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## **Commercial Interior Designers are Driving Innovation for Workplace Safety, Health, and Equity During a Time of Pandemic and Civil Rights Activism**

**SAN FRANCISCO (Oct. 21, 2020)** – [IIDA Northern California](#), the professional association for the region’s commercial interior designers, is grappling with how today’s monumental issues affect our work and public spaces. The COVID-19 pandemic, racial justice and climate change have major implications for how to make commercial spaces safe, functionally efficient and aesthetically rich.

“At IIDA, we believe commercial interior design plays a key role in promoting the health, safety and welfare of the public. Design has the power to heal and bring people together,” said **Yoko Ishihara**, president of IIDA Northern California. “In respect to public health, racial equity and climate change, these are unprecedented times. As highly trained professionals, we’re responsible for pushing the value of design beyond our current understanding to make a positive transformation through innovation.”

Commercial interior designers are trained to identify and apply creative and technical design solutions to the interiors of commercial buildings – from offices and hospitals to restaurants and concert halls. Their goal is to understand the human experience within these spaces, and improve how people use them, all while keeping the public safe and healthy. Their work must conform to local and state codes which these professionals must understand and follow thoroughly to ensure compliance.

### **The advent of COVID: A new design challenge**

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented new challenges to commercial interior designers. They must now address how commercial building design can help mitigate the spread of infectious diseases and balance that with the economics of managing a business. Factors being reassessed include how to move people to and through workspaces; how to keep interior surfaces clean with minimal human touchpoints; air quality, filtration and freshness; and how to balance health-driven spatial requirements with ambience and experience in hospitality spaces such as hotels, restaurants or entertainment venues.

### **Designing for safety and health**

Health and wellness decisions are supported by material choices, physical design and aesthetics. Considerations include lighting, ventilation, water filtration and climate control. The pandemic adds per-person space allocation, navigation patterns and shared touchable surfaces to this list. Strictly clinical considerations must be translated for the varied usages of commercial spaces.

“People visit restaurants for cultural experiences and to be part of a community,” says **Ishihara**, who also is a principal at Wilson Ishihara in San Francisco. “The space has to feel hospitable – not hospital-like. Within the context of a pandemic, we must focus on maximizing diner experiences – how it feels to sit at every table and adjust spaces so customers feel safe while the experiences are still meaningful and delightful. This will ensure that customers return and will safeguard the long-term health of the business.”

### **Designing for changing work patterns**

The pandemic has moved many to work from home and the very nature of work has shifted in likely enduring ways. According to researcher [Jennifer Magnolfi Astill](#), “The pandemic will mark a permanent change in our perception of workspace. New ways of working together will emerge. Innovation will first appear with digital work tools and later with physical space.”

With many companies delaying a return to their offices, Northern California commercial interior designers are already generating possible solutions for both short- and long-term needs of the new work dynamic. San Francisco-based design firm RMW modelled its [New Office Paradigm](#) on the assumption that shared workspace is vital for team collaboration and creativity, even while maintaining physical distancing and hygienic practices.

### **Designing for flexibility and sustainability**

Commercial interior designers are experts in understanding the required quality and durability of materials selected to meet the projected needs, resources and usage of the space. Flexibility is critical to address this rapid transformation of usage.

For a new shared laboratory facility that houses biotech start-ups actively researching COVID-related solutions, the design team at [MBH Architects](#) of Alameda, Calif. reworked large common spaces into seating areas that offer numerous options and are completely changeable. The designers’ deep relationship with furnishings vendors yielded the “energizing” colors the client sought, while also meeting the health needs requiring non-porous, completely cleanable surfaces.

Promoting a healthy environment and mitigating the impact of climate change are growing worldwide concerns. Regulations, clients and the public are demanding that commercial buildings be built using environmentally sensitive materials and practices, and that buildings function in a sustainable way. With some of the strictest and most progressive building codes in the nation, Northern California’s commercial interior designers are increasingly applying [LEED certification](#) and [WELL building standards](#) to create “healthy buildings” for all.

### **Designing for equitable human experience**

Good interior design has the power to positively influence people. It helps both buildings and their occupants function more efficiently, sustainably and safely. This diverse population includes different ages, physical and intellectual capabilities, cultural backgrounds and preferences.

CEO of IIDA’s national organization, [Cheryl Durst](#), recently wrote, “Confronting racism, injustice and a need for equity is critical to moving forward....We know that design is but one small part of that larger equation - so why not start with the change we can most immediately affect?”

IIDA Northern California recently launched a major initiative, [Dignity, Equity and Justice by Design](#). This program includes conversations, community outreach and mentorship programs. It is designed to galvanize action among IIDA members that can lead to the change that Durst and Ishihara envision.

### **About IIDA**

Founded in 1994, the International Interior Design Association (IIDA) of Northern California is a not-for-profit philanthropic organization that represents more than 900 commercial interior designers from Silicon Valley to Sacramento, San Francisco to Fresno. Like that of its national organization, IIDA NorCal’s mission is to support and promote the profession through education, sharing knowledge and best practices, advocacy and research. The work of commercial interior designers touches the health, safety and well-being of millions of people every day. For more information, please visit [www.iidanc.org](http://www.iidanc.org).

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