



Work Life in Limbo



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How developers, managers and design professionals help residents work productively at home.

When the pandemic disrupted life, causing many residents to remain home for long periods, developers and managers understood they had to create a plan B.

Life in rental housing needed to accommodate family members' office and schoolwork needs, as well as help residents take breaks safely. What made the situation tougher was that nobody knew if changes would be temporary or permanent.

Many communities conducted surveys and asked residents what they could do better, says Ericka Rios, Principal and Director of Leasing with Downtown Apartment Company (DAC), a full-service brokerage whose agents work with Chicago-area apartment buildings.

To date, changes for existing properties and those on the drawing board center around four main options, influenced by a building's size, location, demographics and asset class: A workspace within a unit; a variety of shared indoor and outdoor workspaces; more amenity spaces that spur breaks; and more virtual and in-person programming to connect residents.

Along with these choices, a key lesson has been the importance of staying flexible to make changes in the event of future upswings in COVID-19 cases and residents changing work locations as employers give them greater leeway on where they can work.

Chicago designer Mary Cook, Founder of the commercial interior design firm Mary Cook Associates, thinks a hybrid model—work from both home and an office—is here to stay. Jon Schneider, Senior Vice President of Asset Management at Chicago-based developer Fifield Companies, thinks that having choices can have a huge impact on resident satisfaction.

Here's more to know to develop and manage the work side of communities in the era of the coronavirus.

[Is it time to add an in-apartment workspace?](#)

Years ago, desks were often included as built-ins, then doing so became passé. After COVID-19 surged and residents contended with makeshift arrangements as more worked from home, many developers began constructing new communities or remodeling existing ones with pocket apartment offices or built-in workspaces.

Steve Hallsey, a Partner at Wood Partners, an Atlanta-based merchant builder, agrees. His company has eliminated micro units and expanded the square footage of its one- and two-bedroom units by 15% to 40% where feasible to provide room for a workspace. "You only need about 6 feet by 6 feet, so we're doing this now and will see how it goes," he says.

In one project New York City-based architects CetraRuddy is working on along the waterfront in northern New Jersey, the firm is incorporating dedicated workspaces, says Nancy J. Ruddy, Founding Principal and Executive Director of Interior Design.

Myrtle Beach, S.C.-based developer Sands Companies, which owns its own construction company, is adding 175 square feet to a one-bedroom model for a den to accommodate the work-from-home (WFH) component, says Holly Casper, Director of Asset Management.

The location of a building is a factor in whether there's extra square footage to fit workspaces. Typically, less dense suburban locations are more likely to offer an affordable opportunity than tighter, expensive urban sites, which both Chicago-based developer and property manager Draper and Kramer Inc. and Scottsdale, Ariz.-based

developer and property manager P.B. Bell have found. Yet, companies are innovative these days, looking to underutilized spaces, roofs, courtyards and more.

Yet, bigger footprints aren't always needed. Larger windows can make apartments seem more spacious to fit a desk, and outlets can be placed strategically to create flexible furniture arrangements, says architect Ed Bradford, Principal at The Architectural Team (TAT) in Chelsea, Mass.

At the same time, not all agree that apartments are the best place to set up a workspace. Cook believes that most residents don't want to work from their apartment if it means staring at a wall or working from a closet unless there's no alternative.

How to make a workspace the latest cool amenity?

Even before the pandemic began, more developers, property managers and design professionals were thinking about updating the traditional business center with its multiple desks and printer station to offer options of greater privacy for some and more collaborative space for others.

The solutions now emerging reflect a variety of designs, sometimes in new dedicated spaces and other times in underutilized areas or even temporarily vacant apartments, Rios says. For example, Draper and Kramer transformed the empty retail space at its Crest at Las Colinas Station property in Irving, Texas, into a remote work area by adding club chairs, high-top tables, other seating and a coffee bar.

This and other workspaces reflect common denominators: Strong Wi-Fi, comfortable seating, practical work surfaces, natural or artificial light, access to outdoors if feasible, sound-baffling materials and a way to see others to avoid feeling isolated, which many remote workers quarantining at home have felt, Ruddy says.

Among the most popular solutions are small individual phone booths or "Hushoffice" freestanding, space-age-style enclosures that provide privacy and are best for short spells; semi-enclosed cubicles with a glass wall or open diner-style booths that may be for one or two people and aren't claustrophobic feeling and useful for longer periods; and larger conference areas, now dubbed "Zoom Rooms," where someone working can spread out or several may collaborate. Some of these larger rooms may have a TV screen, big monitor or white board for presenting and Starbuck's-style couches to encourage comfort. They may also be located near a communal socializing space for a work-fun balance, says Jack Bierwirth, Vice President, Investment Management at Draper and Kramer.

Cook says this type of variety is important since different demographics have preferences. "Baby Boomers are more likely to want a study room with technology integrated because they like Zooms while Millennials are willing to bring their own technology," she says.

Even seating variety is a consideration for comfort and flexibility, says Ruddy, whose firm favors a mix of chairs, stools, sofas, benches and lounge-style seating.

Companies that have access to outdoor space, especially in warm climates, have additional options. For example, Sands Companies has added screened porches off its entertainment areas and cabanas near pools equipped with outlets, TVs and work furnishings. P.B. Bell is using new outdoor furnishings, many with USB cords.

But even in colder destinations, outdoor areas can extend seasonal uses with heaters, firepits or structures like yurts or pods. At the Twenty Broad Street building in lower Manhattan, CetraRuddy constructed a resident lounge and workspace on the roof with sweeping views of the downtown skyline. Residents can also work from an adjacent indoor space and view the outdoors. At the 535 W 43rd Street building project in Midtown Manhattan, it excavated a basement to be at grade with a courtyard and provide access.

Another change in redesigning new workspaces has been to make them serve multiple functions. At developer Fifield Companies' Westerly building in Chicago's River West neighborhood, Chicago-based Morgante Wilson Architects constructed a deep ledge in the mailroom in front of a window facing the street to give residents a place to work, open mail and people watch.

Lobbies are also reimagined to be more than a space to pass through, says architect Elissa Morgante, Founding Partner and Principal, Morgante Wilson Architects. "Instead of big sweeping sofas, we might design smaller seating zones within a large space for six with outlets and worktables, or design smaller groupings," she says. The materials favored may still be practical for frequent use and to absorb sound, but they are also homier looking since these spaces are designed to appear as an extension of a resident's apartment, according to Morgante.

To fit the work-fun balance at M&R Development's 42 Hundred on The Lake community near Milwaukee, the work area within its two-story clubhouse is adjacent to an entertainment kitchen, large dining table, coffee bar and lounge, says Diana Pittro, Executive Vice President with RMK Management Corp., which manages the building.

A similar approach was taken by The Habitat Company, a Chicago-based multifamily developer and property manager, when it updated its Hubbard Place building during the pandemic to include a co-working space near an entertainment lounge, which can serve as an alternative WFH area, says Maureen Vaughn, Vice President of Marketing and Communications.

Bradford and colleagues at TAT took the same approach when they designed AvalonBay's North Andover Mills' clubhouse with an open lounge, and work pods and a small conference room that can be closed off.

Because of demand for these spaces, some managers let residents reserve time. Some offer the spaces gratis while others charge by hour, day or longer, depending on the building's revenue stream. For example, Alta Terra's Sugar House in Salt Lake City, designed by Minneapolis-based BKV Group, has five rentable private offices plus individual work areas, two conference rooms and a communal table. Charlotte, N.C.-based property manager RKW Residential charges at some locations, depending in part on the asset class, says Teresa DeVos, Executive Vice President.

Because of interest in making workspaces flexible, many are designed for additional roles before and after work. "They can be a spot to enjoy coffee and a newspaper in the morning and a place for cocktails or games later in the evening," Cook says.

Bierwirth agrees, "Everybody doesn't want to work 100 percent. It's a real opportunity for those owners and managers who can adapt and provide flexibility," he says.

What's Happening on the Student Front?

To keep students safer, Campus Apartments, a large, national student housing developer, owner and operator based in Philadelphia that has a presence at 27 colleges and universities across 17 states, initiated a policy last year that gave residents increased access to one-bedroom units. For example, transitioning what were once two resident shared rooms into private bedrooms, which also gave them more space for a desk, says Miles H. Orth, III, Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer.

Now, with the coronavirus more under control, Campus is working to decrease the bed/bath parity by reducing bedroom counts and increasing bathrooms, especially in the house product that is available at some schools. At some schools, for example, residents have an entire house to themselves, perhaps with as many as 17 bedrooms and 10-plus bathrooms, so the company is working to even out the bedroom-to-bathroom ratio a bit more.

Besides working from their bedroom or a shared common space in the apartment or house, students at many buildings have the option of working from a common area. It may offer tables and chairs in different configurations, some for just one for extra safety or quiet. And because they, too, want to take a break, many of the properties are back to offering programming including free coffee and holiday and school and sports-related events in any number of building game rooms, lounges, gyms and other shared common facilities.

2 Additional Lessons

Since the pandemic kicked into high gear, property managers and third-party providers have focused on offering residents different ways to take a break from their work and leave their apartment, especially those who haven't gone back to an office. Two main ways many engage them is by making shared amenity spaces safe and enticing, and

offering innovative programming, which may periodically change, depending on demand. And they keep their options open to make more changes as new needs arise.

Lesson #1: More varied amenity spaces

While interests vary based on location and demographics, Rios says high on the list are spaces that accommodate meditation and wellness, especially when they can be set up outdoors. Food is also a huge draw.

To meet that need, Ruddy has seen more developers and owner-operators incorporate cafes, demonstration kitchens and third-party operations. At the Hamilton Cove building in Weehawken, N.J., where CetraRuddy served as interior designer, an independent coffee roaster set up a cart to serve residents in the lobby. Wood Partners, which already had an area retailer set up a wine and liquor bar in one of its Arizona communities, is exploring offering “honor” pantries so residents can come down from their apartments and purchase chips and other convenience foods by swiping their credit card, says Hallsey.

New types of amenity spaces have emerged. For example, mailrooms have moved from the back of the house to the front, gotten larger and become a combination social lounge and workspace, says Cook. “People were coming down to check their mail three to four times a day, and it’s only delivered once a day. The point is they wanted some social engagement as well as exercise,” she says. She and other designers saw it as a good space to add a workspace.

Package rooms have also become an amenity space as deliveries increased exponentially during the pandemic. “A small package room is no longer sufficient. It has to be large enough for overflow, and can also work for work,” says Bradford.

More are looking to outdoor areas to increase possibilities. “If we can put a rooftop space, we will, especially in dense areas that have a view,” says DeVos.

The Habitat Company invested in more heaters for outside use and also opened its pools earlier and closed them later in the season, says Vaughn.

To keep areas healthier, designers continue to favor antimicrobial surfaces where coffee bars and other high-touch areas are located, DeVos says.

Lesson #2: Vary programmed activities

During the pandemic, property managers also learned the importance of scheduling more activities, many connected with food such as a food truck on site for lunch or throughout the day one day a week or more, or mixology classes or catered dinners, says Rios.

There are also more activities for residents to engage with one another such as an oversized, wall-mounted Scrabble board in an entertainment area of a building that The Habitat Company developed. That company also organizes a long list of events such as a competitive make-your-own-gingerbread-house contest. During COVID-19 to save money, some events were hosted by staff rather than an outside provider, she says.

Pets, which many residents adopted during the pandemic, offer another opportunity to gather resident owners at “yappy” hours. Some events represent partnerships with local retailers or vendors who orchestrate poolside yoga, trivia nights, paint and sip or cooking or bartending classes.

For those still reluctant to gather in person, Zoom or virtual activities continue with supplies such as beer, wine, food ingredients, and art materials sometimes dropped off at residents’ doors, says Rios. Some activities may include a charge; others are free. Rios expects more of these types of events to be organized as weather begins to worsen in certain parts of the country.