

Architects hustle with design changes

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Few, if any, buildings need massive Covid-19 pandemic-related adjustments.

Educational buildings, offices, retail and restaurant outlets are absolutes. So are sports arenas and entertainment venues.

But there are plenty of minor projects. Architects are fielding calls from developers and building owners about what modifications are needed as workers begin to make their way back into office settings.

"In our case, we use our office as a case study," said Ray Bednarski, president and CEO, Kideney Architects PC

In Kideney's offices on Genesee Street, dividers were installed between desks, hand sanitizers set up, directional signs posted and the building's HVAC system was checked.

"I wanted to make sure people felt and saw the extra levels of precaution we took," Bednarski said,

Kideney's health-care clients have asked to convert floor space into isolation rooms to protect patients.

Meetings have been held via Zoom and Microsoft Teams.

"But there are times when we absolutely had to be in our client's buildings," Bednarski said. "In our profession, there are some things you just have to do in person."

Bednarski said architects are talking with educational clients about social- distancing protocols for students and teachers.

"The bottom line is we are focusing on an abundance of caution when it comes to Covid-design issues," Bednarski said.

Joseph Wutz, a principal with The Bonadio Group, said there are no easy answers for clients asking about Covid-19 issues.

"There has been a total shift," Wutz said, "And there are concerns about what happens if there is another (virus) wave."

Michael Mistriner, vice president with CPL, said clients are worried about a timeline if there's another spike in cases, as well as whether architectural changes are to be made for the short term (less than one year) or longer. Mistriner calls it an "unprecedented time" in architecture.

"Our role is to play, at least in part, a trusted adviser for our clients," Mistriner said. "Covid changes are not gimmicky things. You have to understand this is a difficult time for everyone."

CPL's higher-education clients are wrestling with issues such as how many students can be assigned to a dorm room. For instance, can a three-person dorm room be adjusted to a two-person room, and what sort of space crunch does that create?

What about parents who insist on individual rooms for their children? And what to do about communal bathrooms, sinks and showers?

"Density reduction, regardless of the client, is the biggest issue," Mistriner said. "It really forces us to think in new and creative ways that weren't under consideration even a few months ago."

Protective issues related to density are causing a shift in office planning, Mistriner said.

"For the last 10 years, architects were focused on taking down walls in offices to create a more collaborative atmosphere," Mistriner said. "And now we are looking at creative ways to put those walls back up."

Mistriner said CPL is dealing with office tenants who may require less office space as more workers opt to continue to work remotely.

Also under review is how much square footage should be allocated to workers in an office setting. In many cases, that space will be doubled because of social-distancing protocols. Lunchrooms also are up for review.

"There's a lot of scurrying and scampering going on, as everyone is trying to gauge the short-term and long-term implications of returning people to work," Mistriner said. "It makes for an interesting time to be an architect."



An example of the type of COVID19 related design work CPL has been engaged in. The rendering depicts a college residence hall connector addition featuring new single rooms.

Marc Mussachio, partner and architect with Mussachio Architects PC, said design changes are giving him plenty of sleepless nights.

"It has become something of a moving target," Mussachio said. "Every time I think we have an answer, more information or guidelines come along, and we have to start all over again with a different look."



Mike Mistriner, Vice President CPL

Clients have decidedly different needs. Owners of office buildings are looking at HVAC systems and social distancing for worker space and lunchrooms. Hotels must ensure that rooms are sterile.

"You just can't pack rooms – any room, be it a hotel or an office – the way they used to be," Mussachio

said. "People, our clients, are still digesting what their future needs will be, and we have to be nimble and adjust accordingly."

Jake Schneider of Schneider Architectural Services PC sends all employees to a job site with masks, gloves and safety glasses. On-site meetings used to be in a construction trailer. Now, crews use sawhorses and plywood outside for tables and desks.

New to designs are doors that can be opened with a slight nudge of a shoulder instead a traditional handle.

"It is kind of the new normal," Schneider said.

Schneider's firm is working on the new headquarters for Evans Bank N.A. in Amherst. Many Covid-19 protocols already were designed into the building, Schneider said.

Evans put an emphasis on privacy, so many offices and desks adhere to the six-foot distancing mandate.

"We are back up and running," Schneider said. "Even with design changes, we are still adhering to design schedules."