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Are you prepared to re-open your offices?

Preventing contagion opportunities might result in better spaces all around

When COVID-19 cases dip low enough to allow us to go back to work and to stores, what will we find? We might never again view a coworker's cough the same way.

Andrea Johnson's San Mateo space-planning firm, KRJ Design Group, is getting calls for "contagion-conscious safer space solutions," she says.

"Social distancing isn't easy in many Bay area and Silicon Valley offices that fit a lot of desks into a limited space, and it's not easy for most firms that deal with the public in person." Before the pandemic, her firm was doing some of the same work for public agencies working with potentially volatile populations in an age of shootings and attacks.

Some solutions look like fitting spaces with adjustable barriers, creating staff workplans, examining ventilation systems and surfaces, and partitioning spaces in ways that have other benefits. "Six-foot distancing doesn't seem like a full preventive," she says. "There are more targeted ways to reduce contagion opportunities." Her firm has created a six-point "Safer Spaces" program and signage for her clients.

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Joe Allen, a Harvard Public Health School professor, thinks the pandemic will change nearly all details of public spaces—and push a new awareness of both the risk and health promotion aspects of interiors. Allen is coauthor of the book, *Healthy Buildings: How Indoor Spaces Drive Performance and Productivity*.

"How often do you think about your doorknob? Doorknob expectations will be totally different now," he says.

"It's likely that insurers will require risk-reduction and employee health measures," says Allen's coauthor, John Macomber. He thinks workplaces that upgrade risk-reduction and healthful space planning will be well positioned for market changes: "In an upmarket, they get the premium; in a down market, they get the tenant."

Separated together

What will it look like? Lobbies and waiting rooms will be redesigned to provide six feet distance or their use minimized. Restaurants and waiting lobbies will need new layouts to increase distancing or implement safeguard features while maintaining capacity as best possible, Johnson says. Beyond furniture and fixtures, spaces will need programming, much as we see in stores today. "The changes we make should cue the incoming public on what to do. They shouldn't have to look for tape on the floor or remember social distancing," she says.



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Johnson's firm is creating protocols for commercial real estate and public agencies. She recommends all firms create one. "Our public agency clients' needs are very much like our commercial clients' needs," she says. "We have a checklist and a set of criteria we use, then post our 'Safer-Spaces' signs throughout so the public understands a lot of effort is being made."

Many mitigations offer benefits beyond preventing pathogen transmission. Rolling partitions with wall panels that move up and down and with surfaces like easily cleaned translucent windows or white boards reduce pathogen travel but also create adaptable work spaces that can become meeting rooms, temporary private spaces, and more.

"Offices and lobbies don't have to give up visually open space when division and distancing introduced," she says.

Spaces that breathe cleanly

COVID-19 reportedly is spread through droplets emitted via sneezes, coughing, and even just talking. Virus-laden droplets can travel up to six feet or more, according to the CDC. Heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning (HVAC) systems will be scrutinized for their ability to be cleaned and filters replaced. Natural ventilation will be valued for letting out potentially contaminated air. Systems that clean air with filters or even UV disinfection might be considered—for both virus but also for allergens and dust that were concerns before the pandemic.

Surfaces hard or soft? The COVID-19 conundrum

The surface materials in our spaces might be considered: Smooth surfaces that are easily disinfected are also the surfaces where COVID-19 has been shown to survive the longest, surprisingly. Porous surfaces like cloth and wood—associated more with bacteria, dust, and mold risks—are where the virus has been shown to last less than a day. Consider adapting cleaning regimens and matching the surface materials to the use of the space.

Improving spaces for health

"For many spaces, simple strategies and workplans can go a long way to control infection opportunities," Johnson says. "We potentially can come out of this with better, more healthful spaces all around. We'll need to earn the trust of the public to come back together again in offices and public spaces."



Call KRJ Design Group to learn ways to make your space work effectively with infection-control techniques. We'd love to talk to you. **Email andrea@krjdesign.com or call 650-525-3700 ext. 1**



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