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SPACE NEEDS, REDUCTION, AND RESTRUCTURING

How can we rethink public space after COVID-19?

COVID-19 has changed lives around the world, from the way people work, learn, teach, and deliver or receive healthcare. At HMC Architects, we are exploring the pandemic as an opportunity to learn, reinvent, and most importantly help our clients amid this crisis.

As part of this ongoing research effort, we are committed to sharing our findings with the industry on five main areas of Technology, Adaptability and Flexibility, Regulatory/ Budgetary/Institutional Impacts, Space Needs, Reduction, and Restructuring, and Impact to Wellness/ Mental Health. In this article, we discuss the space needs, reduction, and restructuring of civic spaces.

METHOD

A group of representatives from different public agencies, including fire, police, sheriff, city and county administration as well as architects from HMC and consultants from public safety and engineering companies were invited to attend a virtual focus group to discuss and share insight. Prior to the focus group session, a short online survey was sent to the group for their review and evaluation of short- and long- term impacts of COVID-19 on their current and future facility operation and design.

RESULTS/DISCUSSION

Many public agencies were already evaluating their programmatic space needs in order to provide increased efficiencies, enhanced inter-agency collaboration, reduce redundancy, and save critical public funding. Additionally, public entities and departments had begun to move many of their services online, which allowed them to reduce or eliminate physical high touch areas like public counters. Much like the private sector, public agencies were looking to consolidate buildings and spaces creating “open-office” plans with smaller collaborative workspaces and low partitions. While the goals for increased efficiency, collaboration and cost-savings remain, public agencies must rethink how to achieve these goals while implementing infectious control measures and remote work schedules in order to provide necessary and critical public services.

REDUCED SPACE UTILIZATION

While most essential civic buildings and services remain operational, many services and spaces are currently closed, limited, or underutilized for the foreseeable future due to the pandemic. This includes public libraries, recreation centers, and courts to name a few.¹ Even in essential workplaces such as police and fire departments, we’re seeing safety protocols to reduce the risk of transmission,



Los Angeles County Liberty Community Plaza, HMC Architects

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Civic space is the heart of civil society.

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which have resulted in empty or underutilized buildings or spaces.

Work-from-home or alternate work schedules have also created underutilized office spaces. While some agencies or departments may be able to reduce space, others may need it for other critical functions in order to maintain physical distancing or to disperse public services throughout their district.

While it may be possible to utilize or repurpose space for essential functions, it is unlikely that civic agencies will be able to maintain empty buildings with decreasing budgets. Like the private sector, cities and agencies are now faced with increased deficits and dramatic budget cuts, which are likely to result in cuts to public services or reductions in force. Results from our focus group discussion showed that agencies have also been descoping or canceling projects to deal with budget deficits or are unclear on how to proceed during the pandemic.

As we navigate through the financial, social, and cultural burdens of the global pandemic, it is of critical importance we begin to think of how we restructure, repurpose, and collaborate to maintain and support the communities we serve.

REVALUATING AND RESTRUCTURING CIVIC SPACES

Because many public and civic environments will go unused or underutilized, it's critically

important to evaluate space inventories to repurpose/reprogram space that is no longer needed or can be efficiently reduced.

Many civic functions or services are generally located within a civic center or building. Functions or critical services that cannot be performed from a remote workplace will have to be done in a work environment large enough to accommodate meetings and workstations with at least a six-foot physical distance from others.

To reduce public interaction while providing increased service throughout their jurisdiction, some essential functions or services may need to regionalize their departments, moving them to other buildings. Even if buildings or services can remain in a centralized location, building entries, waiting areas, security checkpoints, and elevator queuing will require expanded entry areas to maintain physical distancing. As space requirements are evaluated, consolidated, and expanded to other facilities, it will be important to provide flexible and adaptable work environments to ensure the safety of agency workers and their constituents.

OUTDOOR PUBLIC SPACE

It is also important to re-envision outdoor public spaces to help supplement the shortage of interior space. Many activities normally performed indoors may have to be relocated outside to accommodate for physical distancing and the lack of interior



Forming civic-private partnerships may provide additional resources to support local communities and economies.



space.² Public entities are looking into repurposing parks and squares for small outdoor meeting spaces, cafes, lunchrooms, and other interior gathering spaces that allow building occupants to maintain a safe distance.³

Outdoor civic spaces are an extension of public life and can be utilized for activities and functions that are normally performed indoors.⁴

Private sector spaces not currently in use can become places for community events, and cities should look for these opportunities. Parking lots can allow for physical distancing and become places for outdoor movies, concerts, health and fitness classes, or other events.

CIVIC PARTNERSHIPS

Increased civic and private partnerships will be critical in order to endure the instability and uncertainty of a post-pandemic economy. Until a vaccine is produced and supplied, communities will have to contend with limited public events, large gatherings, school and university closures, and limited availability of services. Cities such as Los Angeles and Long Beach, California have had to work with retailers, restaurants, and other vendors to both support and return to an open economy. For example, Long Beach's "open streets initiative" is closing public streets and parking spaces to support their community retailers and re-open restaurants while maintaining social distancing.⁵ It's critical that civic agencies, healthcare and educational institutions, and the private sector will need to work together to support their individual missions, provide essential services and reinvigorate their local economies.⁶

SUMMARY

While some agencies or departments may be reduced in size, others will grow in order to address concerns with the pandemic and require more physical space. Public agencies will need to rethink and restructure their physical space to be flexible and adaptable to serve multiple functions. With decreasing public funds, maintaining public assets will be challenging. However, forming civic-private partnerships may provide additional resources to support local communities and economies.

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