



Social Gathering While Social Distancing

How a holistic approach to planning can maximize retail centers, food courts, and spaces designed for gathering.

As retail and restaurants reopen to the public post-coronavirus, developers and property owners are faced with a new design challenge: How can we encourage social distancing in places that were designed for social gathering? Team AO recently partnered with Capstone Advisors to explore solutions that would optimize their business operations and the guest experience for their popular SoCal eatertainment destination, The Island at Carlsbad. **In this edition of AOpen, we will share some best practices and lessons learned, and how our expert team of retail, restaurant, hospitality, and landscape designers can help property owners maximize gathering spaces through thoughtful planning and design.**

To learn more about these ideas and how they can be tailored to your gathering space, contact Rob Budetti at rob@aoarchitects.com or call 714-639-9860.

1 Holistic Planning Approach

At face value, the solution sounds simple: move dining tables and seating six-feet apart from one another and problem solved. While this maneuver may help businesses comply with social distancing guidelines, it does not optimize gathering space, conditions, or operations. Instead AO employs a holistic approach to re-planning, taking into account the entire property, circulation, operations, signage, landscape, design, and guest experience. We found that this method results in greater customer capacity and a better guest experience that will attract visitors to safely gather and return again and again. Utilizing this strategy for the Island at Carlsbad resulted in a space plan with only 20% less capacity than pre-coronavirus, a number much smaller than some businesses reporting 50% or even 75% less capacity as a result of social distancing.

2 Reallocating Existing Resources

Optimizing gathering spaces post-COVID-19 doesn't have to be a costly exercise. Our team is able to deliver real value by reallocating existing resources and developing creative, low-cost solutions. For the Island at Carlsbad, we reorganized the layout of existing tables and chairs, taking advantage of spaces that were previously not assigned for dining. Permanent furniture that could not be moved became a backdrop for potted plants, artwork, or signage that enhances the center's brand.

3 Planting With Purpose

Creative and thoughtful landscaping is a valuable tool in designing warm and welcoming gathering spaces in our new era of social distancing. Designed well, landscaping can be a natural device for circulating pedestrian traffic and creating discreet social distancing barriers. Landscape also provides moments of relief, reflection, and sensory stimulation. For the Island at Carlsbad, AO's Landscape studio studied ways to delineate seating and walking areas by integrating cues into the hardscape, delivering a seamless solution that feels like a part of the center.

4 Highly Visible Signage

As part of the holistic approach to planning, Team AO assists our clients in building a visible and thoughtful signage program that compliments both pedestrian and vehicular circulation. Communicating with customers is key in order to instill consumer confidence, letting the public know that gathering spaces are safe, clean, and open for business.

5 Team Collaboration

The holistic approach is not just reserved for planning and design, but employed in our collaboration with the clients' entire team. AO coordinates with members of the development and operations teams to ensure that maximum value is delivered and the best solutions are implemented. Working with Capstone, AO engaged various departments and stakeholders, from directing maintenance teams on how to mark locations for optimal table set-up each morning, to coordinating with restaurant tenants to allocate outdoor patios for alcohol service that adhere to regulations and social distancing guidelines.