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COVID-PROOFED OFFICES

Green design and green building practices are no longer nice-to-haves; they're set to become property imperatives in reaction to the coronavirus

Star attraction: The Oracle building, in Zenprop's Woodmead North development, has a four-star as-built green rating

Joan Muller mullerj@fm.co.za

SA's green building movement is likely to be an unintentional beneficiary of Covid-19, as architects, designers and developers are compelled to create safer and healthier buildings.

As employees across the globe start returning to their offices, industry players predict that green or sustainable workspaces will no longer be "nice to haves" – they will become necessities.

"The pandemic has already done for air quality what load-shedding did for energy efficiency," says Lisa Reynolds, CEO of the Green Building Council of SA (GBCSA). "There's now a tremendous opportunity for greener buildings to flourish."

Reynolds argues that the accelerated adoption of sustainable building practices will not only improve the wellbeing of those who work in these structures; it will also lead to cost savings due to greater efficiency in water and energy use.

She says: "A lower operating cost is something any building owner and tenant will appreciate right now."

The GBCSA is already looking at ways to encourage the move to environmentally conscious design and building practices. Last month, the council introduced a new Covid-19 measure that falls outside its existing green-star SA credit-rating tool.

"The idea is to reward innovative thinking in terms of design initiatives, construction management procedures, technologies, processes or strategies that will reduce the spread of Covid-19 and other infectious diseases," says Reynolds.

In practical terms, Covid-related green-star credits can be earned for a wide array of practices, varying from something as simple as using sustainably sourced, nontoxic surface cleaning and disinfecting products, to more sophisticated, tech-enabled solutions such as ultraviolet germicidal irradiation in ventilation systems.

Reynolds says the latter is one of the control strategies that may help avoid viral transmission. Pathogen risk initiatives and management protocols that address indoor air quality, contact surfaces, wet services design and building access will also be recognised for green-star ratings.

The interior design and the layout of workspaces will also need to be reimagined, as the pandemic shifts the focus increasingly to employee and building health.

Estelle Meiring, a director at architecture and design consultancy Paragon Group, says the new Covid-19 occupational health and safety measures recently introduced by the government have important implications for tenants and landlords. For instance, it could lead to a significant decrease in employee-density ratios.

In recent years, many companies reduced the space for each employee to about 6m²–8m² and opted for high-density, open-plan offices instead of private cubicles.

Meiring says the trend of shrinking office and desk sizes could reverse, as companies will have to space out employees to adhere to safe social distancing measures.
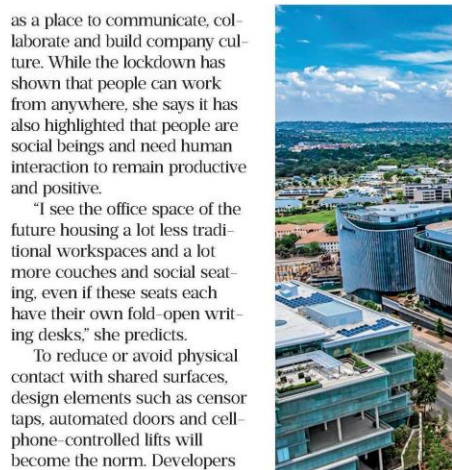
"With telecommuting and flexible working here to stay, business owners might find that, though they have fewer employees at the office at any one time, they need more space per employee," says Meiring.

She believes a density of closer to 18.5m² a person could become the new norm. If, however, a company's density is 14.5m² a person, it may have to install physical barriers or screens between desks – all of which, of course, have cost implications.

Another upshot of the pandemic, in Meiring's view, is that the office will no longer be seen as a place to sit and work, but as a place to communicate, collaborate and build company culture. While the lockdown has shown that people can work from anywhere, she says it has also highlighted that people are social beings and need human interaction to remain productive and positive.

"I see the office space of the future housing a lot less traditional workspaces and a lot more couches and social seating, even if these seats each have their own fold-open writing desks," she predicts.

To reduce or avoid physical contact with shared surfaces, design elements such as censor taps, automated doors and cellphone-controlled lifts will become the norm. Developers

What it means:
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Pivot model: The JLL Tétris building in Madrid
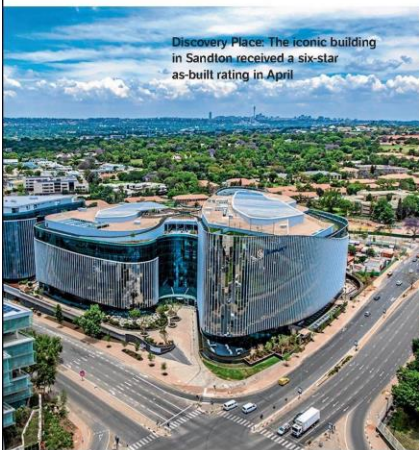
Discovery Place: The iconic building in Sandton received a six-star as-built rating in April

Working in: Unilever's office in Lagos, Nigeria, has a four-star green rating for interiors

The pandemic has done for air quality what load-shedding did for energy efficiency

Lisa Reynolds

Plush precinct: In September, Sandton Gate became one of the first developments to achieve a green-star certification for a sustainable precinct

exclusive use by one person."

The repurposing of work spaces and finding creative ways to alter existing buildings to perform new functions will become a key priority, she says.

Emma Luyt, MD of commercial design practice Tétris SA, a division of real estate consulting firm JLL, agrees that common spaces will become central to designing the workplace of the future. She refers to "pivot spaces", a new concept that is essentially about creating multi-functional areas to meet the evolving needs of employees who will alternate between remote working and time in the office.

Luyt says the new workplace is all about creating flexible, common spaces that will promote collaboration and idea sharing. There will also be an increased need for experienced colleagues to nurture young talent which, she argues, cannot happen in a remote working environment.

Tétris has already introduced its pivot model in a JLL office in the Spanish city of Madrid, seemingly with great success, says Luyt. The company has created an array of spaces for different uses — known as half-moon, huddle and fire-room spaces, among others.

The half-moon space, for instance, promotes collaboration and team meetings, with seats arranged around a large video conference TV screen that allows remote workers to dial in. Each seat provides a power point and a laptop surface. Luyt says this layout allows a team to share screens, make notes and plan weekly deliverables.

She notes that the huddle and fire-room configurations are more intimate spaces that enable smaller team collaboration, with comfortable seating areas that still meet social distancing regulations.

Then there are private pods where employees can book a desk for a day. Of course, every office also needs a canteen or a café for informal break-out and lunch times.

The accelerated use of technology — the advent of the augmented office — will also be a major outcome of the pandemic and the remote working trend.

"We expect to see many companies starting to use portals or apps to control employee experience within an office space," says Luyt. "These portals will include the choreographing of staggered start times and working hours, biometrics, room booking, lighting and temperature control and even touchless catering ordering."

Ultimately, companies that provide safer and healthier workspaces for employees will have an important competitive edge. As Luyt notes: "Sustainable design is becoming a major asset in attracting top talent." ✖

are likely to incorporate more stairs into their buildings to enable vertical circulation of air instead of exposing people to recycled air in cramped lifts.

Meiring also foresees a move to employees looking to "own" a portion of workspace so they can be in charge of its hygiene.

"Though that cannot necessarily translate back to a cellular office for every employee, it could mean that every employee has their own personal desk surface, something that can be clipped in and out in a hot-desk environment for