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BUILDING STORE TRAFFIC

HARDWOOD INDUSTRY UPDATE

TRENDS IN WORKPLACE DESIGN





For its design of the Mill Homes headquarters in Columbus, Ohio, the Gensler design team selected polished concrete for the concourses and Shaw Contract's Honest Tile modular carpet in Truffle from the Haven collection. Photo by Cory Klein Photography.

The fear last year of spreading the Covid virus brought unprecedented changes to the workplace, but corporations and the interior designers serving them are now looking at how they can get Americans back to their desks, in spaces that respond to and acknowledge the changes wrought by a year of remote work.

FLEXIBLE SPACES

Over the course of the last 13 months, much of America's corporate workforce took to their home offices, kitchen tables and couches and, yet, largely managed to keep operations humming with some efficiency. This forced vacancy changed the corporate sector's view of what can be done remotely and, perhaps even more importantly, altered the perception of what an office can and should be.

While having a team collaborate in person is still the ideal for many organizations, today's workplaces must be spaces that flex to support a team in whatever form it takes—remote, socially distanced, in-office or hybrid—while also conveying a culture that compels workers to the space. To do that, the space must be flexible, comfortable and safe.

"It's interesting to think about how work has long been associated with a place, and that was uncoupled by the pandemic," says Liz Potokar, interior designer with Gensler. "The fundamental role of the office is shifting to become a place that brings people together. Amid the quarantine, everyone realized that people are missing those chance interactions, those

mentorship moments. You can't schedule those quick little learning experiences on Zoom. We're also missing the social aspect—catching up with coworkers. We have always talked about culture and brand-driven spaces as a benefit to offering people more purposeful work experiences. That's true now more than ever."

CULTURE BUILDING

Culture is one of the most critical aspects of employee recruitment and retention. Compensation, benefits and vacation packages are all important, but a culture that employees believe in and feel connection to is a factor that competing employers may not as easily imitate.

Since placemaking plays an important role in building these values, culture was compromised to a degree when the corporate workplace went remote, and looking ahead, workplaces are expected to prioritize this physical placemaking as a means not only of recruiting and retraining but also of pulling remote workers back into the office.

Nicole Zack, senior designer with Nelson Worldwide,

RETURN TO THE OFFICE

Just as the transition to work-from-home was a jarring learning experience for many, so too could the return to work be, if not handled correctly.

Nelson's Nicole Zack believes that it will be a challenge for corporations to require employees to snap back to office life as it was prior to the pandemic; long hours in the confines of the corporate space, especially if coupled with a time-consuming commute, will simply seem onerous after the past year of commute-less couch working. And while some businesses may insist on a traditional approach, they will have to recognize that competing employers may offer hybrid work formats with greater flexibility, which younger generations in the workforce value highly, a factor that could impact talent recruitment and employee retention.

Moving forward, Interface, for instance, will have a 3/2/2 policy for employees; that's three days in the office, two working from home and two off, with in-office and remote work days chosen by the employee.

That being said, corporate workplaces are by no means going away. "Workplace environments are not obsolete," says Gensler's Liz Potokar. "In some ways, they are needed now more than ever to build culture and attract clients, so we are optimistic."

believes these efforts support not only corporate goals but also universal human needs. "How do you create culture in a digital environment, culture on a screen?" asks the designer. "It's hard to develop trust on a screen. Offices are places for culture, innovation, forming bonds. As humans, we need that. We yearn for that connection. You want to feel like part of a whole and understand why you work for the company that you do."

Of course, in the era of the hybrid workplace, this culture must extend to distanced employees as well. Reid believes

that there needs to be "a seamless technology flow between people who don't want to return to the office and those in the office."

And Zack imagines that hybrid workplaces might include a virtual culture wall, where out-of-office workers can drop in and see what's happening in the office.

SECTOR ACTIVITY

Though empty office spaces offered a great opportunity for large-scale renovation without the "obstacle" of employees, due to the uncertainty of the times, construction and renovation effectively came to a halt in the workplace sector amid the pandemic.

"Given the unknown, most entered a wait-and-see pattern," says Potokar. "Clients did take time to evaluate what's working and what isn't. Our strategy team has seen an increase in helping facilitate employee surveys and gather data to understand employee wants and needs for when they return."

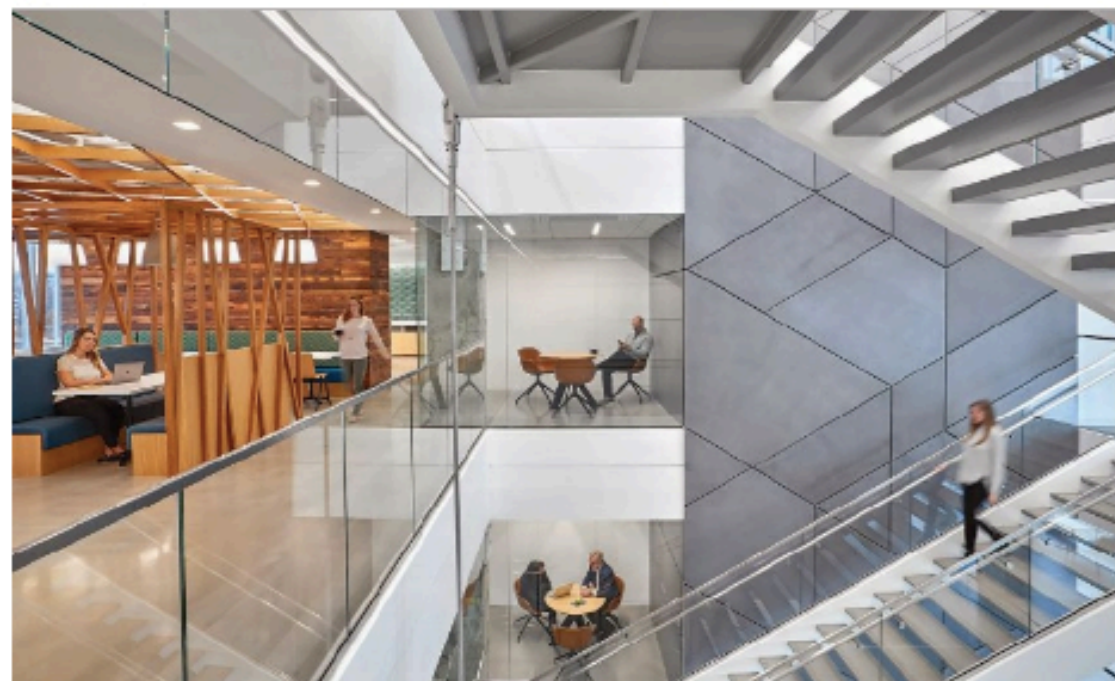
Zack has seen similar trends. "The corporate workplace has realized that it can't go back to what it was without making changes," she explains. "Clients have been making use of what they have, and we have been working with them on how they can enhance, retool and rearrange their existing assets for the future."

That, of course, takes into consideration concepts heretofore unconsidered. "Originally, everyone thought the quarantine would be more short term, so many corporations put projects on hold," explains Callie Reid, associate with CallisonRTKL, "but as it extended, they began doing research and looking at their existing plans. A conference room that was planned to seat 20 will now sit five with 6' distancing."

Potokar is seeing clients experiment with strategies to manage distancing while still offering options for employees with varied workstyle preferences.

"Instead of changing everything," Potokar notes, "clients are taking on a pilot project or a space within the office to test, learn from and then move forward. Right now, we have a client who has five floors and is taking a different approach on one, with an all-open space that offers more choices for deskings [workstation styles]—which was a trend we saw before the pandemic—but integrating in areas that are more spaced out."

Zack notes that corporations are largely looking at the return to the office as a testing period to see "what environments employees use when they come back." That may mean, of course, that the renovation work and associated flooring sales are delayed but will come. And with fewer



CallisonRTKL's Appian headquarters project, located in Tysons, Virginia, features polished concrete flooring, providing a clean, neutral look across the space. Photo by Garrett Rowland.



Nelson Worldwide created this technology-focused hub in midtown Atlanta for a health insurance provider. The space features Duchateau's LVT in the colors San Tropez, Arctic and Nile. Photo by Farm Kid Studios.

expenditures for facilities over the course of the work-from-home period, some corporations may have a bit extra in their facilities' coffers as well.

FLOORING THAT PERFORMS

Never has more been expected of floors than in a Covid world. Reid notes that she has sensed a shift in client priorities for flooring over the course of the last year. "Cleanability and durability have become more important because a lot of clients are increasing cleaning protocols—from mopping hard surface once a week to twice a day or increasing vacuuming of carpet," the designer reports. Of course, much of this increased wear-and-tear is on floors in place prior to the new cleaning regimens taking hold.

That said, long-standing criteria for flooring remain critically important: acoustic mitigation, aesthetics, performance, cost and sustainability requirements. "Cleanability is really important to clients, especially the facilities department" says Zack. "But sustainability, lifecycle and natural aspects are also important because building materials are such a large part of the carbon footprint. And aesthetics are 100% critical. That can't go away. There should be no ugly floors. Floors are the foundation and become such a big part of the design, whether toned down to serve as a backdrop or used as a place to really make a statement. Cost, too—that's always a consideration."

Reid believes that certifications such as WELL and Fitwel will be of greater interest to clients as they seek to create facilities that support health and wellness and notes that "flooring is a huge component of the WELL program—materials that support indoor air quality, have low VOCs (volatile organic compounds) and hardwoods that are FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) certified. As designers, it's our responsibility to select materials that make a healthier environment."

The designer continues, "One thing I have been hearing about frequently—even in Super Bowl commercials—is the importance of carbon neutrality or negativity. Interface is at the forefront with that, and others are following. Previously, it may have been that you had one carbon neutral option, but it was ugly and

expensive. It's great that the products are becoming more available, and, as designers, we have products that we can spec without doing an enormous amount of research."

Reid is concerned about the recyclability of products that have potential for recycling but with no clear recycling stream established. "What will happen in ten years when these products are ripped out?" she asks. "I'd like to see progress on that front."

Designers do believe that flooring manufacturers are doing a good job offering materials that meet many and varied needs. "There is never a shortage of options," says Potokar. "Every year, it's great to see—at NeoCon and other trade shows—manufacturers pushing the envelope in new products and designs, and it's always great to have a fresh palette to pick from."

SAMPLING

Nicole Zack believes there is work to be done with regard to flooring samples. "The visualizations of installation images aren't always ideal, so we end up with six actual samples to put down in front of the client because flooring is such a big part of the design," she reports. "Images are great if they are real, but visualizers are often not super realistic looking and printing them from the website doesn't work well, so I always request actual brochures."

Potokar's wish list for the flooring manufacturer centers on acoustics—namely flooring with the cleanability and durability of hard surface but with the acoustic benefits of soft.

DESIGNER FLOORING PREFERENCES

REID: "Material wise," says Reid, "LVT and carpet tile are the flooring I specify the most." Carpet tile, the designer reports, is flexible and highly cleanable and the tiles are easy to replace if damaged, and while LVT poses some challenges with regard to acoustics, it is better at mitigating sound issues than concrete or porcelain.

According to Reid, clients generally request hard surface flooring in gathering spaces and cafés, with soft surface flooring in the office space and conference areas for its acoustic benefits. She appreciates manufacturers that offer hard and surface collections with same-height products and coordinated aesthetics. Sealed concrete is a popular flooring in the D.C. area, where Reid works, as clients love the industrial look and perceived natural quality of the material.

POTOKAR: "There are two elements at the forefront of the decision-making process with flooring: function and aesthetics. Whatever we are specifying has to have acoustic benefits, cleanability, durability. We think about lifecycle cost; we're

mindful of the impact that our specifications have on the environment. The functional requirements have to be met.

"But aesthetics is something that any designer will tell you matters, and materials that add texture and depth to the space are key. I gravitate toward authentic materials rather than those that try to replicate."

ZACK: "My go-tos are Interface and Shaw. I like Interface because they are sustainability focused and have same-height LVT and carpet tile, so you don't need transitions. They also have a great look and, with Flor, more residential looks. Shaw is great at patterning, reimagining products and creating patterns that you don't see everywhere. They have good behind-the-scenes stories as well."

FLEXIBLE SPACES

In the current landscape of the corporate office, flexible takes on many different yet interconnected meanings. Of course, it's about supporting workers in whatever way they prefer to work, be it privately or more collaboratively. That is the direction many offices were taking pre-pandemic, and it feels especially important now, as workers have had such a high degree of flexibility over the course of the last year. Providing a variety of work zones through which employees can transition throughout the day—as they may have at home—offers a chance for a new perspective and a cleared mind.

But creating a flexible space hinges on choosing materials that themselves are flexible. That includes considering where to make flooring changes within a space and how that impacts its use. If a floor only looks good with the furniture atop it in a single configuration, that doesn't suit offices that now need to create distance between workstations.

How do long-established precedents, such as using soft surface under work areas and hard surface in travel zones, fare as corporations enforce 6' distancing, and how are flooring maintenance procedures complicated by these reconfigurations? Flooring specifications must create a space that supports, not impedes, the functions that occur atop it.

Workplace designers are considering how "to remain nimble and flexible and plan for the time ahead," says Potokar.



For the design of M/I Homes' headquarters, the Gensler team specified quality materials, reflective of M/I's values as a homebuilder. Photo by Cory Klein Photography.

"This influences how we think about designing spaces and our flooring choices. We've always used a combination of hard and soft flooring surfaces. Carpet is our go-to for solving acoustics, but is it the most durable and easy to clean? Maybe not. What are the possibilities for new products that meet all those needs?"

COMFORTABLE SPACES

Secondly, as employees have been working from their homes—often in their pajama pants—over the course of the last year, they have become accustomed to a degree of comfort that the workplace hasn't embraced previously. Of course, that doesn't need to equate to slippers and recliners but to the incorporation of a more residential aesthetic within the office

"But aesthetics is something that any designer will tell you matters, and materials that add texture and depth to the space are key. I gravitate toward authentic materials rather than those that try to replicate." Liz Potokar

space. This is, in some sense, a continuation of or a new direction within the existing residential trend that we have seen for the last several years in corporate.

Hospitality design has been influential in corporate space for several years now, bringing a bit of luxury to the office, and designers believe the balance of residential and hospitality aesthetics will merge in a unique balance. "Creating a sense of comfort, the look and feel of home, moving from the couch to the dining room table: how can we bring residential design into the workplace?" asks Potokar. "Hospitality is about bringing people together and building culture. That is the role of the workplace and what everyone [working from home] is missing right now."

This has obvious impacts for materiality, color, patterning and texture in flooring with the buttoned-up workplace aesthetic softening to something of an open-collar or even untucked feel.

WILL EMPLOYEES STILL WANT TO SHARE SPACE?

With increased concerns about airborne germs, will we see the return of walled offices and individualized workstations? Perhaps, believes Zack, but not in the form the static, single-use barriers of yesteryear. "Walls are good for separating," says the designer, "but they are also bad because they separate. The key moving ahead will be acoustically and visually creating a sense of a more closed-in area. We may see barriers to separate but a door. We digital screen barrier or furniture to create the smaller space." Ultimately, this balance between spaces of the aughts and the long hallways of closed-in offices of the 20th century, but with barriers that potentially offer some use aside from their primary function of dividing.

"Walls are good for separating, but they are also bad because they separate."
Nicole Zack

perhaps not may use a or acoustic niture divider sense of a or zones of mately, Zack will be a bal- the big, open

Reid notes that these dividers will likely serve a secondary function as well, such as serving as a green wall or marker or felt board. Many of these, the designer believes, will be flexible, and some may come down or be used elsewhere eventually. She doesn't believe permanent barriers, made of drywall, will be constructed.

Potokar believes that there will be a period of transition as employees return to office life. "For the time being, I don't think people want to share desks, but when we get to the point where we are in a more comfortable place, the idea of a hybrid workforce lends itself to space sharing because employees won't be there five days a week and so a corporation won't need as many workstations," she reports. And for corporations looking to lower capital overhead, the need for fewer workstations may equate to less required square footage and, therefore, a potential for reduced expenses.

SAFE SPACES

The world has spent the last 13 months in quarantine battling an unseen enemy, and that, without a doubt, changes how employees view shared spaces and the germs that call them home. Office "luxuries" such as touchless or electronic doors, movement-sensing soap and towel dispensers, automatic flushing devices and the like will be viewed through more of a necessity lens moving forward—at least for a time. If employees are returning to the office, they expect to be kept safe while there. And Reid points out that these sorts of innovations make sense even in a post-Covid world to reduce transmission of germs that result in every-day illnesses, such as the common cold.

While flooring is not a high-touch surface, it is a crucial device in wayfinding and, as such, it plays an important role in keeping employees moving smoothly and distanced. For a time, that might mean stickers are adhered to signal traffic patterns, and ultimately it could drive demand for flooring materials with subtle wayfinding or distancing cues incorporated into the design.

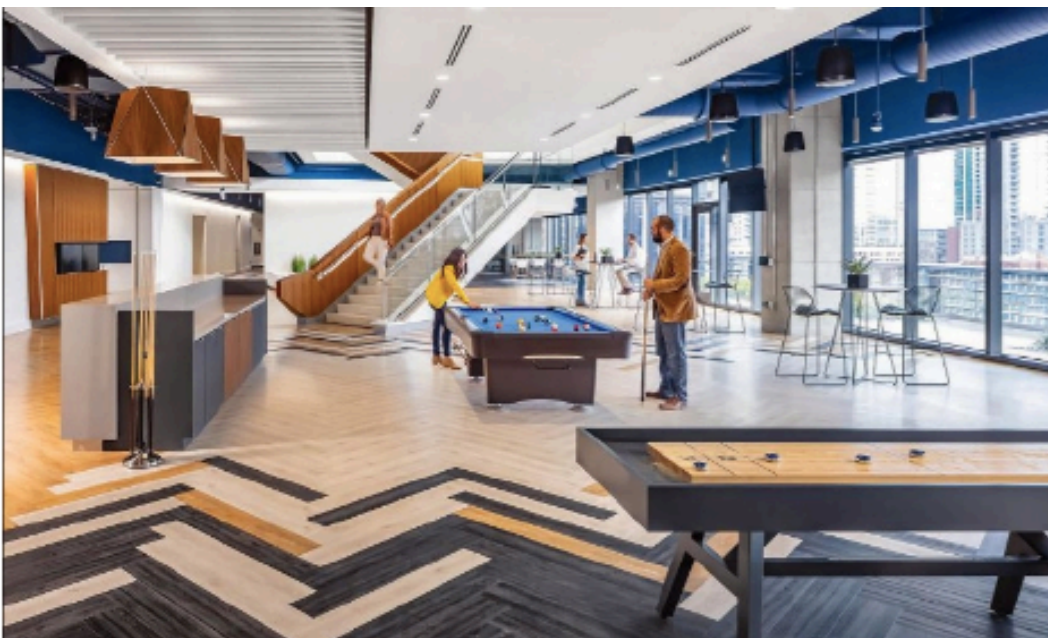
BRINGING THE INDOORS OUT

While many workplaces have long offered access to the outdoors—a place where workers could enjoy lunch in the sun or step outside for a breath of fresh air—today some are creating outdoor zones equipped with power sources, Wi-Fi and comfortable furnishings to enable employees to spend time actually working outdoors. The benefits aren't just short term; even when Covid is long in the rearview, outdoor workstations will continue to serve as a valued resource and relaxing reprieve for employees.

Designers report that corporations currently on the hunt for workspace are seeking properties that offer such assets, which may be achieved through a variety of means, including opening facades or utilizing rooftops.



The CallisonRTKL design team selected Trinity Tile in Elite Premium White for the lobby of Appian's headquarters. Photo by Garrett Rowland.



For its design of an Atlanta-based health insurance provider, Nelson Worldwide utilized flooring as a wayfinding mechanism to subtly separate the various spaces. Photo by Farm Kid Studios.

Obviously, maintenance and cleaning protocols have become more important and more frequent, and, as such, floors must be able to withstand more wear-and-tear than it was previously thought they'd need to endure. In light of this, Reid believes that her choice to always use solution-dyed fiber in corporate workplaces is a wise one and, moving forward, designers will carry even more of a preference for materials that can stand up to whatever the cleaning and maintenance teams throw at them.

Whether that will create a long-term preference for a particular type of flooring surface is hard to say, but Zack notes, "Wellness has been a movement for the last three years with the Well Building Standard, which considers the individual within the space, not just the space itself, on the radar for more end-users. Right now, in the world that we're in, the wellness movement has been emphasized, and there is a perception that hard flooring surfaces are easier to clean."

PROJECT STORIES

APPIAN—CallisonRTKL

CallisonRTKL was called upon to develop a new headquarters for Tysons, Virginia-based Appian, a cloud computing and enterprise software company. Across the eight-floor office, CallisonRTKL chose sealed concrete—with its clean, simple and neutral look—as the central flooring material but accented that with hardwood flooring, which

types are delineated with different patterns. Work zones feature a calming tweed-type pattern, while bolder patterning is specified for more dynamic social zones.

M/I HOMES—Gensler

Gensler sought to create a design that would stand the test of time for M/I Homes, a homebuilder headquartered in Columbus, Ohio. The client sought to "push the envelope of design in the Columbus area to draw a younger generation of worker to stay in the region," recalls Polokar. The design team found inspiration in the industrial style of the city's up-and-coming neighborhoods with the flooring choices of hardwood and concrete.

These materials are also a reflection of M/I's value as a homebuilder, which hinges on utilizing quality materials. Materials with a residential feel were selected to reflect the company's nature as a builder of residences. The design team was able to bring in a home-like feel with carpet tile that features a herringbone pattern and a texture reminiscent of woven fabrics.

HEALTH INSURANCE PROVIDER—Nelson

Nelson partnered with a leading health insurance provider to create a new technology-focused hub in downtown Atlanta. Previously split across numerous smaller offices in the area, the company sought to unite its locations to create a new workplace model that would display their technological capabilities within a state-of-the-art interior. Mirroring the building's geometric and edgy architecture, the flooring was thoughtfully chosen to complement the exterior architectural language and to mimic the movement and vibrancy of the office.

Amenities throughout the space include a tech bar, road warrior respite suite, café and micro market, and a fitness center. Flooring is used as a wayfinding mechanism to subtly separate the various spaces. Easy-to-maintain and durable terrazzo flooring was utilized in the main elevator and entry areas, while soft, gradient carpeting is prevalent throughout the workspace to mitigate acoustics. ■

CONCRETE CONTINUES

Polished concrete continues to be a popular choice as a finished floor in the corporate sector, prized for its authentic look and industrial vibe. Of course, the material, which isn't cheap to prepare for finished-floor use, presents significant challenges with regard to acoustics, and clients are sometimes displeased with the textural or tonal imperfection of existing slabs once they are revealed. In this instance, a concrete topper may help achieve the desired look—but, of course, at an added cost. While difficult to quantify, some pundits believe polished concrete now accounts for 15% of the area within today's offices.