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REAL ESTATE COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE

NYC office towers welcome workers back with new tech, toilet protocols

By Lois Weiss

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Building owners, health experts and designers are collaborating to get workers back to the office quickly and safely.

Getty Images



Vaccinations are being distributed, the lifting of all **COVID-19** lockdowns is in sight, and with that, confidence is returning to both employers and commercial building owners.

Many real estate executives now believe companies will call their workforces back into the office starting in June and July. But how exactly they will do that safely and efficiently remains a matter of opinion — with buildings owners, health experts and designers all weighing in.

As a result, everything from build outs, technology and even toilets are currently being reimaged in an attempt to get tenants back to the office quickly.

“They are all trying to position themselves as the better building,” said Peter Turchin of CBRE, which manages 2.7 billion square feet of office space worldwide — 20 million square feet of which is in New York. “They are looking at their competition very acutely and at what they need to do for their buildings.”

While pre-COVID some companies were down to as little as 60 to 125 square feet per person with benching, the amount of space per employee is now rising.

Most clients have scrapped plans to double the size of their offices to accommodate six feet of social distancing and are instead having employees come into work every other day or rejiggering the furniture to alternate chairs and desks.

“There will be less density and they are not putting employees back in elbow to elbow,” said Nelson Mills, president and CEO of Columbia Property Trust, which owns the Times Building at 229 W. 43 St. and 315 Park Ave. South among others in Manhattan.

Exterior of 521 Fifth Avenue.

To air things out, Savanna’s Grand Central-area office building, at 521 Fifth Ave., will soon have usable outdoor terrace space at every setback.

Stefano Giovannini

Examples of the race to restructure can be seen at SL Green Realty Corp.’s 1.1 million-square-foot Midtown office tower, 1185 Sixth Ave., where thermal scanners and giant air filters in the lobbies have been installed, and at private equity giant Savanna’s Grand Central-area office building at 521 Fifth Ave., which will soon have a usable outdoor terrace at every setback.

At both 545 Madison Ave. and 10 Grand Central (155 E. 44 St.) Craig Deitelzweig, president and CEO of Marx Realty, has overseen the installation of UV lights in common areas and the bi-polar ionization system AtmosAir to target — and hopefully kill off— most COVID particles.

“Once people start coming back, others in the same industry will see they have a competitive advantage,” said Deitelzweig, whose company also owns properties that include 430 Park Ave., 201 E. 57 St. and the Cross County Center in Yonkers.

Exterior shot of 1185 Ave. of the Americas.

Thermal scanners and giant air filters have been installed at 1185 Avenue of the Americas in Midtown.

Stefano Giovannini

In most offices, new air-filtration systems with upgraded MERV filters were added, while others are changing the outside air more frequently. Along with a boatload of hand-sanitizer stations, most owners have used the lockdown to install “sneeze guards,” automatic doors and destination elevators, as well as programming phone apps that can be used instead of key fobs.

“Owners are spending money and putting it into the infrastructure and focusing on wellness and health,” said Bill Rudin, chief executive of Rudin Management, which owns among others, 345 Park Ave., 3 Times Square and Dock 72 in Brooklyn. “[Our app] allows our tenants to see how many people are in the lobby waiting for elevators. We have people stationed in the lobby wearing white gloves hitting the elevator button. We have limitations on elevator occupancy and are pumping more fresh air into the elevators and have upgraded filters.”

Where touchless sensors or anti-microbial covers on buttons have not been installed, owners are being as creative as possible to make occupiers as comfortable as possible — and they’re tapping design firms to help.

“Most executives are thinking of a new mix of employees and deciding who needs to be in the office or not,” said architect Thomas Vecchione, principal of the design firm Vocon, which is advising office building owners on cutting-edge new layouts.



“When employees come back in June, they are saying they want it to feel post-COVID in a smart way. We’re all worn out and want to come back, but we also want to come back to an office that is fresh, light and inspired.”

“Owners are spending money and putting it into the infrastructure and focusing on wellness and health.”

- Bill Rudin, Chief executive of Rudin Management

But it’s not all about adding flashy tech and piling on amenities. The practical issue of deciding who to bring back first and how to position employees is a hot-ticket conversation going on behind the scenes in virtually every company in New York that leases office space, insiders told the Post.

“Companies won’t go from zero days to five days in eight-hour increments all at once,” explained Jay Neveloff, partner and real estate chair of the law firm Kramer Levin, which advises clients on development, leasing, conversions and financial structuring. “Many businesses are trying to scope out different alternatives in order to phase in employees for both days and hours.”

Businesses are now exploring a hybrid occupancy model where some employees may come to the office just two or three days a week — or more.

“We have been in regular communication with our tenants as to when they will come back and we want to give them confidence that the building is a safe place to be,” said.

Portrait of Tommy Craig

Tommy Craig
Hines

Meanwhile, Tommy Craig, senior managing director of Hines, which owns a portfolio that includes stakes in One Vanderbilt and the Hudson Square Portfolio, said the focus for most office buildings is on “the path of travel” from entering the buildings, to the concierges, entry gates, elevators, common hallways, bathrooms and into their offices.

At the soon-to-be completed Zero Irving at 124 E. 14th St., Josh Wein, managing director of the developer, RAL Companies, said all the restrooms will be individual rooms with their own sink — similar to what you might find in some restaurants. Along with the now de rigueur touchless auto-flushes and sinks, for added room cleanliness, the porcelain tile floors and walls were installed with minimal germ-collecting grout lines.

Cleanliness is now extremely important to tenants, agreed Robert Ioanna, senior principal at Syska Hennessy Group, a global engineering firm that also provides facilities management, as the science shows smaller spaces are more likely to have COVID germs suspended in the air.

He is advising his client owners and tenants to “put a lid on it” — the toilets that is — because fecal matter carries COVID for 30 days while flushing sends a nearly invisible plume of particulates into the air.

“Get in and get out of the bathrooms and bring a Lysol spray and don’t talk to anyone when you are in there,” Ioanna said.

“Face the wall and don’t talk in the elevator.”

While that may sound a tad dystopian, building owners are assuring tenants that nothing will boost company moral quite like being back in the office.

“When everyone is back this summer, we’re having a ‘No More Zoom & Gloom’ party for the tenants,” said Deitelzweig.



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