The Office of the Future. Finally.

By Sandra Yencho – Director, Americas at Pacific Project Management (PPM)

Over the past several months, as we've been sheltering in place, working remotely where possible, the global business community has been forced to face a reality it has been so far unwilling to address – the changing future of the office.

For years, the blurred lines between where we do our work have become increasingly fuzzy. We saw that fuzziness manifest itself in phrases like "work-life balance" – a tacit recognition that we were working everywhere all the time, because we could.

Without a clear framework of where work was expected to be done, we let it remain undefined and fuzzy. Convinced that we would perhaps figure it out later.

Well, "later" just showed up in the form of a pandemic and now we are all finding ourselves staring directly in the face of a reality that has honestly been there for a long time.

Recently in the news, we've heard about companies like Google, Amazon and Capital One extending their work from home (WFH) policies well into fall 2020 and beyond. Still others, like Twitter and Facebook, are considering allowing their employees the choice to WFH "forever."

All of this has begged the question – is the future of the office "dead"?

News flash – it's not. More than ever, companies have recognized the workplace must evolve to suit the purpose and needs of the 21st century workforce.

While we experiment with the future of the design, scale and use of our workplaces, key themes emerge as we start to think about the purpose of why the office has survived as a 'place' and how we might imagine its future.

Ballrooms and Pocket Parks

As organizations evaluate their strategies for returning to the office, the discussion shifts from occupancy metrics to long-term strategies for their portfolio. Napkin calculations quickly illuminate "de-densifying" an open office plan will allow a 40-60% return occupancy in most scenarios.

Gradually phasing occupancy from 20-25% to the new maximum occupancy will allow for better monitoring of the return to office from a health and safety perspective.

To operate at reduced capacity in traditional open office space, companies may consider taking additional 'bridge' space in satellite locations, decentralizing teams like operations and/or working in shifts in the office. While a 'pandemic friendly' approach to creating separation to reduce transmission, this short-term solution increases capital and operating expenses and moves us further from the real value of a workplace.

So why is a physical workplace important?

Many organizations find employees value the workplace to foster culture distinct to their beliefs and values, to provide career development support through leadership and peer access and for a sense of community connection as their top priorities of placemaking.

Other values include a place to collaborate and problem-solve with others, separation of personal and family life from work, and the day-to-day social interaction – even if brief or casual in nature, such as saying hello to others in the hall or a weekend catch-up at the coffee station.

"There is an undeniable magic that comes from unplanned learning and collaboration that is difficult to replicate in a hyper-planned virtual environment."

These values are all the more noticeable in the face of a pandemic and long-overdue racial and socioeconomic changes we are seeing in this country. Providing access to space that supports the core ethos of a company, employees' voices and perspectives in a way that brings people together over shared goals and values is worth the investment to organizations.

Our recent shelter in place experience has provided us with the opportunity to reimagine how the future of workplace will look and our long-term strategies will be designed to incorporate those values. Instead of giving up on coming together, we may need to change what it looks like.

Corporate HQs where thousands of people are often located in an urban center might likely be replaced in favor of regional offices, making for short commute times, reducing and controlling exposure for those using mass transit.

Futurists, designers and creatives are reimagining our workplace to evolve to be free-access and based on how we work (commonly referred to as activity-based work, ABW). The prevalence of the rise of ABW will be a trend that continues as new solutions address our current and future conditions.

'Ballroom'-sized team rooms equipped with digital white boards for team collaboration events and small studio VC space for professional-quality client meetings will tackle the challenges of "distance gathering" and video and audio quality we face while working from home. 'Pocket-park' focus space for individual work will be tucked around the workplace to inspire us to get in the mental 'flow' free from distraction of co-workers or a quiet place for employees to work away from the distractions presented at home.

These concepts are not new but deviate from the traditional open office 'one-size-fits-all' approach. Research, design and variation play a very specific role in creating space that works for the next generation of workplace design.

The Smarter Office

If we've learned nothing over the past few months of working from home, it's that technology can be leveraged for business continuity, to enhance engagement and advance creativity. Where a speakerphone with dial-in users and a video of the tops of peoples' heads in a banal conference room sufficiently fulfilled the role of a "virtual meeting" in the past, our new expectation today from our WFH experience is that we now meet, literally, face-to-face with our clients and co-workers in full 1080P color on our computer screens.

Whether its virtual meetings, building automation or virtual and augmented experiences, our increased dependence upon technology over the past few months will be integrated and adapted into our offices even more quickly than ever before.

Take a situation where you want to decide if you want to go into your ABW office. With a quick tap on your smartphone, you would be able to reserve space at the office in the morning to work in a focus pod and at 1pm in a VC room to have a client call, all tied together with your calendar and web-based VC technology. Badge technology at a turnstile in the building lobby will notify you to go to elevator cab '3', which will take you to the 4th floor. 'On demand' and 'frictionless' technology will decrease the number of touchpoints through your day, limiting virus transmission risk and decreasing the frequency of cleaning in specific high-touch surfaces.

If we imagine the office more in terms of 'choice', if we aren't assigned to 'our' desk and 'our' conference room, we start to embrace the possibility of having access to more amenities that can enhance productivity, creativity, and engagement. For the organization, focusing on the utilization and operational scale of their physical space will be critical to control costs and resources associated with physical security, hygienic cleaning practices and sustainability practices moving forward.

At a building or portfolio level, tracking, adjusting and monitoring building operations systems is one way companies will seek to have more environmental control of space. Whether it's tracking the number of users on site, air quality and exchange, energy use conservation measures or motion- or voice-activated controls, it will become essential to make systems smarter to generate a higher degree of confidence and control over operations in our buildings.

Finally, corporate employers will take a cue from the retail and hospitality sectors, automating service programs like food and beverage, office and mail services, training and learning for their staff. Whether it's online ordering lunch from the in-house café for contactless payment and pick-up, or on-demand learning with interactive classes, employers will look for ways to offer and elevate service programs similar to the ways airlines, hotels and restaurant have assimilated to the pandemic.

Human-centric and Smart. Finally.

While certainly the impact of COVID-19 has been devastating – more than 120,000 U.S. deaths and an economic toll to industries like hospitality and travel that may take years or decades to recover – it has forced our hand to reconsider how we live and work.

Is the office dead? No. Not even close. The intangible qualities of human engagement that lead to creativity, trust, and relationship has immeasurable value that tiny square boxes on a computer screen simply cannot replicate.

One thing is certain. The office of the 21st century will change forever. And for that, we should all be grateful.

About Sandra

Sandra has more than 20 years of experience in architectural design and workplace strategy. With degrees in architecture and business, she likes to see the intersection of what great design can do to help companies succeed. She currently lives in New York City with her partner Stan and their French Bulldog, Bougie Belle. She can be reached at sandra.yencho@pacificpmg.com.