



The destination lobby in a post-COVID-19 world

Uncommon common spaces

BY ELIZABETH LOWREY | AUGUST 2020

Even before the coronavirus upended our world, most lobbies in commercial office buildings were predominantly security checkpoints, cavernous transit areas that people hurried through to get to the elevator banks. Elkus Manfredi Architects has been teaming with forward-thinking clients to transform their existing lobbies into destination “great rooms,” anterooms that serve as extensions of the tenant space and bring together building occupants, visitors, and the community. Adding programming to an existing echoing marble lobby with a formidable security desk, finding underutilized spaces to expand the lobby experience, and discovering ways to activate the lobby – these are some of the ways our designers have been redefining these underutilized lobby spaces to make destinations rather than merely areas to pass through.

These lobbies have been extraordinary agents of change. Each in its own way has become the “living room” for the population in its building and the surrounding neighborhood. Tenants large and small uniformly report that these destination spaces have delivered a competitive edge for building owners and enormous value to tenant companies as well as the community.

But then COVID-19 turned our world upside down.

Does COVID-19 mean the end of the destination office lobby?

At the time of this writing, people’s first reaction to that question is: Gathering anywhere in close proximity is history. They fear that lobbies are forever changed into even

more security-focused checkpoints for taking temperatures, allotting masks and gloves, and queuing for solo elevator rides.

We don't agree. We firmly believe that the powerful human need for community will prevail, and that gathering spaces will become an even more important tool for companies to provide the social energy and unexpected "collisions" that spark creativity, collaboration, and innovation.

In this moment, we all might be feeling deeply threatened by the pandemic. But not long from now there will be treatments and a vaccine to protect us from COVID-19. People rebound, and during the past months we've all learned that we are yearning for community. Yes, we have learned to work remotely. But people will come to the office for those things they can't get working from home: the connective creative energy that can only happen when people are together in the physical – not the virtual – world.

Because of the success of remote working, the workplace is not going to be the mandate it was pre-COVID-19.

Employees won't have to go into the office every day to sit alone at their desks for heads-down work. So, for companies to drive the collaborative innovation they need to thrive, they must draw their workers into the workplace. The office must become a magnet by offering the dynamic community that people can't get at home.

We believe that the destination lobby is a powerful tool to help companies make that happen.

The power of the destination lobby

Two of Elkus Manfredi's recent office-building lobbies illustrate the impact that welcoming communal spaces can have upon not only a company, but an entire neighborhood. Both are located in Kendall Square, a hotbed of institutional and entrepreneurial science in Cambridge, Massachusetts, that has been dubbed "the most innovative square mile on the planet." Home to some of the world's greatest scientific pioneers, Kendall Square is, right now, a place where vaccines and treatments for COVID-19 are being discovered.

The Draper atrium

Elkus Manfredi's reinvention of the headquarters of Draper, a world leader in science and tech R&D, demonstrates how a destination lobby designed to connect diverse



Above: The blue stairways and bridges wrapping the Draper atrium interior open out into wide seating areas to create additional collaborative areas above the ground floor. ©Robert Benson

Page one: A bright and inviting hub flooded with natural light and fresh air, this prototype destination office tower lobby offers occupants the choice to physically distance or engage as each person wishes, while blurring the lines between inside and outside with pivoting garage doors. ©Elkus Manfredi Architects

disciplines can become the heart of a company that helps to revolutionize its future.

While continuing its dedication to government work, including confidential national-security programs, Draper has increased its work for the private sector and its outreach to the public. This change required a new interdisciplinary environment for its Kendall Square headquarters. To forge this change, the headquarters – built in the '70s, siloed at every turn, and uninviting to the public – needed to change, too. Employees were working in isolation from each other. There were limited areas allowing for casual employee interaction, discouraging spontaneous connections across specialties.

Elkus Manfredi reimagined Draper's workplace around a

new atrium that encourages the interaction necessary for 21st-century discovery. Calling upon the tools of adaptive reuse, designers enclosed a wind-swept plaza to create a soaring 25,000-square-foot (2,323-sq.-m.) atrium rising the full height of the building. The atrium is divided into two parts by a glass wall that downplays the division. The public area includes a reception area, meeting space, and an amphitheater, where visitors learn about Draper's work. The multi-level "Draper-only" space behind the glass wall creates opportunities for interaction among formerly sequestered engineers and scientists with a cafeteria, coffee bar, and multiple informal seating options and meeting pods. Filled with sunlight and fresh air and dedicated to staff connection and the visiting public, the atrium is both symbol and stage for Draper's evolution.

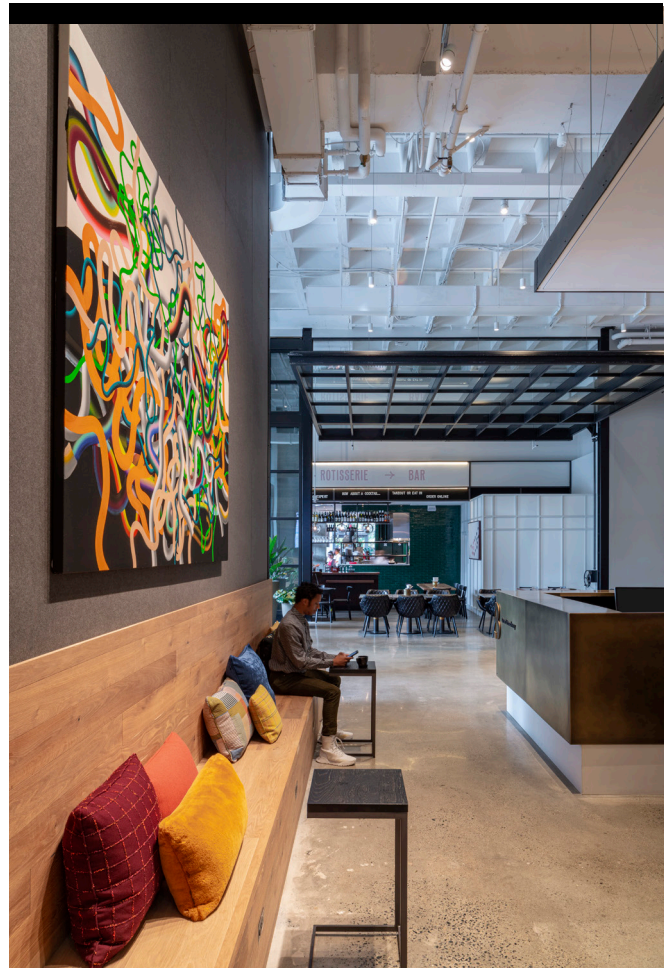
The One Broadway lobby

Repositioning the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's One Broadway office tower in Kendall Square is a critical component of MIT's Kendall Square Initiative, a plan to bring vibrancy and diversity to this extraordinary neighborhood. The building's lobby was a special focus.

Situated in the heart of this wildly innovative community near several world-class universities, the 4,500-square-foot (418-sq.-m.) lobby serves as a meeting place for scientists, engineers, and entrepreneurs to connect, collaborate, and recharge. The new destination lobby is a departure from traditional office-lobby design in both form and function. A warm and welcoming co-working space for all, the lobby is open to a ground-floor restaurant via a wall-size glass garage pivot door. Taking cues from hospitality design, the lobby contains a variety of intimate, collaborative seating options. Original works of art enliven the space. Designed for flexibility, the lobby can transition into an extension of the restaurant for large events and be an inviting workday destination for the neighborhood – perfect for the world's "most innovative square mile."

Designing destination lobby spaces in a post-COVID-19 world

As the working world emerges from the pandemic, new concerns about health and safety are top of mind. We believe that people's hyper-sensitivities to cleanliness and proximity will endure at some level long after the threat



With its wide variety of seating options, vibrant mix of materials, and arresting original artwork, the One Broadway lobby welcomes the public along with building tenants, their visitors, and restaurant customers. ©Adrian Wilson

of COVID-19 has passed. That means the destination lobby must be designed not only to accommodate those heightened sensitivities, but to be even more compelling, more inviting, more gracious than ever before to overcome residual fears about sharing physical space. The lobby must not only be a safe, healthy place – it must feel safe. Calling for less decoration and more architecture-based solutions, this challenge presents designers with the opportunity to create lobbies offering the benefits of community manifested as safe and healthful places for people to be.

Elkus Manfredi recently developed a prototype study (shown on page one) of a destination lobby in a high-rise office tower that illustrates the principles we believe address the new challenges posed by COVID-19 and its aftermath, and still offers all the community elements that empower

innovation. Marrying humanity and innovation, this dynamic new space is airy, inviting, interactive, and hi-tech. It incorporates new health and safety features, and gives occupants a sense of control and freedom of movement. Original interactive art is the new “decoration,” enlivening the space without clutter.

Major post-COVID-19 features of the prototype include:

Choice: This lobby offers both a highly social side and a quiet side, so that the degree of physical distancing is up to each person to decide. Mediating between the two areas and providing a flexible touchpoint, a reconfigurable 80-foot-long, seven-foot-wide (24m x 2m.) harvest table serves as a grounding signature piece for the building of 2,000 people while not forcing proximity.

Cleanability: All materials and finishes must be easily cleanable. More flat, anti-viral surfaces and less soft furniture that holds germs – these elements will be the new normal. Research is telling us that, counterintuitively, the virus does not last long on most organic materials. Honest and unpretentious, this lobby’s furniture is made of wood, which studies have shown has natural antimicrobial properties that eliminate close to 99 percent of all potential contaminants unlike plastic, which, even coming out of the dishwasher, continues to breed bacteria.

Natural light and fresh air: HVAC systems will be upgraded, exchanging air more frequently and using higher-grade filtration. Equally important will be access to daylight and

nature, either via outdoor areas or views. Filled with natural light and fresh air, this lobby features pivoting garage doors that blur the lines between inside and out.

Touch-free state: Life post-COVID-19 is going to be a touch-free experience, a factor that this lobby addresses with new innovative technology at lobby entry points, elevators, ID swipes, and everywhere people formerly touched something.

Security: Security is not going away but becoming increasingly hi-tech and discreet. New security factors such as health monitoring and queuing for elevators are incorporated as humanely, elegantly, and inconspicuously as possible.

The opportunity to create destination lobbies for office buildings is greater now than ever before and the need is more urgent. Rather than restricting people, as many fear will be the result of COVID-19, these spaces will function as welcoming places for both gathering and solitary enjoyment, enabling people to safely and confidently engage in the community that we all need.



*Elizabeth Lowrey,
IIDA, RDI, is a principal
at Elkus Manfredi
Architects.*

Published by CoreNet Global. Articles may not be re-printed without written permission from the Editor. For reprint permission, please contact Tim Venable at tvenable@corenetglobal.org.

CoreNet Global is an opinion leader in corporate real estate, workplace and infrastructure management. Enhance your knowledge with resources like research papers, exclusive member survey reports and presentations from top speakers on hot industry topics. Members of CoreNet Global benefit from a wealth of research knowledge and resources – find out more at www.corenetglobal.org.