

# The office goes open-air: How an SF couple conceived next-gen workspaces



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Jason Kelly Johnson is from Swift Current, Saskatchewan, on the Canadian prairie, population 16,000. Nataly Gattegno hails from Athens, one of the densest cities on Earth, population 3 million. They met in the middle, at the graduate school of architecture at Princeton University, in New Jersey, and came west to open a design firm called Future Cities Lab.

They were far thinkers, except on the name Future Cities. The couple, who live in the Dogpatch with their two daughters, forgot to trademark it and lost it, so now they gather their ideas under the umbrella of Futureforms, an art, design and urban-design studio with a name they did not forget to trademark.

They tested it by creating a mock-up of the Crown Zellerbach Building, a 20-story tower on Market Street in downtown San Francisco also known as One Bush Plaza. Then they just had to sit back and wait for the design world to catch up, which it did 15 years later with the arrival of the coronavirus, social distancing and the need to rethink how our work spaces are conceived.

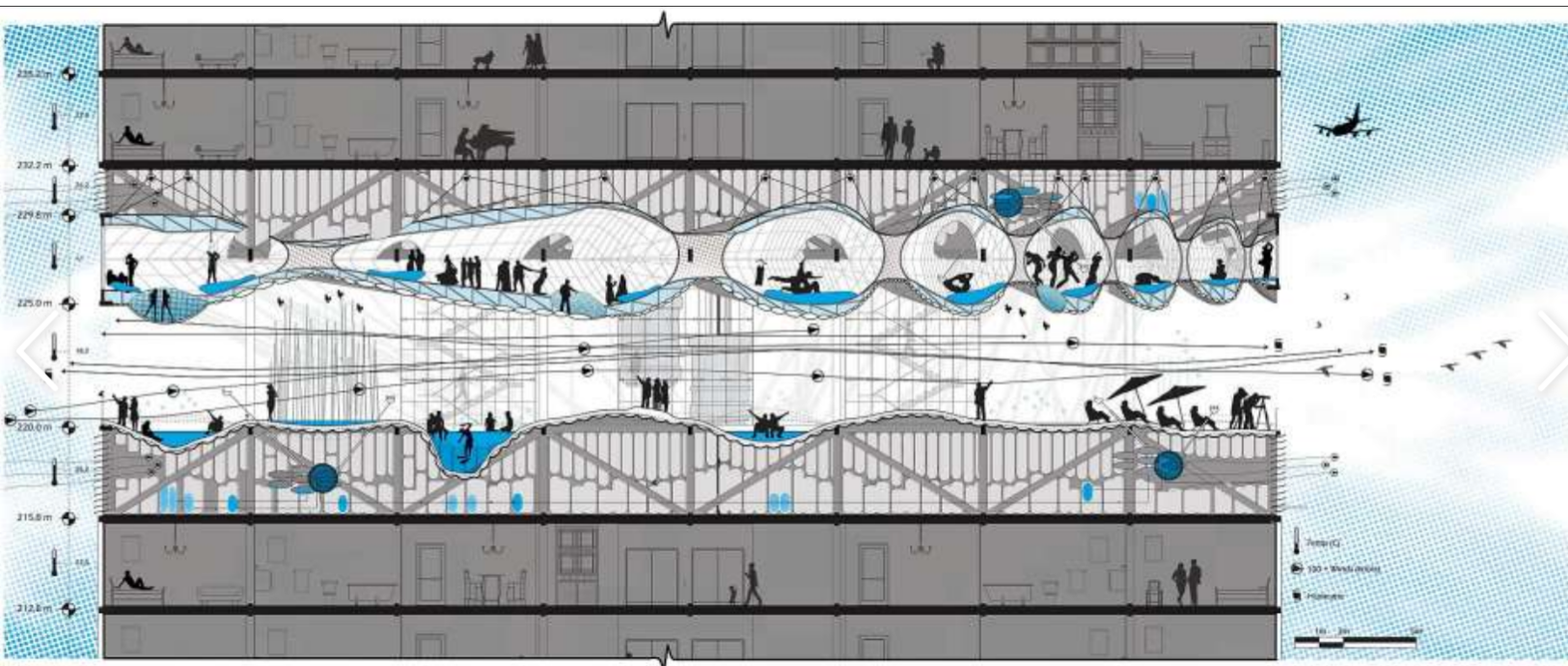
**Q: Was it a long wait, those 15 years it took for the Supergalaxy concept to come around?**

**Gattegno:** At the time, it was for an architectural competition, and competitions are usually for speculating with far-out or experimental ideas. We were like, “Oh, wouldn’t it be interesting?” and now it is, “You know what, Supergalaxy is starting to make sense now.” When people are told, “You can work at home now,” it raises the question of what happens to the office space that is left behind.

**Johnson:** Because of COVID-19, people are looking at the business model of having 100 people on a floor working side by side. Supergalaxy is interested in recasting three floors of an entire office building as a hybrid outdoor live/work room, with 30-foot ceilings.

**Q: How can we grasp that environment?**

**Johnson:** We are pulling out all of the existing infrastructure and furnishings. All that is left is the elevator, stairs and columns. We take out the windows so birds can fly through. There are things within Supergalaxy that blur the distinction between work and play, and between the natural world and the artificial. The ceiling is made of baffles that can lower to protect the space from the wind. It acts as a cocoon around you, but there are moments when fog and wind is allowed into it. You embrace the fact that you might have to wear a fleece or something.





A rendering of Futureforms' Supergalaxy floor plan within the Crown Zellerbach Building in downtown San Francisco.

Photo: Courtesy Futureforms

**Q: Didn't the ancient Greeks already have this figured out?**

**Gattegno:** The one thing that I have taken from my experience in Greece is the importance of outdoor public space. The idea of Supergalaxy is to bring outdoor public space inside a building. That is a more interesting way of rethinking a typical space where you have an agora, which is the Greek word for public space. If you have to stand 30 feet from someone, you need a big plaza. It doesn't have to be the plaza in front of City Hall. It can be going down three floors from your office and having a fully outdoor space on the 25th floor. Or an elevated park like at the Transbay Terminal. You are lifted up off the ground and can look into offices and apartments.

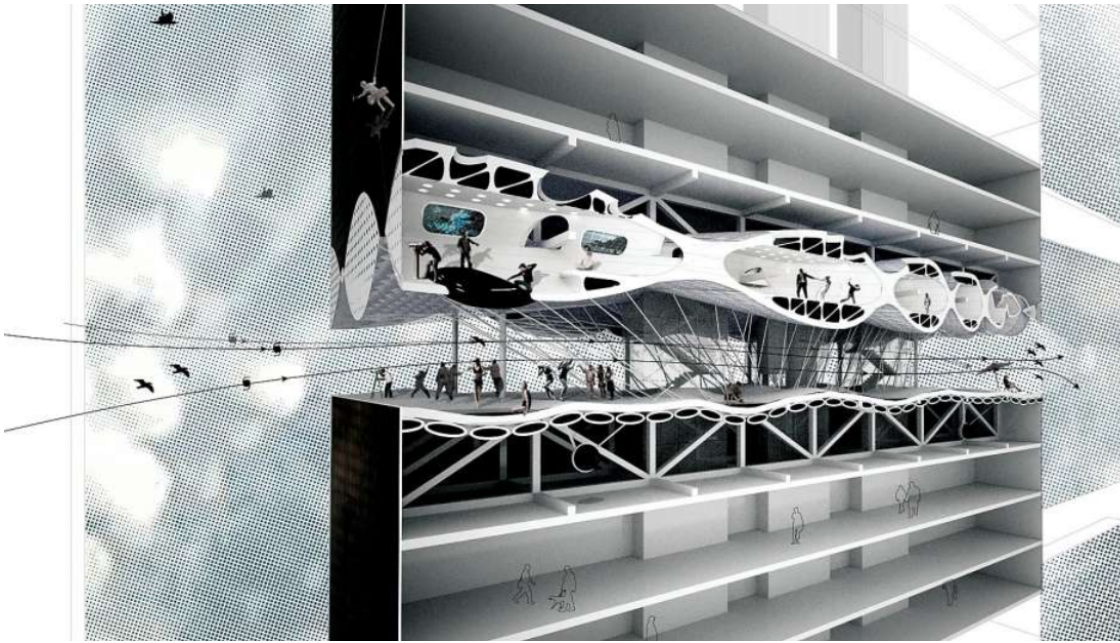
**Johnson:** There is this idea that if the typical downtown urban building as we have conceived it becomes obsolete, there is an opportunity to introduce alternate forms of occupation. We could take ideas from the Greek Forum and create open spaces that are conducive to debate and discussion, available to all citizens.

**Q: The Greeks didn't need all of these zoning laws, did they?**

**Johnson:** The Greeks liked to use the sidewalk and the water's edge to stand and socialize, debate and discuss, which is what we are doing now, with social distancing.

**Gattegno:** The city would have more unexpected, diverse and potentially productive collisions between programs: Single-family homes adjacent to skyscrapers, public parks in the middle of office towers.

**Gattegno:** That is one of the things that has been interesting with downtown San Francisco, the amount of privately owned public space. Supergalaxy brings up those questions of public and private. Is that three-story swath public space, like an extension of the sidewalk? Or is it private space owned by the building tenants? Jason and I would argue that it should be an extension of the sidewalk rather than privately owned.



**Q: Is the Supergalaxy floor plan feasible?**

**Johnson:** Businesses right now are completely rethinking their relationship to their staff. Companies are going to try to bring together people for short intensive periods, safely. It is a little like going on a retreat. It will recast office spaces as a living room. You will bring in 10% of your work force, then move them back to their home office. You will clean the space and have another group back in. What Supergalaxy does is to provide an open space that is highly technologically mediated, and allows for fluid communication.

**Q: What should the future city take away from the coronavirus lockdown?**

**Johnson:** People want more space. They want the street to be the sidewalk. There are some interesting patterns emerging with how we are re-occupying space between buildings. People are moving toward the edges and are attracted to places that have light and air and space. We are still attracted to being in the proximity of other people. We still want to look people in the eye while somehow responsibly congregating. A lot of people are imagining a 10-foot bubble around themselves.

## More from the Throughline

