

Designing for the future: how COVID-19 could change offices for good

BY BRANDI SMITH



David Euscher

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More than they ever have before, Americans are working from home to follow CDC recommendations about social distancing to slow the spread of COVID-19. The situation is forcing employees and employers to adapt to a kind of new normal.

“Connecting with clients and connecting with my team has been different,” says David Euscher, vice president and interior design studio leader at Corgan. “We’re in a very collaborative field and I find that communication is much more scheduled and intentional than when you’re in a studio space together.”

Corgan, a global architecture and design firm founded in Texas more than 80

years ago, works with clients internationally to create places “where people thrive and clients succeed.” Projects span a range of categories from offices to healthcare to airports. The company touts clarity, singularity, locality, responsibility and empathy as its design principles.

Empathy is something Euscher, who’s based in the firm’s Houston office, says he’s grateful to see more of as Americans cope with a once-in-a-lifetime challenge.

“People are reaching out to one another on a personal level. Checking in on others, just asking, ‘Are you doing OK?’” he says. “Everyone’s going through the same thing at the same time and that shared struggle is bringing people together.”



“I think it all kind of comes down to how an organization works and how they want to interact with their fellow employees too. That's really going to be what drives office design.”

While he's working from home himself, Euscher and his team are working with clients who anticipate the return of employees to the office. His approach has evolved as scientists have learned more about the virus. Surface contamination, for example, was a concern early on in the pandemic, leading Euscher to look into anti-microbial materials for construction as well as cleaning regimens. More recently, scientists warned about person-to-person transmission as a bigger threat.

“Knowing that is a contributor to the spread, that really starts making us think about our behavior and the space that our behaviors occupy or kind of drive in

an office environment,” says Euscher.

Open floor plans are a less attractive option than ever, though Euscher suggests it's easier to rework an open floor plan into a safe, social-distanced space than it is to work with cubicles and traditional offices.

“At Corgan, we developed a tool called Unscripted (trademarked name, patent pending) that lets us analyze plans quickly to try to optimize the distance between people,” Euscher says. “We can look at an existing space and—based

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Designing for the future

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on the furniture they have, whether it's an open plan—figure out how to reconfigure it to accommodate employees in a safe space.”

Depending on the company’s goals, that could result in expanding its offices or the decision to scale back.

“I think it all kind of comes down to how an organization works and how they want to interact with their fellow employees too,” says Euscher. “That’s really going to be what drives office design.”

It may not be a binary decision to have an office or not. As we return to the workplace, it will look different for each organization, but we will need to think about how to not only create a safe space but also a place where employees feel safe and confident—tapping into the psychology of trust and designing for that. If a company is one that thrives on collaboration, it may make the decision to bring all of its employees back into the office. Doing so in the current environment dictates that each employee would need more space, which leads to a need for more square footage.

Companies that have found success in having employees work from home may see that as a long-term solution and an opportunity to find a smaller space to



house those workers who do need to be in the office.

“We’re seeing different reactions from different groups, but in general, have learned that humans are adaptable. Different settings are needed for people and tasks,” Euscher says. “They’re making decisions based on what they believe is the right thing to do for business continuity, as well as for the safety and health of their employees.”


As Corgan’s clients learn about how to best serve their workforce, the firm’s designers are learning a lot as well, according to Euscher.

“It’s happening all across the design industry. As a firm with diverse practice areas, we’re able to tap into resources across our education, healthcare, aviation, and interior workplace market sectors and share best practices, new technologies and lessons learned. Across the firm and across the design industry, we have a common goal to solve some really difficult problems,” he says. “There’s a collegial spirit of trying to make the world a better place for all the people we serve.”

He’s hopeful that kind of energy will continue long after employees return to their workplace, no matter how different that space looks in the future.

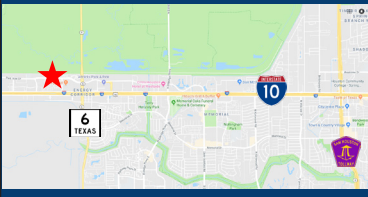
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