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Urban Design in times of Covid-19: Imagining a post-pandemic city

More than a century before Sars-CoV-2, the Bubonic Plague-causing pathogen killed millions in India in 1896. Our cities then, as now, scrambled to tackle the epidemic.

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Manit Rastogi, Bandra Collective, Sonali, Mriganka Saxena and Puneet Khanna



A view of Old City during ongoing Covid-19 lockdown, in New Delhi. (PTI)

The colonial authorities created an organisation with the sole purpose to redesign what was then Bombay to improve its sanitary and living conditions. The planned opening of the suburbs was, in fact, a result of this. Today, coronavirus has forced us to take a hard look at our cities, again. HT reached out to urban designers and architects to re-imagine and decongest four key spaces of our lives:

a classroom, a street market, an office and a congested residential area. A look at their designs and innovations.

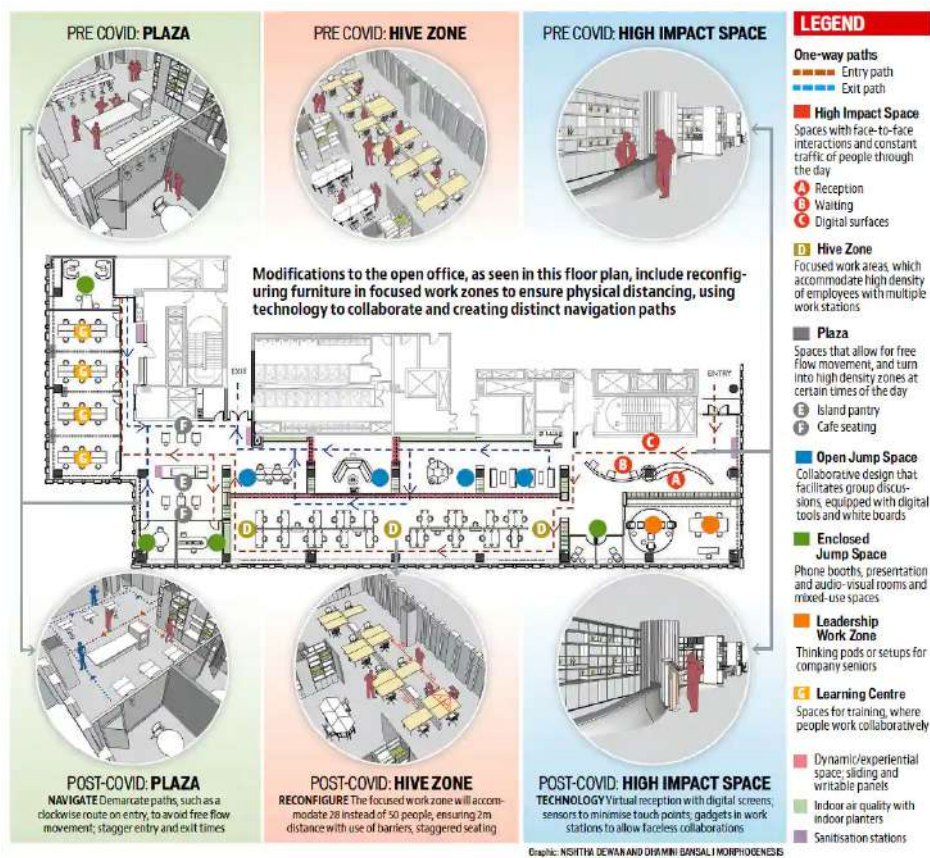
Offices in times of Covid-19: Using tech to build a more agile workspace

The workplace in a post-Covid world needs to re-evaluate priorities and be prepared to respond with swiftness and agility to the next big disruption.

To start with, minimising the transmission of virus and other pathogens as well as ensuring employee health are top priorities for all organisations. To that end, we've looked at how reconfiguring the workspace to allow physical distancing, and using technology smartly can go

Learning centre, where people would sit and collaboratively work; Open and enclosed jump spaces, equipped with digital tools to allow teleconferencing and white boards to facilitate group discussions; Hive zones or focused work areas, which accommodated high density of employees; and Leadership work zones, for senior members of the company.

In the post Covid scenario, the reconfigured open office will seat fewer people, as the space allocated to each employee has increased with larger workstations and higher partitions, in keeping with social distancing norms. Agile workspaces like hive zones and jump spaces have been redefined. Close collaborative and communal spaces have made way for staggered seating; workstations are connected through digital tools that allow multiple users to work simultaneously and attend video conferences from their own stations; sliding panels create dynamic working and meeting spaces; and single occupancy pods and phone booths have been provided. Technology embedded in furniture allows workstations to be truly plug-and-play.



The reception, an area of face-to-face interactions has been replaced by a virtual reception that relies on smart technology and digital screens to convey information to visitors. Magazines, pens and pads, staple features of a reception, have been removed. Attendance systems have evolved to operate on facial and voice recognition technology. The carrying capacity of lifts, which lead up to a reception, is reduced to a fourth.

Technology can also be used effectively to minimise touch points like blinds, light switches, and toilets. Simple sensor-activated lights and faucets and smart window shades can be used, instead. Temporary plexiglass screens can be installed at various check-in points and hand-sanitiser dispensers as well as Ultra Violet phone sterilising stations can be placed in plain view.

Navigation is another vital aspect to the new office plan. Where earlier the movement was more free-flowing, a post Covid office must stagger entry and exit times to decongest arrival and fro movement also decreases chances of transmission of pathogens.

Manit Rastogi,

co-founder, Morphogenesis, is a leading speaker in sustainable design and works with urban policymakers to spearhead initiatives on environmental and socio-cultural sustainability