

# Breaking Ground

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## HEALTHCARE MARKET UPDATE

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# BEST PRACTICE

## EMBRACING CLEAN DESIGN: HOW THOUGHTFUL DESIGN CHOICES CAN SLOW THE SPREAD OF DISEASE

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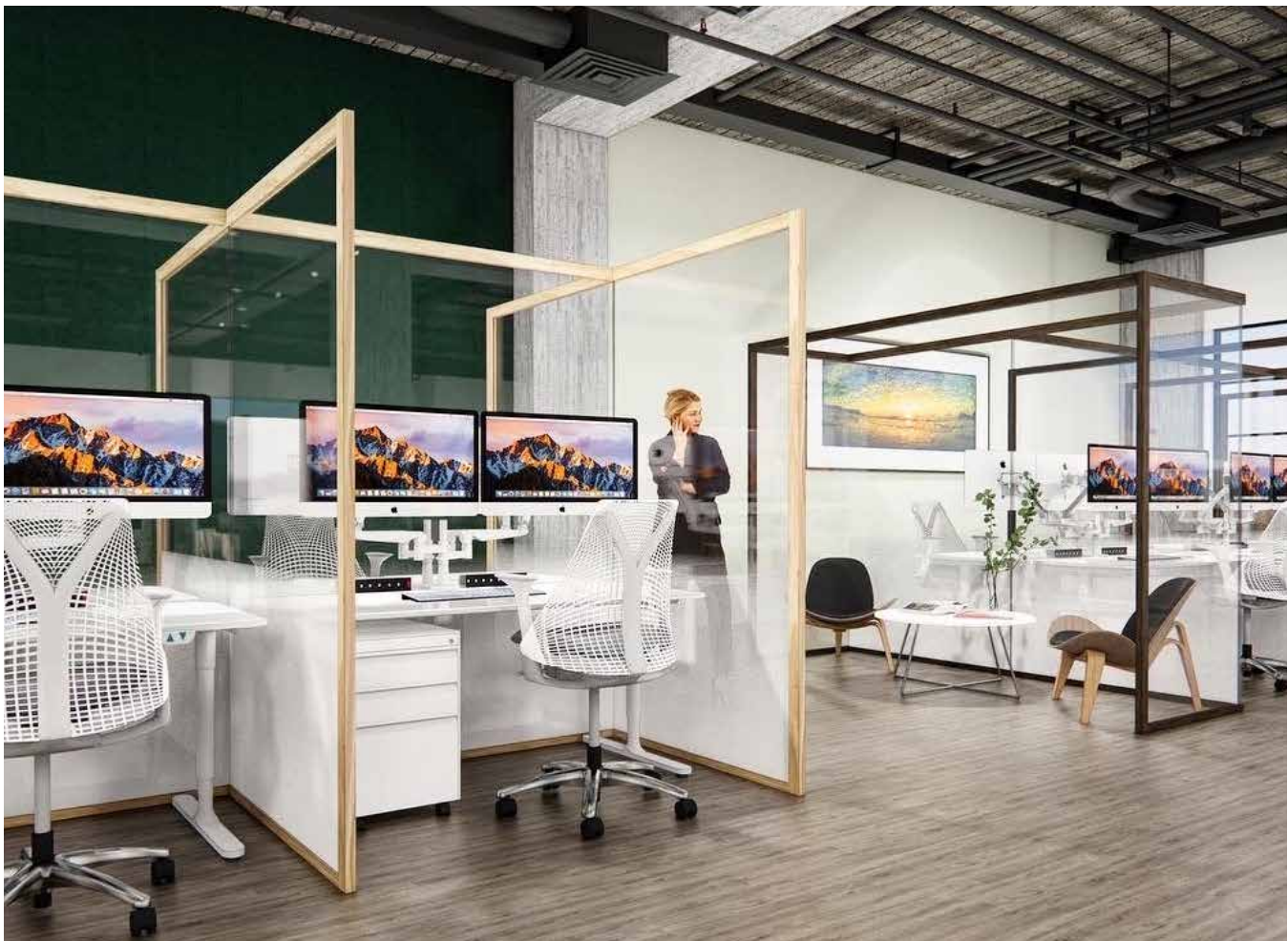
As the design world responds in real time to the coronavirus pandemic, a surge of “clean” design recommendations is suddenly available. These suggestions describe everything from how to integrate antimicrobial materials to how to improve air quality, implement sensor technologies, and approach space planning in the workplace to incorporate social distancing measures. While some of these are short-term strategies, many hint at a larger movement toward “clean design”—a series of design choices rooted in the need to protect public health long-term.

Just as environmentalism inspired comprehensive building standards—such as LEED and WELL—the recent design trends inspired by disease prevention will soon coalesce into a more established series of guidelines and best practices. These standards will place new responsibility on building ownership to make their buildings feel safe to tenants who have become more aware of how their surroundings can

impact their health.

As we begin to envision the increased sensitivity of office design in the wake of COVID-19, there is also a more cautionary lesson to learn from the environmental movement. Many have noted that the growing public awareness of sustainability and “green” design also gave rise to “greenwashing”—the use of vague environmental shortcuts in the interest of marketing a product or building as environmentally friendly.<sup>1</sup> If designers, manufacturers, and building owners fail to make conscientious choices in the wake of COVID-19, the move towards “clean” environments could provoke a new era of “cleanwashing.”

While the responsibility for preventing direct person-to-person disease transmission falls largely on the individual, building owners and landlords will be expected to become more cognizant of potentially hazardous elements within a space such as poor ventilation, densely crowded areas,



The “office” is a solution designed by Falk Built. Image courtesy Falk Built.





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and high-touch surfaces. Although the CDC currently states that surface transmission is not a primary means of contracting COVID-19,<sup>2</sup> the research is ever-evolving; a person may still be able to contract the disease by touching their face after touching an infected surface. According to a recent study, a cluster of COVID-19 cases originating in a shopping mall in Wenzhou, China, may have been connected through contact with a contaminated object.<sup>3</sup>

Developing intensive cleaning practices, encouraging social distancing, and designing with hygiene in mind will not only mitigate the spread of disease but also convey to tenants that the building's owner is committed to ensuring their safety. Conversely, a building that does not appear to be following recommendations for cleanliness and social distancing stands to make people feel unsafe and drive away business. Working with architects and designers to implement a set of "clean" design practices will create a building that offers a feeling of safety to occupants while providing effective long-term preventative measures.

Below are some ways to ensure you take adequate measures in working with your architect to ensure your building tenants thrive.

### Steps to Avoid "Cleanwashing"

The following examples show how building and business owners can go beyond minor upgrades to address the major components of creating clean spaces.

### Encourage Tenant Accountability by Increasing Accessibility

Consider the tenants' journey from the building's door to their desk. What surfaces will they touch? How many crowded spaces will they pass through? Envisioning every surface and space a person encounters in their daily routine will help to inform the most essential placements for things like hand sanitizer, signage, and spatial cues. For good measure, consider placing sanitizer at all entrances, exits, and gathering spaces throughout the building. Be sure to maintain a backstock of supplies and research the integrity of your brands; the EPA offers a comprehensive list of products that meet their criteria for use against COVID-19.<sup>4</sup>

To the best of your ability, create an accessible and barrier-free journey through the building. Where possible, designate entrances and exits as one-way to avoid crowding. In places where queues form, use floor markings or decals to indicate the recommended six feet of separation. Integrate signage to help enforce restricted elevator or waiting area capacity. Providing tenants with clear guidelines and accessible preventative measures encourages them to do their part in curbing the spread of disease while reminding them that you're invested in their wellbeing.



### Design the Details with Cleaning in Mind

Though a building design may include an abundance of surfaces that are made to be easily cleaned or wiped down, many still have moldings on the walls or deep reveals within millwork that would create ledges or nooks where dust, dirt, and bacteria can collect. Conduct an assessment of hard-to-clean spots and add them to the deep-cleaning protocol. Planning new spaces doesn't mean sacrificing your design aesthetic; keep your millwork simple and avoid unnecessary vertical or horizontal surfaces in detailing your new office.

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### Integrate Touchless Technologies

Best practices suggest upgrading a building's bathrooms to include sensor-operated appliances, but this must go beyond adding automatic paper towel dispensers to make a meaningful difference in how easily disease spreads. Be sure to carry this through to all bathroom appliances, such as soap dispensers and faucets, to create a truly touchless hand-washing experience. In bathroom design planning, consider a doorless layout, like those used in airports and other transportation hubs. Where doors are already in place, install foot pulls and replace stainless steel push plates and door knobs with copper or brass alternatives, which have inherent antimicrobial properties.<sup>5</sup>



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**Select Easy-to-Clean Building Materials**

A facility might strive to become healthier by upgrading the frequency of its cleaning protocol, but choosing the right building materials also contributes to creating a clean atmosphere. Recent design trends toward the use of reclaimed wood and rusted metal decor, for instance, don't project an image of cleanliness. Instead, design a space to have minimal porous surfaces in high traffic locations. Using mosaic tile may be elegant, but the many grout joints collect germs and are more difficult to clean. If carpet is unavoidable, consider replacing with carpet tiles, which are more easily replaced. As noted above, materials like copper and brass are less hospitable to the coronavirus compared to stainless steel and plastic. The materials in high-touch areas should also be able to withstand frequent cleaning. Tenants might begin by cleaning their spaces more aggressively, but replacing old materials with antimicrobial or easy-to-clean alternatives will make a big overall impact on the cleanliness of the space.

**Stay Informed and Collaborative**

While many building owners are doing their best to adapt in real-time to the challenges posed by the current pandemic, it's important to acknowledge that this global experience will have irreversible effects on our collective perception of public space. The widespread investment in clean design is not a trend or a quick-fix; it is the beginning of a movement that will outlast the current strain of coronavirus. As "clean" becomes an easy sales point, make honest, good design decisions with integrity. Be transparent with your tenants about the changes you have made and intend to make, and keep an open line of communication with designers about the best short- and long-term options for creating a safer, healthier space for tenants. <sup>BG</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Greenwashing

<sup>2</sup> How COVID-19 Spreads

<sup>3</sup> Indirect Virus Transmission in Cluster of COVID-19 Cases, Wenzhou, China, 2020

<sup>4</sup> List N: Disinfectants for Use Against SARS-CoV-2

<sup>5</sup> Aerosol and Surface Stability of SARS-CoV-2 as Compared with SARS-CoV-1

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