

5 Ways Coronavirus Will Drive Future Office Development

Developers and Tenants Will Prioritize Healthy Work Environments



(Getty)

If crowded open office floor plans and ping pong tables were on their way out in the past few years, coronavirus is likely to make sure of it. Instead, the pandemic will steer developers and tenants alike to focus on creating a healthier workplace overall, opting for activity-based workspaces, hospital-quality HVAC systems, and fewer people in the office.

“Coronavirus has quickly amplified the idea that work does not need to be tied to a desk or a place,” says Larry Lander, principal at [PDR](#), a group of architects, interior designers, business consultants, and workplace experience experts with offices in Texas. “The emergence of activity-based work—finding a setting designed specifically for particular tasks, whether solo or in a team—will accelerate,” he adds.

J. Kevin Heinly, managing director, principal, at global architecture, design, planning, and consulting firm [Gensler](#)'s San Diego office, agrees.

“Office buildings will be designed to deliver a flexible workplace that can easily accommodate rapid changes in head count or team configurations in real time by integrating a variety of physical workspaces, flexible seating arrangements, and technologies that create a virtually connected organization,” he says.

So, what will these changes look like as developers seek to create safer, healthier office buildings? What characteristics should real estate investors and landlords look for when buying existing spaces to better alleviate the concerns people may have about social distancing and spreading germs as they return to work after the pandemic?

Here are five ways the coronavirus crisis could impact office development going forward.

1. Square Footage May Shrink, But Offices Will Feel More Spacious

Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, Gallup data showed up to 43% of the workforce worked remotely with some frequency, and 5.3% worked primarily from home, according to Census Bureau data. Heather Sidorowicz, president of [Southtown AV](#), a Buffalo, N.Y.-based commercial audiovisual integration firm, likens the rapid rise of remote work during the pandemic to pulling off a bandage.

“So many organizations had such hard and fast rules about employees not working remotely, but if it's business as usual and the job is getting done, they're going to be forced to change their perspective,” she says. This will lead to new designs in office space or repurposing existing spaces to better meet the needs of a smaller workforce.

“The enormous investment in an assigned desk for each person will be replaced by radical variety in choices of how and where to work,” adds Lander. “A variety of work areas distributed throughout the floor allow more space between individuals.”

Many current trends in office space design will continue to grow, creating new standards for personal space and cleanliness. “Corridors [will be] wider and more gracious for safety, hygiene, and a sense of quality,” Lander notes.

2. Touch-Free Technology Could Help Reduce the Spread of Germs

Those who have embraced technology to work remotely and stay connected with loved ones during the pandemic will bring this new comfort level for video conferencing, screen-sharing, and seamless communications back to work with them, Sidorowicz believes.

“The desire and need to be able to take content off your own device, which only you have touched, and throw it up on a screen without touching wires or playing with connectors will only increase,” she says.

Likewise, building automation technology can help reduce the number of surfaces that people touch, reducing the spread of germs. Voice-activation technology paired with sophisticated control systems can minimize the need to touch elevator call buttons or door hardware.

Heinly suggests that such enhancements will find their way into most areas of [buildout and design](#). “Office developers may also install smart window shades that are activated with sun-tracking technology, lighting systems that use sensory detection to adjust brightness in accordance with the time of day, and automated water dispensers to minimize exposure.”

Lander notes that these changes could also involve simple design swaps, like automated bathroom doors or motion sensors on water, soap, and paper towel dispensers, all helping to create a general ability to avoid touching common-use surfaces in new construction or retrofit projects.

3. HVAC Systems Could Achieve New Filtration Standards

“Fresh air was a major focus in the 1980s 'sick building syndrome' era," says Lander. “Building owners and developers will increasingly look to expand upon those efforts." As a result, filters used in healthcare settings may become a standard amenity in commercial office buildings, he adds.

Several experts cited the use of copper as an antimicrobial material, perhaps even for use in HVAC air filters, along with the use of UV light to kill viruses.

Heinly predicts there may also be an increase in air quality measurement systems, along with state-of-the-art air purification and sanitization systems to promote a healthier workplace. He believes that landscaping features, such as living walls, will also be utilized to organically filter air and breathe oxygen into indoor spaces.

4. Building Materials Will Become Healthier and Easier to Clean

New construction projects may also turn to healthier, antimicrobial materials like copper for hardware, too.

Heinly says he is already seeing antimicrobial technology in interior design elements, from faucets to paint.

There will be particular emphasis on materials that can be effectively cleaned, designed and built with details that contribute to that ease, explains

Lander. "Storage and design elements will be created with no inside corners, no places for pathogens to collect, and no areas that can't be reached for cleaning."

In addition, hard floors may replace industrial carpeting, which can harbor dirt, mold, and bacteria.

5. Sanitized Office Spaces Will Become a Selling Point

Just as building materials in post-pandemic projects will become easier to clean, tenants will have new expectations for cleanliness within the buildings they lease.

"Deep cleaning should become a standard, not just a once-in-a-while proposition," Lander says. He believes landlords that can showcase sanitization methods that go beyond just wiping down surfaces, which also should be done regularly as employees move around within the office space, will gain a distinct market advantage in the months, and years, to come.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us that mobility, choice, and virtual collaboration capabilities are critical to maximizing productivity and satisfaction in today's workplaces," Heinely notes.

Smart developers and landlords who utilize technology to meet their clients' changing needs will continue to do well as we face a new normal together—six feet apart, of course.

[Read more of LoopNet's coverage of coronavirus here.](#)

Was this article helpful?

36 of 37 found this helpful

DAWN ALLCOT CONTRIBUTOR

Dawn Allcot is a full-time freelance writer and content marketing specialist. She specializes in reporting on commercial and residential real estate investing, personal finance and technology. Her work has appeared on Forbes, The Balance, Bankrate.com and the Chase News & Stories website, among others.

Related Articles

- [Tips for Managing Your Office Relocation](#)
 - [Historic Brooklyn Restaurant is Ready For its Rebirth](#)
 - [LoopNet's Top Tenant Stories of 2020](#)
 - [Outdoor Winter Dining: Strategies for the Pandemic and Beyond](#)
-