



# Fewer People, More Space

Architects and builders see continued need for centralized workplaces.

By **MICHAEL AUSHENKER** Staff Reporter

One casualty of the coronavirus may be the open office configurations which thrived until 2020, but the work-from-home fade isn't going to replace centralized workspace, according to designers, architects and builders interviewed by the Business Journal.

Gruen Associates' **Debra Gerod**, a partner at the firm which worked on Tarzana Village Walk and the Topanga Plaza, said that companies will quickly make the easy changes of more hand-sanitizer in the office; the lunchroom may disappear; employees will use stairwells over elevators.

"There's already priority to this getting people to use stairs instead of elevators for health reasons," she said.

But **Marc Rapisardi**, principle at Sun Valley-based **S3 Builders**, told the Business Journal that he believes such practices

as installing plexiglass around cubicles and work-from-home teams will be short-lived.

Rapisardi maintains that socializing and collaboration comprise the core of corporate work culture.

"Let's remember that the open office paradigm was ... a direct response to the phenomenon known as 'watercooler moments/conversations,'" he said.

"So, do I think Covid-19 is going to change the work environment? Of course, it will, but in the years to follow, I do not believe it will change how we occupy and utilize the space," said Rapisardi.

He likened the coronavirus crisis to the 2004 Pacific Tsunami that claimed 227,288 lives. After the storm, new signage and advances in early detection systems were installed, but people returned to the coastline.

"At our core, we're programmed to love the beach just as we love our collaborative work environments," he said.

**John Loper**, associate professor of Real Estate, Sol Price School of Public Policy at USC, said that Zoom meetings cannot rival "that productivity of people needing to be nearby and collaborate. The need for office space to get together – that will come back, but it may

be that people come three times a week."

Gruen's Gerod, who is president of the local California Architecture IAssociation chapter, said that she has been "talking to a gazillion (industry) people for the past few months."

"Nobody has quite particularly figured out how this is going to end up," she said.

## Space considerations

Loper said he has heard of companies closing conference rooms to provide space for desk separation in the office.

He envisions a future with "fewer people in the office but they need more space." He believes that while co-working won't totally disappear, any common space occupied by ping pong tables or video games "can be problematic."

Similarly, Gruen Associates Managing Partner **Mike Enomoto** predicted the death of the medium-sized conference room.

"The eight-person conference room is on the verge of being history," he told the Business Journal. At his firm, five mid-sized chambers may become obsolete in favor of a 24-foot by 40-foot flex space in the building that can easily house 10 people with ample spacing.

"I don't think open workstations will go away but I think the drafting desk style, that won't stick around," added Gerod.

Enomoto believes that the pendulum is about to swing hard in the other direction when it comes to collaborative offices.

"The open office may be a thing of the past," he said. "The space becomes a lot larger and lot more private offices."

While some are quick to write the epitaph for co-working, Gerod does not believe that collaborative spaces will vanish so much as transform. "WeWork will become WeConference," she said. She envisions the comfy sofas and chairs making way for bigger rooms.

Offices are crucial, she added.

"You've got to mentor the people who are going to replace you one day," she said.

## Work from home

In April, Ohio-based **Nationwide** insurance was the first major institutional business to announce that it would permanently assign its workforce to operate from home and shut down the bulk of its office space across the country. A few Silicon Valley social media companies have since announced a work-from-home poli-

cy for at least half of its workforce.

USC's Loper believes the pandemic has led to a de facto experiment that certain companies have found to be surprisingly fruitful and efficient.

"A lot of companies have discovered that working at home actually works," he said, predicting that our society will soon see "people working from home all of the time. Which generally means less office space in the future."

Loper believes it's still too early to know if companies will follow Nationwide's lead in shedding thousands of square feet of office for a permanent work-from-home employee base.

"I'm hearing that people are pausing on getting new office space. I don't think a lot of people have made up their minds yet," he said. "We're really very early on that."

In Woodland Hills, **David Honda Construction** chieftain **David Honda** foresees a work-from-home divide that will be generational.

"There will be a different class culture in Gen-Z and millennials on how this group adapts to remote home office," he said. "They are usually co-living, have parents or spouses and kids while Baby Boomers are OK with remote work."

A big question is whether work from home has functioned simply out of necessity.

"Things have been OK, but it's also because it's been temporary," Enomoto said.

"There is some fatigue with having work remotely," Gerod acknowledged. She said that in architecture, "we design things that are physically built; looking at physical models in the proper light" is important.

Loper does not believe that many companies will follow Nationwide's example to that degree. He also sees a trend in which companies may shrink their central office and install satellite offices in "the Santa Claritas, Calabasas and Orange



**Honda**

Counties and Rancho Cucamongas — out in the suburbs where employees live."

If companies will reconfigure their offices spaces dramatically, the Gruen partners do not expect to see this reflected in their assignments until year's end.

"There's so much uncertainty about everything," Enomoto said. "We're involved with an insurance company looking for a new space. We started prior to COVID; now you can see their hesitation."

## Forward-thinking notions

One place where ideas on how to reconfigure the office space have already begun circulating is on the college campus.

"As everybody else in mid-March, we evacuated our physical campus and continued instruction online and now we're deep in planning for the fall," said **Ingalill Wahlroos-Ritter**, dean of **Woodbury University School of Architecture** in Burbank.

The seasoned architect told the Business Journal that a school campus represents "a microcosm of every occupiable space – offices, classes, cafeteria, assembly halls, etc."

People will return to school in some hybrid form – in person and online. "Each space needs a different strategy," she said. "We're now determining what that's going to look like – disinfectant deep cleaning, physical distancing, mask. We have a team that is looking at this and an architect who will work with the provost."

The school is currently installing plexiglass barricades, hanging curtains and demarcating one-way walkways.

The students have even begun to address design in a post-pandemic world. One student designed an adaptive reuse of a vacant office building that began pre-virus and was based on the abandonment of traditional towers but has since found even more acute relevance.

In the post-pandemic world, Wahlroos-Ritter foresees modifications to ventilation systems, access points and hand-sanitizer supplies as does Honda, who outlined that HVAC systems will have new hepa filters or UV lighting and redirect the air supply.

"Labor-intense professional janitorial service will increase office cost or employees will be keeping Lysol in the desk," he said.

Ultimately, Rapisardi believes the "new normal" will be consistent with the old normal.

"Open office plans are an evolution that address the innate need to be social both personally and professionally," S3's founder said. "Adding to our individualistic social needs, is a societal need for collaboration. Our best means to progress as a species is through collaborative efforts."