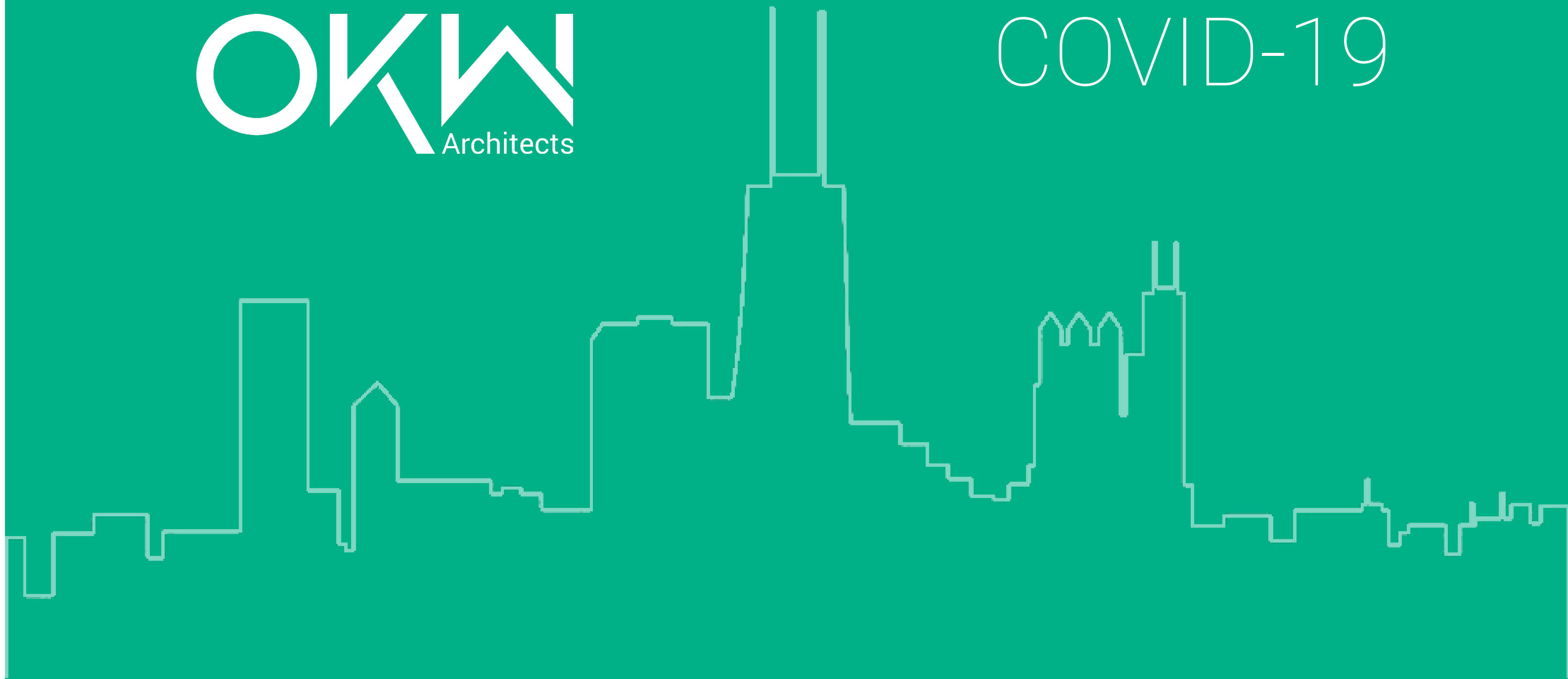




COVID-19



## Tales from the FRONT LINE

March - April 2020



**Jon P. Talty**  
CEO & Chairman

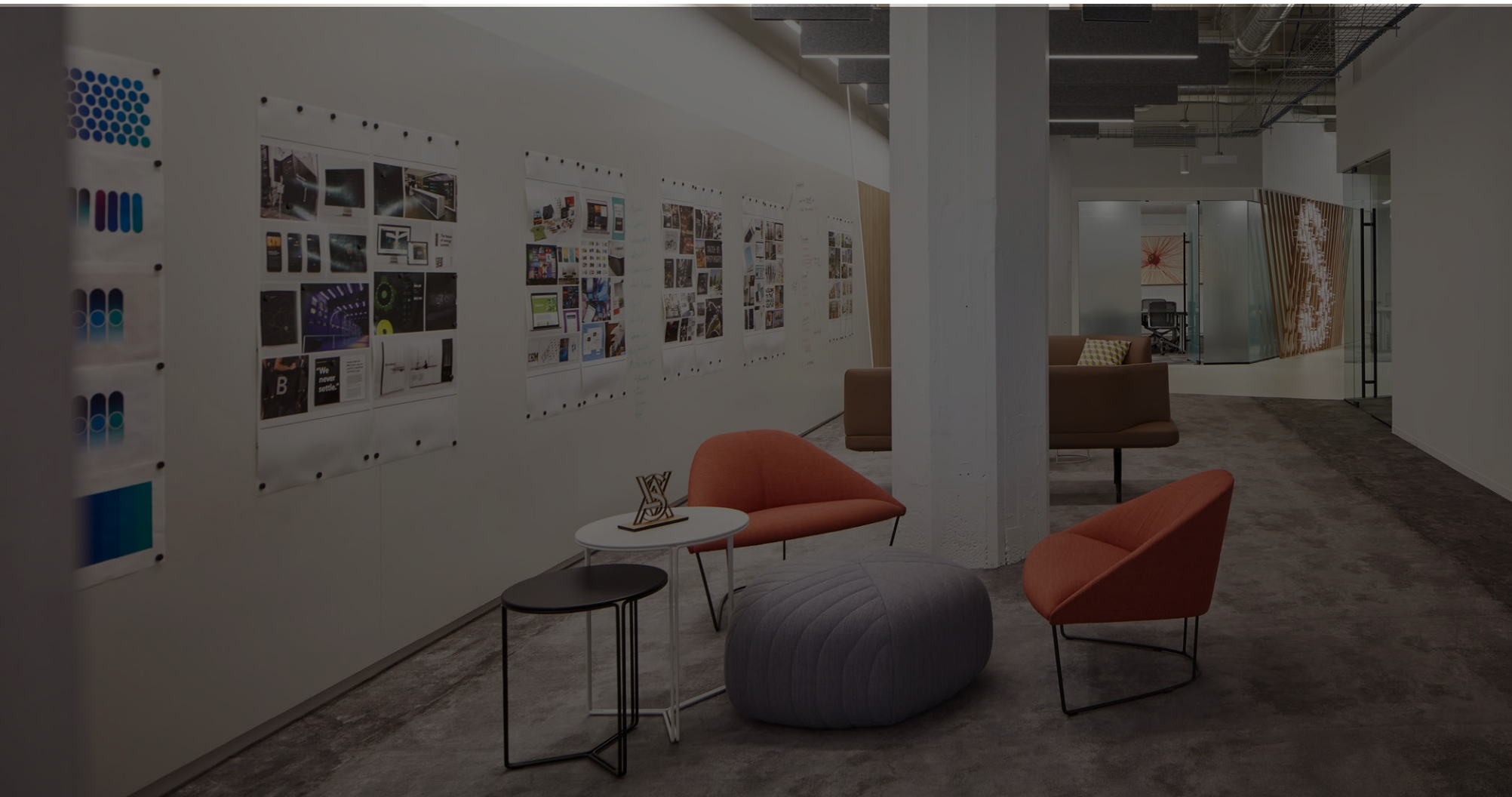
As the world confronted and engaged with the new landscape brought about by COVID-19, many professionals took stock of the new normal and planned for the future of their businesses and industries.

**In mid-March of 2020, the Urban Land Institute created a weekly newsletter to provide perspective on the daily changes that the commercial real estate, architecture, and construction industries were facing. Featuring the top professionals from all corners of the community, the series was a real-time reaction to the changes taking place around the world.**

Having steered OKW Architects through the last three decades, **Jon Talty** offered his views on the present and future of the local and global architecture industry. These are his collected articles.

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# Adjusting to distance

MARCH 23, 2020

Jon P. Talty  
CEO & Chairman  
OKW Architects

A term I never heard before the start of this month – social distancing – flies completely in the face of our profession. Architects are collaborators. Our work, more often than not, focuses on bringing people together, not distancing them from one another. It's about space and place making, whether it be a public square or a room for family to gather. Today, that thesis of connectivity is being challenged and reconsidered.

OKW practices architecture through a broad range of disciplines; from healthcare and retail, to housing, hospitality, and workplace. **If there is a single thread connecting nearly every client and opportunity, it is the want for an experience. We are constantly in search of something to entertain, surprise, and engage us.** Our healthcare work is changing the paradigm by viewing its spaces through hospitality and retail lenses. Our senior housing and workplace arguably push hospitality to the forefront of design considerations.

With the sudden onset of COVID-19, we are being told to distance ourselves from one another. The idea of "benching" in a workplace has given all of us reasons to reflect on the modern workplace and how we gather on a daily basis. Furthermore, the notion of a storefront retailer or healthcare provider serving as both a provider of goods or services as well as a community center (think Starbucks and NorthShore University HealthSystems) is now a questionable premise.

These fears will not and cannot be sustainable. We are social animals. We are simply learning a lesson to be smarter than we were before. Lessons are often learned the hard way, but in the end, we need one another and we learn from one another. It cannot be replicated through a screen and syllabus provided by some remote individual.

Perhaps the result will be better technology in the surfaces that make up our workstations, or the hardware on our doors. It might be more sophisticated air filtration systems weaving through our offices or improvements in the treatment of water through our infrastructure. Perhaps it is as fundamental as the way we greet one another, especially the aged or medically compromised. We are learning new lessons daily. We are resilient. From this tragic development will come better and best practices that we have not yet considered, and we will all be better off for adopting them.

## OPPORTUNITY

The healthcare industry will lead the way following this COVID-19 experience. We must foster and implement a new way of thinking to better respond to cataclysmic events, resulting in better preparedness for the next pandemic. Our hospitals and care facilities will have more flexibility to accommodate patient demand. Assessment of mass triage will evolve. It has already embraced the implementation of temporary structures and modified vehicular circulation to its problem-solving arsenal. Buildings that today sit empty or underutilized can be repositioned for flex space in cases of emergency.

At home and at the office, our technological infrastructure will continue to accommodate remote connectivity. Telecommunication companies and providers of remote communication services (Skype, Zoom, Google) will no doubt take the opportunity to upgrade and scale their infrastructure to account for future surges in demand. **But none of this will happen without the insight, determination, and creative thinking of design and technical professionals, the drivers of the built environment.**



900 N Michigan's **Aster Hall** food hall was envisioned and built for social engagement. Under social distancing protocols, spaces like this are sitting empty.

# Upending the office

MARCH 30, 2020

Jon P. Talty  
CEO & Chairman  
OKW Architects

After another week of coming to grips with our new reality, it is imperative that we think about how this global pandemic will change facets of our industry in both near and long term. After we've tackled how to improve the healthcare industry and improve how we serve our communities in times of crisis, we will move to a crucial sector in constant evolution: the workplace.

Social distancing has produced a new environment that millions of Americans must navigate daily. Professionals like myself who didn't grow up with remote work or expect to implement it in our lives, are now finding it to be not only necessary but effective and relatively fluid. **Technology has blessed us with the ability to connect in ways I never would have dreamt a decade ago. As we spend more time apart in the weeks ahead, we will improve our habits and continue with our dogged commitment to our passions and craft. After all, the show must go on.** However, once the dust settles, we will all return to our places of work with the reassurance that this paradigm is not only possible, it is useful and even enjoyable.

We will remember this attitude when we approach our next lease negotiation. Whether that happens next year or in the next decade, business owners will know that they are far more flexible than they were the last time they considered their space and technology needs. The once-novel strategy of "hoteling," implemented by a number of larger service and consulting industries, had left many smaller businesses scratching their heads, assuming that they weren't able to implement them because of their size, industry, or culture.



*VSA Partners' office (pictured above) in the historic Montgomery Ward building is a flexible and forward-thinking concept, allowing work from anywhere in the office. Today, they must also be able to work from anywhere in their home.*

We all know better now.

Social distancing is already accelerating the expectations that million of Americans have of their employers. When we couple this rapid change with business owners' duty to maximize their real estate, we will see the workplace become far more flexible than it was prior to the pandemic. We will rethink the desk, the workstation, and the office to better suit the employee. Remote work will be far more commonplace now that it has been tested and proven effective on a global scale. Productivity will rise and costs will go down, but more importantly, employees will be armed with the sophisticated tools in their homes so they can be better equipped for their roles as moms, dads, partners, and caretakers. **The very notion of going to the office will take on a completely new meaning.**

In the long term, building footprints will reflect this new paradigm. For business owners, it will translate to more money falling to the bottom line, more resources to invest in people and technologies, more nuanced real estate to meet the needs of the company, and a happier workforce. This is not to say that remote work will be the default expectation. We need one another, especially in collaborative industries where there's no substitute for in-person creative exploration and feedback.

But the very idea of what it means to work will be forever changed.

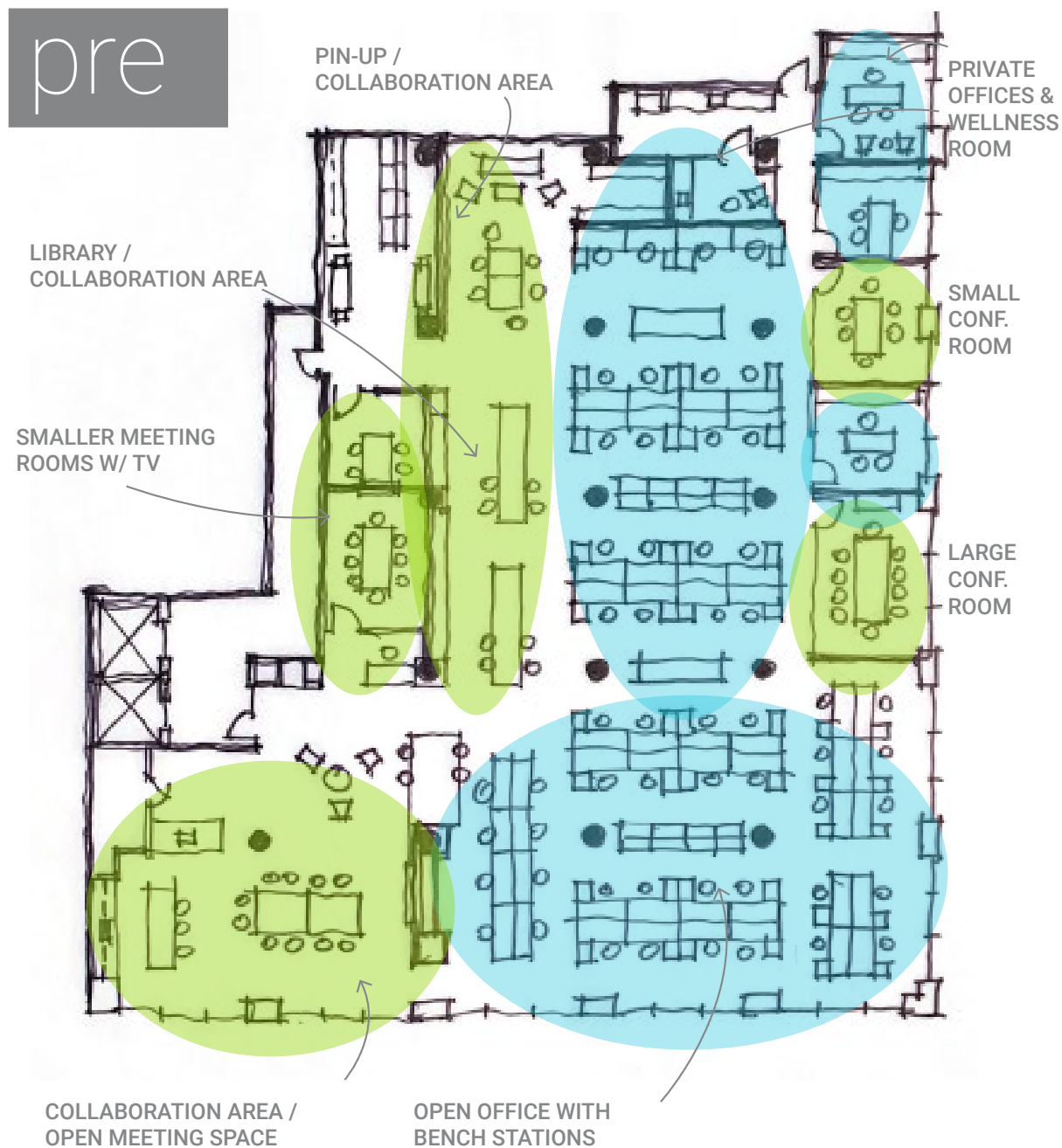
## OPPORTUNITY

In the reinvention of the workplace, the design profession has always led the charge. Together with landlords and brokers, we need to collectively imagine what our offices will need in the years ahead. As the world shifts away from work as furniture and more as a philosophy, we will reevaluate where that work will take place. We will still ask ourselves how much space we need, but there will be a greater focus on what makes us effective and fulfilled. In addition to providing a desk at the office, employers will plan ahead so that their staff can have the same connectivity at home, as some companies are doing now.

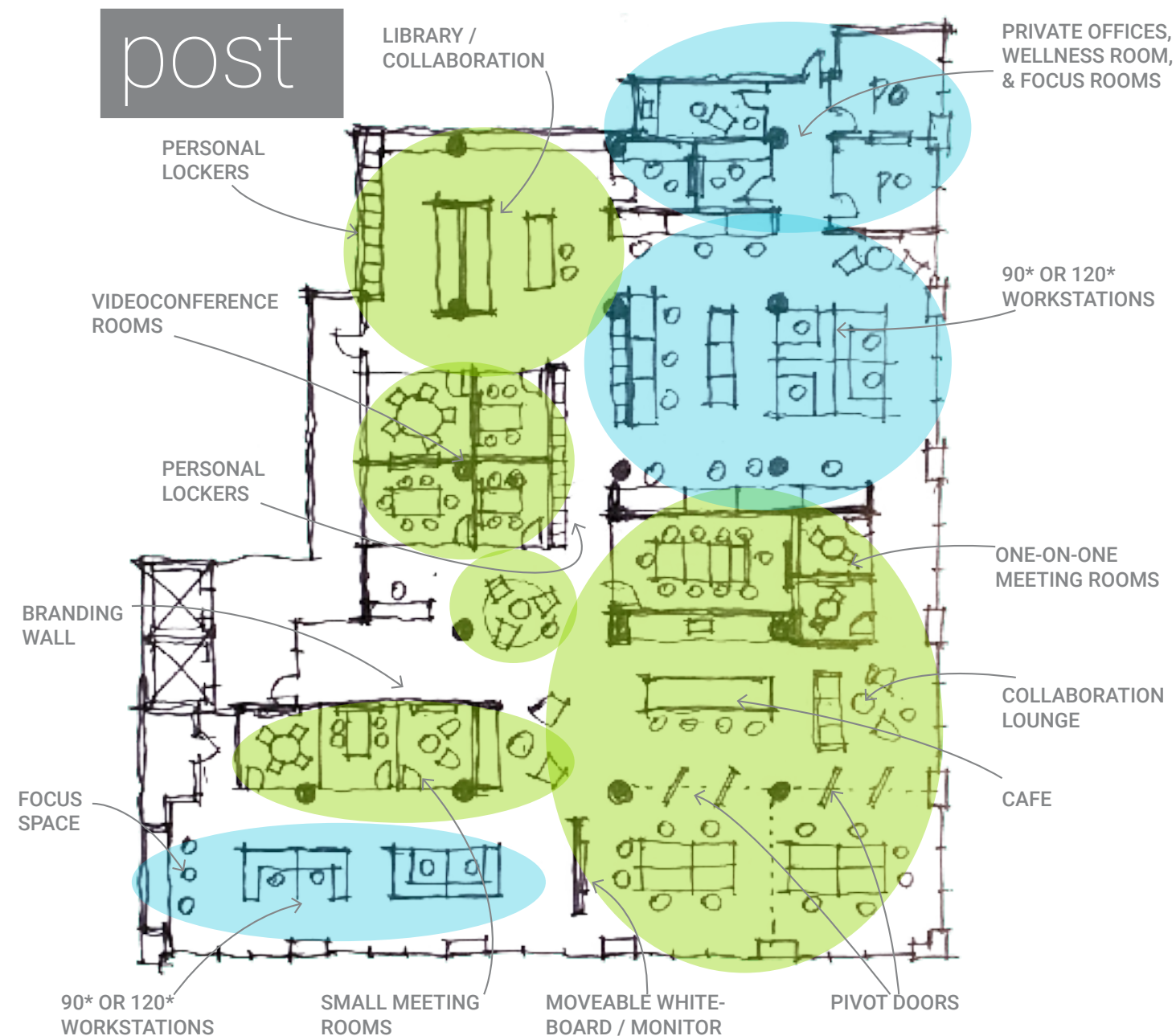
COVID-19 has made us reconsider most, but not all habits of the past. With the lessons learned from this pandemic, we will emerge smarter and more flexible to better take on the global marketplace.



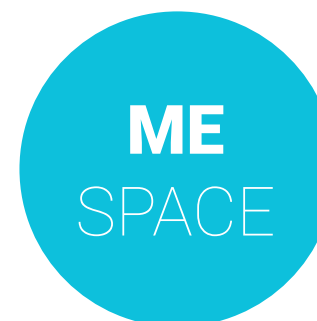
# How might the corporate office might respond to the COVID-19 pandemic?



A floor plan study using OKW Architects' West Loop office.



Workstations / Benches  
Private Offices  
Focus Rooms  
Wellness Areas



Meeting Rooms  
Collaboration Spaces  
Lounge Areas  
Cafe  
Library



**Yong In** IIDA is OKW's Design Director of Interiors. To help understand how the office might change in a post COVID-19 world, she looked at OKW's West Loop office and imagined how an office with a greater focus on virtual collaboration might look.

# COVID-19 vs. Density

APRIL 6, 2020

**Jon P. Talty**  
CEO & Chairman  
OKW Architects

As we watch cities across our nation battle the COVID-19 pandemic, the debate in kitchens and GoToMeetings alike has again begun: is density a good thing or bad thing? As a veteran of cocktail parties that have carefully skirted the topics of religion, politics, and building height, I have heard both sides of this debate.

Let's start with the pushback.

It's easy to see why China and Italy are more vulnerable to the spread of the virus. Their density promotes interaction and provides a template for contagion. In both of these countries, extended families live very close to each other and regularly interact. In Italy, this has resulted in a disproportionately high death toll for its elderly population. Across the Atlantic, New York City has been seeing an alarming spike in cases, not entirely due to its teeming concentration of people.

My hope is that here in the United States, we do not look at the Big Apple as the poster child for urban density and determine that we need to spread out. **Our cities need connectivity and compactness to be their best, both in terms of providing its residents access to resources and bringing them together as a community.** Density also provides us with choice: of neighborhoods, restaurants, and businesses as well as healthcare and education. If one option does not meet our needs, perhaps another will. Density is walkability, engagement, and identity.

In a way, density can be liberating. If everything you need to live a full life is within walking distance or a short transit trip, a city can give every resident, regardless of age, the agency to make key decisions about how to lead their lives.

At a time when our nation is as bifurcated as it is, we need to come together, literally. Although we are being asked to flatten the curve, now is not the time to flatten the landscape out of anxiety. We need density to support an ever-changing Main Street, to offer housing to both affordable and aging marketplaces, to support new businesses and initiatives, and bolster the communities that will help us through this and the next crisis.



I have had several conversations in recent months about the evolution of Chicago's skyline, more than once hearing someone wish that it still looked like it did decades ago. I respectfully disagree. **The change we have seen to our city is not only beautiful but necessary. That same change needs to redound to the communities across Chicagoland and the cities that connect us across the US. We cannot let the potential transmission of a virus hamper responsible evolution.** To do so would mean separating us from each other and everything that makes us human.

We need to remind ourselves what that means. It is time with our neighbors, the sounds of kids in the streets, participating in the monthly music festival or block party, running along the lakefront, and finding strength in numbers. Chicago, New York and Los Angeles, cities of neighborhoods, will experience very different summers for sure. But once the dust settles, I hope our recovery reminds us that we long for connection and that we are stronger together than apart.



# A new building typology

APRIL 13, 2020

Jon P. Talty  
CEO & Chairman  
OKW Architects

As we enter week four of this now familiar environment where we shelter in place and work from home, this isolated architect continues to seek balance, connectivity and answers. The questions are familiar: when will it end, will it ever end, and what will our world be like when we finally return to normal?

It helps to look to the past for perspective. I grew up in suburban Chicago a few blocks from the Hinsdale TB Sanitarium (that's tuberculosis for ULI's young readers). I always steered clear of the buildings and the mystery of their function, but would spend a lot of time in the vast, open spaces that surrounded the facility with my buddies, hitting golf balls, playing baseball, and being a kid. Today tuberculosis is a curable and preventable disease in the US, but in 2017 alone, it was globally responsible for over 1.5M deaths. It is a highly contagious, indiscriminate killer that attacks the lungs and slowly suffocates the infirmed, often disproportionately affecting the urban poor and those without adequate access to healthcare.

Seen in this light, I can't help but draw comparisons to COVID-19.

As we continue to learn about the novel coronavirus and seek a cure, I think of that sanitarium and its purpose, **not as a place to die, but as a refuge for healing**. Given the reality of its rapid spread, we are in dire need of additional facilities to house those undergoing treatment and recovering from the virus. I look at our real estate landscape and the noble efforts of friends like John Rutledge of Oxford Capital, who offered top-tier hotels to the City of Chicago to use in the battle against this disease. We've seen the re-purposing of McCormick Place, college dormitories, and parking garages as field hospitals and read about United Center transforming into a logistics hub for food and medical supplies.

From all of this, I wonder if a new building typology can emerge from this horrible experience.

What if we designed and built structures whose sole purpose is to house contagion? Think of a wellness center on an institutional scale: a safe, human-centric environment that is specifically designed to isolate people and restore their health. This would be different from a hospital in that it would serve one sole purpose in a holistic and nurturing environment.



We have been told that COVID-19 will never be eliminated. It will reoccur, perhaps seasonally, with the hope that a vaccine will soon be discovered allowing future patients the opportunity to survive the ordeal. The idea of a place for that to happen is not that farfetched. Much like the sanitarium I knew as a child, it would offer open space, fresh air, and a pre-engineered built environment to combat the contagious nature of the disease, allowing for patients to convalesce. Medical professionals who work in such a place could be better prepared to protect themselves from contagion.

The building's infrastructure could be designed to allow for air to be exchanged and scrubbed, keeping inhabitants as healthy as possible. Architects could design it to allow for some degree of programmatic flexibility in case of extreme circumstances. If specific facilities like these existed, we wouldn't need to depend on the ingenuity of the private sector and we could leave businesses like the Hotel Felix and McCormick Place to function as they were intended.

I recognize that this might be a tough sell for most people. There's a reason I kept my distance from the Hinsdale Sanitarium as a kid, and I imagine many residents would voice their objection to the construction of a contagion facility in their neighborhood today.

But by the time an idea like this comes to life, we will all have the collective memory of what it was like to live like hermits for months on end, and perhaps we would realize that **this new structure is not only good for those who need it, it could improve the long-term health of our communities.**



*This type of contagion center can be removed from the city without feeling isolated, as this rendering of an outdoor space shows.*

# How do we re-Main?

APRIL 20, 2020

Jon P. Talty  
CEO & Chairman  
OKW Architects

Week five brings both guarded optimism and a flurry of questions regarding the lingering pandemic. The curve is flattening as we continue to shelter in place, but with each passing day, new thoughts emerge as to what Post-COVID life will bring with it. There has been much debate about how the office experience will change in this new paradigm, but we need to also focus on another crucial space in daily life: what will Main Street look like in the weeks, months and years ahead?

When we are officially permitted to leave our homes and re-engage with our communities, I anticipate that people will return to the real world with one of two dispositions: those who will immediately seek connections (I fall into that category) and those who will choose to continue to distance themselves from one another for fear of continued contagion. If those of us who are eager to see each other again have our say, perhaps we can return to life as we knew it.

But if the habits we've developed over the last five weeks become more deeply ingrained in our lives, then **we will have to re-think the basic expectations of how businesses operate.** How will this change towns in which we live? How will goods and services be provided in our new world order? What happens to our retail spaces, financial institutions, our beloved coffee shops and restaurants?



If one of the primary concerns of this post-COVID future is containment of contagion, there are many challenges that retail will face everywhere, but especially in smaller towns and neighborhoods. I live in a community that for years has struggled with how to activate its downtown. For a long time, that desire for retail and restaurant options harkened back to yesteryear when people's options were limited and the desire to "shop local" was not just a hashtag or a seasonal challenge. Having an active downtown also meant a boon to local infrastructure in the form of supportive tax revenue.

What drives healthy retail? Ease of access, unique and relevant buying options, adequate and convenient parking, attractive streetscapes and local branding that support a pride of place and a willingness for people to gather and explore. It goes far beyond nostalgia and into the desire to be a part of a community that helps each other out, especially in times of crisis. But how does this landscape change in a future where social distancing isn't a response to a crisis but instead a staple of daily life?

Will the desire for parking in front of a business be supplanted by curbside pickups and drop-offs? Will wide sidewalks once envisioned for landscape/hardscape, summer sidewalk sales, and "al fresco" dining now be designed with lanes for traffic flow and separation of passersby? Will alleyways previously used for utility service access and the disposal of trash be repurposed as drive-thrus for retailers and restaurants alike? Will certain streets be closed to allow for generous pedestrian movement versus use by automobiles? Will healthcare providers become mainstay tenants of Main Street?

While some of these changes might be feasible in suburban environments, how would this impact 26th Street in Little Village, North Michigan Avenue, Devon Avenue, and Lincoln Square? **We are a city defined by the very unique and vibrant character of our neighborhoods.** What will they become and how will they be used by those who live there?

Many questions remain, but one thing is certain. The lens through which we view and activate the town or neighborhood where we live will be forever altered.

Opposite: Lake Forest's historic **Market Square**, which OKW elevated into a retail and office center for today's tenants.



# Blueprints for the future

APRIL 27, 2020

**Jon P. Talty**  
CEO & Chairman  
OKW Architects

This exercise in reflection and strategic prediction has been cathartic as I try to navigate how COVID-19 has profoundly affected not only my own life, but the state of my office and profession. Having worked in the industry for 35 years, I know that architects get hit especially hard during profound social and economic disruption. I remember an article in the New York Times published during the Great Recession that said that anyone looking for an architect could best find one by hailing a cab.

Given how susceptible the profession is to the vicissitudes of global events, some might say it's not for the faint of heart. It is however, best suited for those whose passions motivate them to make a difference in our built environment. The past few months have reminded me of this and reinforced the notion, especially in the wake of a global upending, that design matters.

Thought leaders in every corner of our rich and diverse design community are playing an outsized role in addressing how the built environment will change to mitigate the next pandemic. These include how we navigate streetscapes and transportation options; the progression through buildings that we call home or work; the unintended "collisions" with co-workers in conference rooms, corridors and even restrooms; and how we shop for goods and services.

As artists, designers, and engineers, we need to take the responsibility seriously and head on. Thanks to our commitment to improve lives through design, we will bring to bear the best of our craft to ensure that this new normal is more than a reaction,

but a fundamental improvement to the way we engage with the world.

In the short-term, the top minds and organizations have feverishly started authoring game plans for Day One ("Year Zero, AC" to give it a sci-fi spin), when we all return to our offices and the lives we once knew.



Tales from the **FRONT LINE**

It is still a guessing game as to what will truly happen and to what degree. Finding the best solutions will require smart, creative, and fluid thinking along with confident and collaborative voices. These are the same qualities we seek in our team at OKW Architects. Although we are all going through trying times in many ways, I am thankful and proud to find meaning in what we do and the influence we have.

The days ahead will challenge us in ways we have yet to understand. But speaking for architects in Chicago and around the world, bold changes are in our DNA, and we are ready for whatever the future may bring.

Jon P. Talty, AIA  
CEO & Chairman  
OKW Architects LLC

Opposite: **Jon Talty**, who started at OKW as its Director of Marketing, has worked with the company for over thirty years.