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## Office of the Future: Central Ohio experts on the ways workplaces are changing

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When we all head back to our offices, we can expect that the spaces we left behind won't look the same.

The Covid-19 pandemic that sent everyone home in March will force businesses to rethink how to incorporate social-distancing and sanitizing stations while cutting communal kitchens and tight meeting spaces.

As part of our look at the Office of the Future, we convened a virtual panel to discuss how the coronavirus pandemic is changing how offices are designed, used, leased and interacted with.

The panel was moderated by reporter Tristan Navera and featured four leading voices with different perspectives on the real estate industry:

Carrie Boyd, principal and director of interior design, M+A Architects

Earl Lee, director of experiential design, Moody Nolan

Ira Sharfin, CEO, Continental Office

Dan Wendorf, senior managing director, JLL

Here are excerpts from our conversation, edited and condensed for clarity:

**A lot of companies have been thinking about coming back into the office, but not everybody is doing it yet. It seems like companies are taking their time and doing it very carefully. Is that generally what you have been seeing?** *Dan Wendorf:*

Across the country, the overarching statement is that it's definitely a unique situation for each individual business, each individual city, as we go through this unprecedented time. But the demand for office, the demand to be back together, is intrinsically linked to the economy. We see the economy starting to come back as we start to see positive indicators, the demand to get back in the office is definitely increasing.

But assisting employees, communicating often is something that we've seen as key to helping slowly return to work, and the employees need to be comfortable with it. Certainly not a mandate and each individual situation is different as we continue to keep our pulse and navigate our way through this.

*Earl Lee:* When it first started, we actually were polling people and we continuously polled people to find out what their comfort level is because at the end of the day, if they're not comfortable, I can't expect them to work at an optimal level. And I don't want someone sitting at a desk who's worried about one thing, but they need to be focused on something else. So that's our biggest thing is just to make sure people are comfortable.

The idea of people being comfortable in their own space is ... paramount to figuring out how to get people back into a work environment. Because at the end of the day, it's not just about getting back into our work environment. It's also going to change because now it's, "Well, wait a minute, maybe we really need to look at how we're going to work together," before we worry about just getting everybody in one space and assuming that we're going to put together like we were before.

**I'm interested in looking at that from a long-term kind of thinking about making an investment in a lease. What are companies thinking about right now?** *Wendorf:* The long-term planning has certainly changed immensely in the past 150 days. But what I think we're going to see, regardless if it's a year from now or three years from now, is an increased demand



JEFFREY KONCZAL FOR ACBJ  
Carrie Boyd, principal and director of interior design, M+A Architects, said her company's office has been redesigned to keep workers safe.

for our communities, our cities, our buildings, to reflect a more resilient workplace. On the developer side, there's always been a focus on technology and sustainability. But just like online grocery delivery got accelerated by five years in the past four months, I think our building technology is also going to be accelerated, and companies are gonna be looking for space that reflects their corporate standards around sustainability, around health and wellness of their employees.

So that's requiring office buildings, office spaces to look different. I think we see that cities are as remarkably resilient as our companies and offices during this. While the initial gut reaction might be more working from home, less space, I don't necessarily think that's going to be the case. We're definitely gonna see a densification, more of a focus on how does the space work when the employees aren't working from home, when they come to the corporate office, which is the hub of the brand, the hub of interactions.

**How are you creating environments for those face-to-face interactions, getting away from the desk?** *Boyd:* I really truthfully believe that the footprint's not going to change, that it's just going to be utilized differently. And the purpose of the workplace is going to change based on what the culture of that company is, what's the heart of that company and how do we build space around it? So it's not a one size fits all solution. It's really got to be catered to that company's purpose.

*Lee:* Realistically that collaboration and feeding off of each other's design inspiration is really what makes us a thing, and makes us pull out good projects. Trust me, I can go home and do a construction document set with no one around me without having input. But when it comes to coming up with an awesome idea, I kind of do need a lot of people in the space feeding off of each other to really come to that.

So the idea of what those spaces could be is what really kind of energizes me because it's now like, how do you make a safe place? How do you make a place that's for collaboration? And how do you make enough of those spaces inside of your same footprint that different teams can really get together, and then disseminate when they have to do the heads down work.

*Sharfin:* I think we are going to see not just large companies, but even mid-sized companies that looked to have multiple locations, it might be maybe they have a membership at a co-networking place where their people can touch down. Maybe they take space in the suburban location because they have people that live out there and they have a place to come in.

**What conversations are you having about working from home versus the office?** *Boyd:* The mentality before this pandemic for so many companies was that work from home just doesn't work, it won't work for us. And then we're forced, sink or swim, we're forced to do this. And before the question was, "Well, how am I going to know if my employees are working?"

And the question back was, "Well, how do you know if they're working now?"

So really, just because you're in your seat doesn't mean you're doing your work effectively, efficiently. That was sort of a pivot for me and also I think it really challenges leaders to be better leaders and really be connected with your teams in a stronger way.

In my opinion, it's short-sighted to have permanent staff making permanent decisions to work from home 100% of the time. There's a piece of culture that's going to be missing. I really feel like now is the time for companies to really sit and think through their mission and understand how they're connecting their team with the overall mission and vision and purpose.

Now more than ever, companies are so purpose-driven and I think creating space for those social interactions for staff to really talk about how the company is and what the company is doing to be part of that mission is I think critical.

I think about myself and my career. If I was working from home for the first five years of my career, I don't know where I would be.

I just I feel like you learned so much because you're overhearing.

*Wendorf:* One of the things that we've been seeing is that employees do have a desire to get back in the office to have those interactions that aren't as possible when you are working remotely. We've seen extreme benefits from folks working from home, but certainly limitations are putting additional pressure to get back in the office.

*Lee:* One of the things that we're finding out is before, everybody said, "Oh, yeah, working from home, it's not gonna work for everybody." And that's true. It's not.

But the reality is they're finding that more people working from home actually work longer from home, because they can now cater their day and their responsibilities somewhat around the work and their meetings.

And they're finding that people instead of working a strict eight hours, they'll eat dinner, remember they had to do something, go back to the computer, and then they're there for another four hours after dinner. The work is still getting done.

Culture is so, so important. I mean, the idea that my staff and with my studio, everything we do is so collaborative, because we have a person from every background and it's one studio so when we try to get together to design, it works so much better when we're in the same room looking at each other's eyes, you see a sketch that somebody is drawing, not waiting for it to pop up on the screen, and then you start to piggyback on that.

**Talk about building the urban environment going forward. How do we see that differently after this pandemic?** *Sharfin:* I think the people that are not going to be in the office 100% are going to expect more. I think the amenities need to be that much better.

Because if you're going to be in the office only 25% or 50% of the time, that experience has to be that much better and that much richer. I think there is a benefit being in downtown urban areas and being able to walk to amenities.

*Wendorf:* The ecosystem is where it's at. That's where we were headed to before all this hit. We call it the cocktail of the four As. You have to be somewhere where it's affordable to be working, has to have amenities, has some accessibility and then anchor institutions. Those are really what help create that urbanization.

I think it's looking at our cities and asking how do you create these cities of the future? It's kind of around the pillars of digitization and automation.

I haven't seen one survey that says people are looking forward to rush hour and longer commutes again. So I think now's the time to embrace that and really have that inward focus look to say, "OK, how are we coming out of this and really using this as a catalyst for change within organizations?"

To come out better on the other side, whether that's in January or a year or two from now. It takes a city embracing that with office users and companies as well.

*Boyd:* We have been such a car-centric society for so many years, and I don't know, I guess I feel maybe we're starting to understand that doesn't actually work, talking about not being excited to sit in traffic again. I think there's some smart urban developments.

We're learning from big cities like Milan and Paris and London who are who are making some pretty large streets into extended patios and pedestrian spaces. I think that's what I'm most excited about as it relates to amenities is really getting back to more pedestrian spaces that are outside.

**Tristan Navera**  
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