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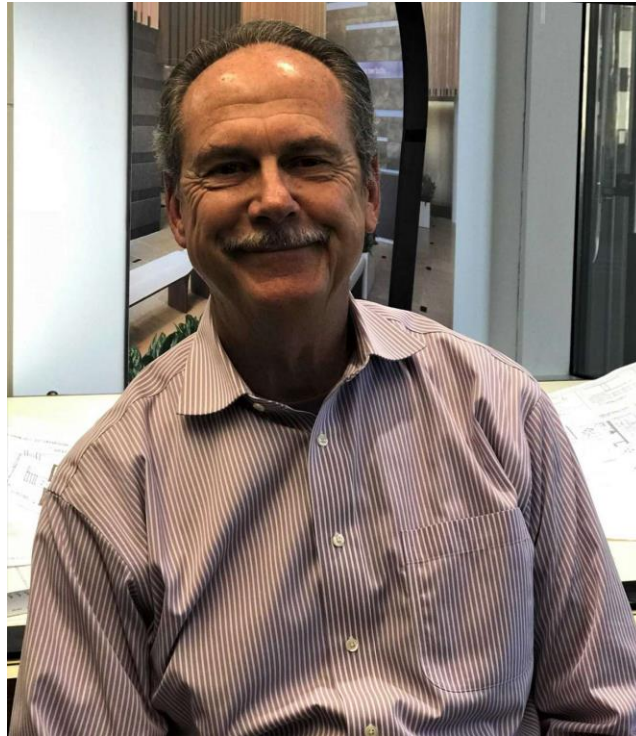
THE REGISTER CITIZEN

BUSINESS

Today's Business: Design already ahead of the curve when pandemic hit

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George Perham formed Norwalk-based VIA, Visionary Interiors Architecture, earlier this year. He is a member of the International Interior Design Association and, among others, American Institute of Architects. He can be reached at GPerham@VIAvisionary.com. Contributed photo /

Is the pandemic causing permanent redesign of office spaces?

Not yet. That's because interior architectural design in Connecticut has been ahead of the curve in a big way. However, change is on the horizon.

Building design trends pre-pandemic were extremely helpful when the COVID pandemic hit.

For example, the trend toward hands-free bathroom facilities, like automatic flush toilets and automatic faucets, began years ago. Antimicrobial fabrics already were in use on chairs and rugs due to proponents of the green movement, who favored antimicrobial textiles because those properties prolonged the life of the material.

While these accommodations may have been put in place before the pandemic, they have been instrumental in helping combat the spread of the virus.

Nevertheless, office design trends are continually evolving. Huddle rooms, for example, are on the rise. They were conceived as a reaction to open-office settings that caused privacy to go by the wayside.

The huddle rooms are particularly useful during the pandemic. They provide a way for employees to continue to work in a socially distant manner but offer an escape from the open floor plan for private meetings or phone calls — and a way for a socially-distant face-to-face meeting for those coming in from a home-work setting.

Workstations that make up the open office environment are what play the biggest role in adjusting to the pandemic. Over the years, workstations have been reduced in size, increasing the density of employees. Height of the separation panels have been lower to provide a more collaborative environment.

The pandemic has reversed that trend. Workstation panels have been made higher, but now are made of glass or plastic, allowing for more collaboration while maintaining separation.

And temporary changes abound.

Building managers and business owners have added Plexiglas or regular glass separators in restaurants and other venues, even offices. However, few are suggesting these changes will be permanent.

Since last April, near the start of the pandemic, our firm provides a free analysis of business spaces to help businesses be comfortable they are following all relevant anti-virus regulations and recommendations.

The fact that few are pushing for massive change is probably a good thing.

Building managers aren't making knee-jerk decisions. They are waiting for the proverbial dust to settle before they make any additional changes.

Most property managers seem to want to wait to see more science, more proof that changes are necessary.

For municipalities, making permanent changes to local building codes at this time probably is not a good idea. As with property managers, patience is needed. More science is needed.

There are a few code changes that might be worth consideration.

High efficiency air filters may be capable of removing a virus from the air. Most airlines already have the so-called HEPA filters installed on their planes. It may be a matter of time because similar systems are required by building code.

Similarly, programming daily air purge cycles may at some point be required. Many building systems already can accommodate this.

Ultraviolet light fixtures in ductwork is another change that may be on the horizon. These fixtures can inactivate microorganisms to help provide a safe indoor environment.

Architects have long understood that they are responsible for creating a healthy environment for those using the facility. The pandemic is a harsh reminder.

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