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Your office will not be the same - architects, designers on what the post Covid-19 workplace will look like



The challenge facing office designers now is how to unite a workforce. PHOTO: SPACE MATRIX

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SINGAPORE - Working on-site may finally be in the sights of companies in the United States and Europe, as restrictions to limit the ravages of the coronavirus pandemic are tentatively lifted.

In Singapore, this will likely not happen until June 1, when the circuit breaker ends.

But will these workers be going back to the same office they left behind pre-WFH (work from home)?

According to Mr Arsh Chaudhry, chief executive officer of Space Matrix, a Singapore-based, design- and-build consultancy which started in 2001, the answer is an emphatic "no".

He says the challenge facing office designers now is how to unite a workforce fragmented by social distancing and isolation, through spaces that will make staff feel comfortable and safe.

"Covid-19 has forced the world to go through one of the biggest social experiments in human history: working from home," says Mr Chaudhry, whose firm has 15 global offices.

Ranked as one of Interior Design Magazine's Top 100 Design Giants, Space Matrix has handled office-design projects in more than 80 cities.

"Working from home is making many business leaders, who were previously sceptical, realise that this is a viable, alternative way of working."

But the practice has limitations, says Mr Chaudhry.

"Some teams can work from home for some periods of time. However, it is not practical to have the entire workforce working from home all the time.

"With WFH, there is no social interaction among colleagues. You miss out on the casual water-cooler banter, incidental collaborations, ideation and brainstorming that is sparked from interactions."



Space Matrix used rich, variegated textures to add to its sensory appeal. PHOTO: SPACE MATRIX

He adds: "It's tough to envisage a future where there will be no offices and everyone will work from home. That is not practical. There is no denying that an office is certainly needed to create and build company culture and a common set of values."

YEARNING TO CONNECT

Mr Colin Seah, founder and director of design at multidisciplinary home-grown studio Ministry of Design, echoes that sentiment.

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"If Covid-19 has taught us anything, it is that people intrinsically yearn for tangible interactions as part of daily life, whether at work or at play," says the Singapore President's Design Award winner for 2006 and 2008.

He believes that post-Covid-19, instead of greater fragmentation due to issues concerning practicality, health and safety, employees will want to intensify their interactions when they return to the office.

"They will expect interactions, such as meetings, to be more meaningful, relevant and efficiently run. It's a bit like combining the best of both worlds," says Mr Seah, who is working on the design of a wealth management centre in Singapore and several hotels throughout South-east Asia.

He sees this panning out not in perfunctory meeting rooms or pantry areas, but in a more organic way, through holistically designed gathering spaces.



Spaces can be modelled after residential living rooms and open kitchens. PHOTO: EDWARD HENDRICKS

"These spaces may be conceptually akin to being extensions of the living room or open kitchen of our homes, allowing for a less formal working environment that we may have enjoyed during WFH," he says.

"Besides a greater variety of workstation typologies such as hotdesking, standing desks, communal clusters and privacy booths, I believe future office spaces will be spaces which facilitate a healthier work environment."

He believes designers will introduce "biophilic elements in earnest, as well as tuneable artificial lighting, which mimics changing natural lighting temperatures throughout the day, sensitive to one's circadian rhythm".

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This delicate cross-pollination of ideas at the workplace is precisely what Mr Stephen Lyon, regional director and head of office at global workplace design company M Moser Associates, says his firm strives to facilitate through design.

"We design the physical, social and digital architecture of the workplace. We look at how people interact with their work setting and design for the behaviours that will help them innovate," he says.

Established in 1981, M Moser has a team of more than 1,000 employees - including interior designers, architects, engineers, workplace strategists and employee well-being experts - across 21 global locations.

"I anticipate that clients will be re-evaluating how they work, post-crisis, particularly during the first few months when employees return to the office," says Mr Lyon. "Clients may decide to stop desk-sharing and keep alternative desks free to support social distancing.



This vertical feature connects two floors in Zendesk's new Singapore headquarters in Marina One. PHOTO: M MOSER ASSOCIATES

"This may require a change to current ways of working - perhaps dividing the office into two or more teams and alternating between working from home and the office. This diversity might be necessary to avoid additional risks should coronavirus cases in the community increase," he says.

In the short term, Mr Lyon says clients will be looking at how best to respond to the virus. Ways in which they can show employees they care include making quick retrofits and upgrades such as using ultraviolet light in air-conditioning systems to kill germs.

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In the longer term, M Moser's teams will be looking at more specialised support systems to help clients bounce back from disruptions.

"I feel it's important that we think more about 'business resilience' rather than 'infection control' when considering what to do when that first line of defence fails."

Another priority for clients, he reckons, is the company's information technology (IT) grid.

"IT systems will also be re-examined with greater rigour; bandwidth will be improved; cloud storage increased; and resilience to cyber-attacks will be more robust," says Mr Lyon.



Allowing for social distancing yet creating spaces for creative collaboration will be a fixture in office designs. PHOTO: M MOSER ASSOCIATES

"Due to the frequency and severity of outbreaks such as Sars and Mers before Covid-19, governments, insurance companies and stakeholders will require our new workplace designs to provide for all contingencies."

5 IDEAS DRIVING OFFICE REDESIGNS

More workers are putting a premium on safety and hygiene in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

These are major concerns when employees return to work, says Mr Arsh Chaudhry, chief executive officer of Singapore-based, design-and-build consultancy Space Matrix.

Trust in their companies is also key. "Trust, as in what companies can do for the workforce in these challenging situations to keep them safe yet productive," says Mr Chaudhry.

He says new design proposals are being driven by these perspectives:

1. SPACE PLANNING

The main concern is space and how best to use it, while being mindful of appropriate physical distancing and enabling social connecting. Organisations are reprogramming the physical set-up of their offices and establishing new workplace strategies to reduce densities with too many people in the office at one time. In this way, employees can work safely and productively.

2. TECHNOLOGY AND SYSTEMS

There is also a need for better air-filtration systems and air purifiers to reduce airborne pathogens. Organisations will be looking out for more sensor-activated and touch-free controls to reduce physical touch points, especially in shared or high-traffic areas of the workplaces, such as meeting rooms and pantries.

3. 'NUDGE' ARCHITECTURE

In the new normal at work, designers at Space Matrix have been applying "nudging" techniques to their designs. These include using visual prompts and signages that redirect traffic and circulation of people within the workplace to avoid overcrowding.

4. MATERIALS

For all touch points and surfaces in the workplace environment, the focus will be on antimicrobial and germ-resistant options for finishes and surface coatings. These ensure better hygiene and are also easier to keep clean.

5. WELL-BEING

Ensuring employees' physical and mental health has become of paramount importance. Offices will look to lead with more empathy by facilitating open and transparent communication to build trust.

Companies are also looking at incorporating more green spaces and water features to transform sterile areas into green oases that help employees relax.

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