

RETURNING





to

OFFICES

AND SOMETHING ELSE

The relevance of workspaces now seems linked to their being part of mixed-use developments.

BY JOHN CAULFIELD, SENIOR EDITOR

Uptown Station is a massive mixed-use building in Oakland, Calif., that houses offices, retail, restaurants, a rooftop park, and parking. A former department store that was condemned after an earthquake in 1989, this building was given a second life via a top-to-bottom renovation and expansion that began in 2016 and was completed four years later.

The vision for the 800,000-sf Uptown Station includes a large interior public area where the building's 4,000 workers and other visitors can congregate. But that public space has yet to be fully activated because of the COVID-19 virus and its lingering impact on people returning to workplaces, according to Tom Pflueger, a Senior Associate with MBH (AOR), the design architect on this project. COVID has also postponed the installation of a portal in the build-

ing that opens onto an adjacent train station. "It's been approved, but just hasn't happened yet," says Pflueger.

The pandemic's fingerprints are still detectable on office and mixed-use projects across the country. In Bristol, Tenn., the *Bristol Herald Courier* reported that developer A.G. Commercial has pushed back the completion date of The Seven14—an 85,000-sf building with 116 residential apartments on two of its three floors plus 28,000 sf of customizable office space and ground-floor retail—to August 2024, from last January, because of supply-chain and labor issues that, it's reasonable to assume, are at least partly COVID related.

Also well documented is how the pandemic has caused developers and owners to reconsider the "why" of office space when more people are working remotely at least some of the week.

In January 2021, the accounting and tax advisory



The COVID-19 pandemic has delayed the complete activation of a massive public space, and its portal to mass transit, within Uptown Station in Oakland, whose office spaces eschew, for the most part, private enclosures. The Building Team on this redevelopment included MBH (AOR), SHoP Architects (envelope design), Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates (envelope AOR), Luk and Associates (CE), Murphy Burr Curry (SE), Novo Construction (office TI construction), Vance Brown (core and shell construction), Salter (acoustical engineering), and Einwiller Kuehl (landscape architect and design).



WAKEFIELD BEASLEY + ASSOCIATES



Wakefield, Beasley + Associates' largest practice is mixed use. Among its notable projects under construction is Rock Row, that integrates the quarry at Westbrook, Maine, into the site plan that will include 400,000 sf of office space and 750 residential units. Waterstone Properties Group is the developer.

firm Green Hasson Janks (GHJ) moved from its headquarters offices in West Los Angeles, where it had been for 20 years, into its new headquarters in downtown Los Angeles' financial district, 18,000 sf at the top floor of the mixed-use high-rise known as The Bloc. Prior to the move, only 52 of GHJ's 160 employees had been coming into the office on an average day. The design firm HLW designed and renovated GHJ's new digs with a variety of workspaces that includes unassigned bookable offices. There is also a mix of open lounge and workspaces adjacent to enclosed meeting rooms, including an area dubbed The Village, where employees can socialize.

Pflueger says that offices at Uptown Station have "very limited enclosed areas," and more open spaces for collaboration. "We're no longer trying to maximize the workplace for density," he explains.

Even before the pandemic, and the so-called Great Resignation that some interpreted as a signal of widespread worker dissatisfaction, companies had been rethinking the purposes of offices for a while. One example is Essex Crossing, a nine-building complex on New York City's Lower East Side, which CetraRuddy and Handel Architects designed pre-COVID. The campus includes two buildings with

175,000 sf of office space each. One of those buildings, 155 Delancey, is mixed-use with 35,000 sf of retail and 83 residential condos, says Ben Baccash, Vice President of Development for Taconic Partners, Essex Crossing's developer.

Essex Crossing offers convenient transit options to Brooklyn and Manhattan neighborhoods, and access to dozens of food vendors at the Market Line bazaar. "It's important to note the proximity of art galleries, restaurants, and metro access as extensions of Essex Crossing's amenities experience," says Baccash.

Each of the office buildings has outdoor work areas. Their 200x200-foot floor plates allow for design flexibility. And contrary to conventional wisdom but as a safety standard, Essex Crossing offers a "boutique office experience" whose amenities include private elevators and advanced HVAC and filtration systems.

A SENSE OF COMFORT AND BELONGING

Janet Pogue McLaurin, Gensler's Global Workplace Research Leader, recently came up with a checklist for employers as return-to-work picks up. It revolves around rethinking the role of the workplace and its amenities, optimizing collaboration and technology,



COURTESY OF HLW



The accounting firm GHJ's new 18,000-sf headquarters in downtown Los Angeles was designed with the acknowledgment that a portion of its employees would be working from home on any given day. The office space includes an area dubbed The Village, where workers can socialize. The Building Team included HLW (architect and design), CM Partners Group (PM), Howard Building Contractor (GC), WM Group (MEP), Western Office (furniture), and Spark Studio (lighting)

and regularly retesting the chosen workplace strategy. Dave Madson, Principal and Director of Workplace for the Boston-based design firm CBT, recommends that office design start with defining the “why” of in-office work, and then designing with an eye toward reducing employee stress through changes in lighting, color, and other environmental elements.

Clients also want spaces “that promote culture and a sense of belonging,” says Maren Reepmeyer, AIA, LEED AP, CBT’s Director of Adaptive Reuse and Associate Principal. So it’s no longer a surprise to see workstations in cafeterias and conference rooms.

As the transformation of the workplace moves into its post-pandemic phase, the changes taking place are “dramatic” and “amorphic, with not as much order” in office design, observes Mark Adams, SmithGroup’s National Workplace Practice Director. These changes already have elevated the relative importance of operational systems, biophilia, and environmental quality. “These are regenerative workplaces,” says Adams, “that allow workers to move from place to place comfortably during the day.”

Adams is seeing more of a hospitality feel in newer office design. He points to law offices of Levin & Perconti in Chicago “where the first thing you see when you walk in is a café-bar.”

Younger workers in general crave opportunities to socialize, as “purposeful work gets done more in collaboration,” says Adams, which is also why he also thinks technology is vital for making offices relevant and commodious once again.

Indeed, must-haves in offices should include smaller rooms for video/virtual calls, energy-efficient lighting and controls, more common spaces

that facilitate messaging, and one-person “focus rooms,” says Michelle Olsen, Senior Interior Designer for Eppstein Uhen Architects’ (EUA) workplace studio in Milwaukee.

One of EUA’s recent design projects is the 152,000-sf Landmark Credit Union headquarters building in Brookfield, Wis., which was completed in June 2021. (CG Schmidt was that project’s contractor.) Landmark sees the headquarters as central to its growth strategy to attract and retain new talent. So the design homed in on enhancing the employee experience: there’s a work café, a fitness center, training rooms, walking paths, a patio overlooking a retention pond, and a lobby that’s adaptable for public functions. Olsen adds that the design supports employee well-being with access to daylight and breakrooms. The project was also site-planned for future expansion.

For the restoration of iconic Willis Tower in Chicago, which was completed in April 2021 and impacted 418,064 sf, the design team took a human-centric approach that considered how the building would impact and add value to the daily routine of its tenants and the community. That approach included the addition of Catalog, a five-story hub at the base of the tower for dining, entertainment, retail, as well as a publicly accessible terrace. The tower also has two amenity floors with a café, bar, and 30,000-sf fitness center. The team—which included Gensler (executive architect, interior design, signage, wayfinding), SkB Architects (exterior, façade design), Thornton Tomasetti (SE), OLIN (landscape), and Turner/Clayco (CM)—engaged the streetscape to create a localized atmosphere. EQ Office is the owner and manager of Willis Tower.

MIX AND MATCH

The consensus among the AEC and development firms contacted for this article is that office, as a building type, becomes a more-valuable asset when it’s a mixed-use component. That’s especially true when, as CBT’s Reepmeyer has seen, offices are combined with much-in-demand typologies like life sciences.

In March, Brand Atlantic Real Estate Partners, Wheelock Street Capital, and B+H Architects revealed their plans for a new mixed-use development in West Palm Beach, Fla., that will be designed to meet the specific needs of tech and finance tenants that have been flocking to this market.

One of the drivers of this project was to incorporate a variety of components, such as hospitality, to lure these tenants, says Melanie Clarke, Architectural Designer and Senior Associate with B+H, which



MERLONE GEIER PARTNERS (AERIAL); AO (STREET LEVEL)



AO is the Executive Architect for the residential/mixed-use portion of Village at Laguna Hills, the redevelopment of a shopping mall on 68 acres in southern California, whose proposed 3 million sf will include offices (for which Gensler is the designer), apartments, a hotel, and retail. Its buildout could take 15 years.

designed the project in partnership with Spina O'Rourke + Partners.

The project consists of two buildings: 111 Olive, a former department store that had previously been converted to 27,000 sf of office space and 10,000 sf of ground-floor retail, so its latest renovation is more cosmetic, says Clarke. Adjacent to this building was a vacant parking lot that will be transformed into 300 Banyan, a 12-story, 115,000-sf glass tower housing Class A office spaces, with an amenity floor that includes an indoor-outdoor gym (with its own entrance), and private outdoor terraces. There will also be a parking garage above 8,000 sf of ground-floor retail, lobby, and food and beverage options.

The two buildings will be connected by a public walkway that, according to B+H, is set up to be activated with food and beverage or retail popups, and cultural programming that might reinforce West Palm's emergence as an arts and entertainment center. 111 Olive is scheduled for delivery in the fourth quarter of 2022; 300 Banyan a year later.

In southern California, the developer Merlone Geier Partners is redeveloping what had been a



shopping mall on 67.8 acres into the Village at Laguna Hills, a 2.94-million-sf mixed-use community. This project has been in the works since 2015, and its latest proposal, which the city approved in April 2021, calls for up to 1,500 apartments in five buildings, 250,000 sf of "curated" retail, 465,000 sf of Class A office space in four buildings (plus an outdoor workplace campus), a five-story 150-key hotel, and a 2.6-acre outdoor park. There will also be two parking structures, 11 acres of landscaping, 6.5 miles of sidewalks and walkways, and a 50,000-sf, 1,200-seat cineplex. The buildout of this project could take up to 15 years to complete.

Ioanna Magiati, a Principal with AO, which is the executive architect on the residential/mixed-use portion of the Village at Laguna Hills,



LAWRENCE ANDERSON



The 632,000-sf 333 Dexter is a mixed-use office building in Seattle’s South Lake Union neighborhood. Designed by The Miller Hull Partnership and completed a few years ago, the two-tower project’s goal has been to reconnect a city that has been deeply divided by highway and tunnel infrastructure. It creates a welcoming urban environment with large setbacks, street furniture, open plaza, and a ground plane that is a functioning landscape. 333 Dexter is also part of Miller Hull’s Emission Zero initiative to offset greenhouse gases released up to the point of occupancy. (Its emission offset for this project was 10,008 tCO₂e, with offsets funding the Dempsey Ridge Wind Energy Farm project.) The rest of the Building Team included Kilroy Realty (client), Swinerton (GC), Coughlin Porter Lundeen (CE), Magnusson Klemencic Associates (SE), Glumac (conceptual design engineer), Hewitt (Landscape Architect), Morrison Hershfield (envelope), Birkenstock Lighting Design (lighting), and SkB Architects (interiors).



recalls the original plan was more modest until big anchors like Macy’s and JC Penney closed their stores in the mall, and caused the developer to A.) scale back on the redevelopment’s retail, and B.) use the entire property to bring in other mixed-use elements.

Magiati places this project within the larger urbanization trend. In that context, mixed-use residential and retail “need to create a story” that buttresses the revitalization of the surrounding community, she says.

PROGRAMMING TAKES PRECEDENCE

As mixed-use, as a building category, has evolved with more of a lifestyle/entertainment emphasis, a big part of any mixed-use development’s success is its programming, asserts Lamar Wakefield, CEO of Georgia-based Wakefield, Beasley + Associates, a Nelson company for which mixed-use is its largest

practice. The firm’s signature project—the 106-acre Avalon, which was completed in 2017—conducts up to 520 programmed events annually.

When it opened, Avalon was positioned as the Southeast’s first “Experience Center,” and it still serves as a touchstone for Wakefield Beasley’s subsequent work, which more recently includes the master planning for a 450-acre mixed-use project in Georgia’s Forsyth County being developed by homebuilding giants Empire Communities and Toll Brothers. It will include 2,400 residential units, 200,000 sf of commercial space, and a potential future school.

Wakefield Beasley is also the land planner for Rock Row, a \$600 million, 110-acre mixed-use redevelopment under construction in Westbrook, Maine, whose 2 million sf will include 400,000 sf of office space, 200,000 sf for medical leasing, 300,000 sf for



COURTESY SMITHGROUP

SmithGroup has been seeing an evolution of office mixed use toward an emphasis on lifestyle and entertainment. One example is the Chicago law office of Levin & Perconti, whose lobby area resembles a hotel's lounge-bar.

retail, a 20,000-sf food hall, 20-plus dining choices, 750 residential units, an innovation center, and the state's largest convention center. An 80,000-sf supermarket has already opened, and the medical research campus is scheduled to open next year.

Rock Row expects to host more than 200 shows and events annually, and is planning a permanent, four-season performance venue that will replace the temporary 8,200-seat Maine Savings Pavilion that Rock Row's developer Waterstone Properties Group closed last September once the redevelopment's construction shifted into higher gear.

Other mixed-use trends that Wakefield cites center on "more": more food and beverage, more roof decks, and more parking structures whose designs are adaptable if ride sharing leads to reducing personal car use.

ZONING CAN LIMIT THE MIX

In a blog posted on March 17, 2022, Dean Strombom, FAIA, a Principal with Gensler's office in Houston, advocates for design that optimizes the

"human experience" by prioritizing wellness and a balanced lifestyle. He infers in that blog that creating more mixed-use destinations would be the surest course toward achieving that goal.

Gensler has been working with Brookfield Properties for several years on the redevelopment of Houston Center, a 1970s-era complex with 4.2 million sf over 9.2 acres, which was conceived as a city-within-a-city, although that never panned out as planned.

Phase 1 of this redevelopment, which was completed in 2020, made the center's 170,000-sf podium level more inviting by leveraging the nearby 12-acre Discovery Green park and convention center, and creating a large plaza for the five buildings in this grouping that Brookfield owns. Gensler's role included renovating the public space and tenant storefronts on the first and second floors, as well as the lower-level windows and shell. There's also a design option for a fourth-floor deck.

Phase 2, which is under construction, reimagines the two-level 200,000-sf mall known as

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‘The definition of mixed use is now “more international” in that “everything is in the same building.”’

— DAVID NICHOLSON, SBLM ARCHITECTS

The Highlight—“which is the only retail left downtown,” contends Strombom—by the addition of food and beverage and entertainment options that are active after work hours. (Interestingly, one of the tenants being kept on during this transformation is Kelsey Seybolt, a healthcare clinic.) There’s office

space above this retail, as well as in two of Houston Center’s towers connected by a skywalk. (D.E. Harvey was the GC on both phases.)

Phase 3, says Strombom, will be a “major renovation” of 3 Houston Center. Gensler—which has been in Houston for half a century and recently moved its offices into 2 Houston Center—“is trying to create a new downtown vitality” with this project, Strombom explains.

SBLM Architects in New York has also worked on recent projects that combine office space with places for employees to “hang out” after work, says David Nicholson, a Principal with that firm. He sees

the definition of “mixed use” as now being “more international” in that “everything is in the same building.” The most common combination is office-retail, although SBLM has worked on projects recently that mix these components with residential, hospitality, and event spaces.

As the 25-million-sf Hudson Yards megacampus in New York has opened in phases over the last few years, it has left in its wake an awful lot of vacant space in other buildings. SBLM, says Nicholson, has been working with several of those buildings’ landlords to rethink, remodel, and convert that space. He wouldn’t say to what, but Nicholson did note that clients are ambivalent about just how radically they want to change their office spaces, and about what they want to spend.

Nicholson lamented that New York’s zoning and building codes “haven’t gone far enough to encourage mixed-use buildings,” the main issue being the amount of square footage allowable for each component. “They could be doing more to help [vacant office space] become something else,” he says.+

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