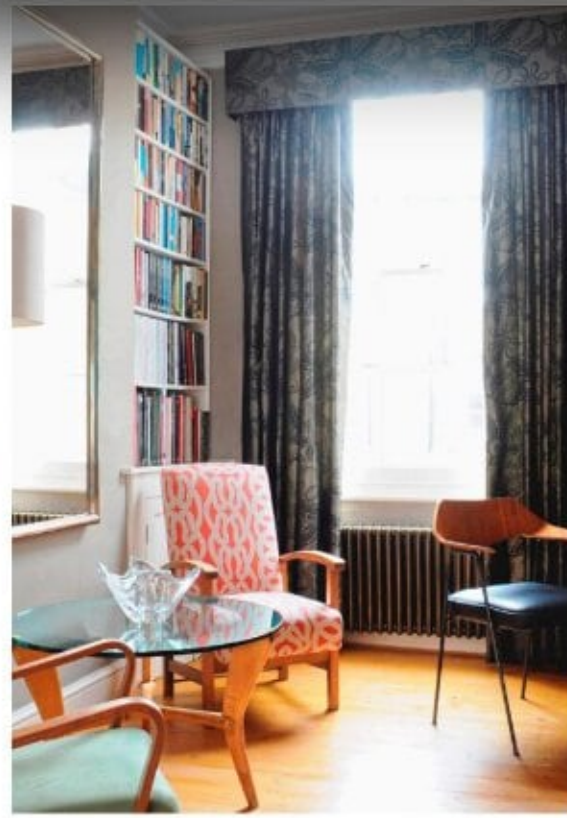




TAKING INTERIOR DESIGN ONLINE

In this article, Benji Lewis, International Interior Designer and Founder of Zoom That Room, explores how we're adjusting to the recent changes in our professional and work lives, and explains how he took his business onto a mostly virtual platform to advise and guide clients to make the most of work-from-home setups.



COVID-19 broke into our lives with such speed back in March 2020, and it's only now that people are adjusting to the impact it's had. Something that was the fourth headline on the evening news, and apparently happening thousands of miles away, was, within days, the most discussed word in our lexicon, making clear that an entire rethink for all of us regarding our daily habits and lifestyles was imminent. I think that most people's reaction once lockdown was announced, aside from knowing that we needed to keep safe, was an acknowledgement that the show must go on, as it were, and quick thinking was vital. As an Interior Designer – and hearing the word 'home' being conveyed as part of our

were able to successfully meld their professional life with a comfortable domestic set up would be key, both in terms of productivity and contentment. The first message that I endeavoured to convey to clients was that achieving a great work-life balance was possible, even if it meant that some upheaval was required. For many, the conditioning has been that you leave your home in the morning, and pick up your professional life in an office, reversing the process on completion of the working day. A positive (there were some – and goodness me, didn't we need to find silver linings) was that virtual interaction was something we were already acquainted with. Another positive was that

cloud, and for many, the reality was that work didn't start and stop between identified times on a weekday. On the contrary, it's quite normal to have to work into the evening or over weekends from a makeshift space in the home. A final positive was that people were being given the opportunity to set themselves up in a working environment that really suited them. They didn't need to sit at a desk space or go into an office that had been designed by someone else – that they might previously have found uninspiring. They could tailor their professional surroundings to suit them. An example of what I mean is that people didn't need to sit at a desk they found uncomfortable, or if they wished to listen to the radio, it might now be possible –

What became clear was that whilst the news we were being fed was undoubtedly unnerving, what was important was to keep calm, adjust thought processes, adapt surroundings, and carry on. A successful working day is governed by several things – not least of which:

- Separation
- Clarity
- Organisation.

Separation
It's a good thing to be able to feel like you're 'off to work' when you start the day, so I have advised clients to look for spaces, rooms or outbuildings that are otherwise unused or underused within their properties that can be converted to efficient places to

to close down the 'office' when you finish the working day. A home office outside of the house is fantastic, so, where possible, I would explore options on converting an outbuilding or doing a new build in a garden. Change the way the new work station feels from the home – they might be under the same roof, but that doesn't mean you can't address the feeling you get when you're in either of these places. I would examine options for finishes such as what goes on the floor (lino is a great look and more utilitarian than carpet), choose a colour scheme that makes your clients feel good, set up a great room layout – try not to place seating facing a wall, for example, and surround

Try to ensure that you have those elements that you'd have found in the office close to hand; a kitchenette, a WC – try to set up with an environment that is closely aligned to the one your client has been used to.

Clarity
Try and ensure that the new office has as much natural light as possible. In the event of that being in short supply, then work with beautiful ambient light – users need to be able to see very clearly the tasks in front of them, and enjoy a space with windows. This doesn't mean harsh luminosity. Factoring in how users want to feel while they're at work is important, so when you shop for lighting, also consider the variety of bulb. I have a loathing of harsh, white light – it's unforaging and

Organisation

Don't underestimate the amount of desk space you need; a working day isn't always confined to a table, a chair, a lamp and a laptop. It's joyous to be able to spread out, so I always suggest to clients that if they have the space for it, to buy the biggest desk they can – better still, with built-in storage. Places to store the stapler, hole punch, all those things people wish to tidy away at the end of the day. Being mindful of clearing is a great way of feeling like a user's in control. Something that I noticed during my first Zoom 'That Room' meetings was that people were crying out for cable management; it's immensely frustrating having to work with limited sockets and extension leads all over the place. I found that clients wished as part of their domestic overhauls, to ensure that they have sufficient power sockets for their requirements. My advice is to never be in any doubt how many of these we all need – chargers/laptops/printers/lamps/radio – we have a plethora of working accoutrements to consider, and that's before you've even thought about giving the work station the once over with a Hoover at the end of the day.

This is the new normal for us, and fast adaptability has been – and continues to be – key. There's no time to wait for good things to happen, we all have to work harder to find them. Taking my business onto a mostly virtual platform has been exciting and opened up endless possibilities. As an Interior Designer, you have to be hard-wired into understanding messages you receive from clients and reading these correctly. Via a FaceTime meeting, there's an awful lot of information you can glean – when you see someone in their room, you can gauge their style, their taste, you can even make good assumptions on their colour choices, if you have your wits about you. A virtual appointment is a very different experience to a phone call; when you can physically see someone, the manner in which they react to suggestions or proposals is clear in their body language or facial expressions. □

