

2020 Is The Tech Awakening CRE Has Been Waiting For

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The circumstances of the coronavirus pandemic have forced tech adoption at an unprecedented rate: The construction industry is implementing augmented and virtual reality, **robots and drones** to accommodate social distancing. An avalanche of urgent lease changes is prompting investment managers and corporate leaders to revisit the ways they process and standardize data. Large-scale office owners are utilizing cutting-edge tools to implement responsive space reconfigurations, **contact tracing** and space-age **HVAC technology** across their properties.

All these changes and new technologies might have been prompted by a need to adapt on the fly to what everyone hopes are temporary circumstances — but some of them have staying power. When the coronavirus is no more, commercial real estate will be left with a much higher-tech way of doing things.

“Traditionally, the real estate industry, especially commercial real estate, has been technology-averse,” **Grace Hill** Commercial Industry Principal **Perry Levine** told *Bisnow*. “COVID-19 changed the paradigm.”

Bisnow talked to companies across sectors about the new systems and tools they have implemented to ease the strife of the past six months — and what they will be keeping in place when the pandemic subsides.

Tech To Accommodate Quick Pivots And Remote Productivity

Levine has been on both sides of the desk in the investment business, and in his years of experience, he has seen the toolset evolve from printed spreadsheets to software as a service — but that change has been slow to come.

“Most real estate organizations never embraced remote work. It just wasn’t done,” he said. “You were in the office working or out in the field meeting vendors or tenants.”

When that was forced to change rapidly this spring, companies recognized the

value of a central repository for all things related to property and organizational processes.

“This pandemic proved that utilizing technology is the most efficient and effective way to continue to run real estate assets,” he said. “Unfortunately, because many organizations did not have pandemic policies in place, they were unprepared. They were missing the rules set for remote work. And for an industry that is all about documentation, this was a crippling blow.”

Grace Hill implemented a policy management software called PolicyPartner, which he said allowed clients to responsively produce pandemic-related work policies and procedures.

“They won’t go back to the old way when the new ways work so well.”

Broader adoption of data tools are also helping companies plan nimbly. **OSCRE** recently began providing the industry with access to a data toolset, the Industry Data Model, which brings together information from disparate sources such as **VTS** and **Yardi**, so data can be more easily aggregated, standardized and integrated for consistency across portfolios and industry benchmarks.

The open-access tool is not new, but according to a spokesperson for OSORE, adoption has been ticking upward, with more than 100 end user license agreements executed by nonmembers for free use of the IDM within a week in late August.

OSORE International CEO **Lisa Stanley** attributes the rush to the economic upset of the pandemic and the need to rapidly adapt.

“As the impact of COVID-19 became clear, many real estate leaders began scrambling to collect and interpret data that would help them make informed decisions more quickly,” Stanley told *Bisnow*. “When they realized that it can sometimes take weeks to collect and analyze often inconsistent data to assemble an accurate financial picture, it was a wake-up call.”

Tech To Monitor Assets And Amenities When People Aren’t Around

Chris Roy, director of creative design at **OTL**, a design-build water feature construction company, speculates maybe CRE’s slow adoption of tech is because CRE stakeholders are people-oriented by nature.

But as the pandemic rolls on, he said technology is becoming more ubiquitous where it wasn't before, and he doesn't see it going away any time soon.

“COVID-19 has most definitely accelerated the demand for and use of technologies to monitor and control commercial property amenities remotely,” he told *Bisnow*.

Many of OTL's water features use computer-controlled systems which, through the use of sensors and a data connection, allow the company to monitor installations, anticipate problems, and in some cases, address issues in real time.

“Other remote monitoring technology we use can issue automated alerts if there is a problem, or allow us to visually monitor a feature's operation through a webcam installed nearby,” he said. “Knowing whether an alert requires a site visit is particularly relevant when most people are observing social-distancing practices during the COVID-19 crisis.”

Mitsubishi and **Thyssenkrupp** both offer similar technologies for their elevators, which have been in **higher demand** due to the pandemic, in part to help automatically set load-weight parameters so cars don't get crowded.



Thyssenkrupp Head of Digital Services for North America **Jon Clarine** told *Bisnow* the company has rolled out what it calls Social Distancing Service in their MAX app: "When buildings drop off 80%-90% in traffic, we can reduce the elevator loading in concert with that so we can direct only four people per call," he said.

Via the platform, the app helps users monitor elevator capacity and adjust as needed based on building capacity and COVID safety requirements.

Tech To Make Buildings Safer — More Easily

Tech for building safety goes well beyond buildings and elevators. **Walter Marin**, founder and principal of **Marin Architects**, told *Bisnow* his firm's most urgent task has been to improve building air quality by using improved technology and filtration systems.

“You can't just sanitize people in order to make it a safe environment,” Marin said. “The air also needs to be clean and filtered regularly to create a more comfortable, pandemic-free environment.”

Marin cited [touchless technology](#) and smart tech. “Some of this technology was already in place for security measures, such as an ID scan or pushing a button in the lobby elevator to allow entrance on specific floors only,” he said. But with the pandemic, its use has crystallized and more buildings, new and old, are making the upgrade.

KBS Eastern Regional President [Marc DeLuca](#) said that among the large-scale office owners and operators, whose assets they manage, the company recently implemented the use of bacteria- and virus-killing [UV-light technology for HVAC systems](#). The investment and asset management firm also recently partnered with [Maptician](#), a cloud-based workplace management platform that uses data to help reconfigure office and community spaces to accommodate social distancing, giving tenants the ability to upload their floor plans, identify problem areas, and more easily strategize pandemic-conscious seating and other shared space issues.

According to DeLuca, KBS launched the platform at six of their office assets and anticipates rolling out the software nationwide across their office portfolio.

“When you approach new technology with an open mind and a methodical assessment strategy, it can solve so many challenges and make the office experience so much better for our tenants,” he said. But that comes with assessment for scalability and ease of use, navigating learning curves and collecting user feedback. It isn’t a breeze, but it is worth it.

“We believe that this technology will be extremely useful for us and our tenants for the long haul,” he said. “Health and wellness has been a growing trend in office properties since well before the pandemic, and many of the practices this technology promotes will be useful in minimizing the spread of common viruses, colds and flu — even after COVID-19 has subsided.

“Going forward, we anticipate technology to advance and the industry to embrace it at an even more rapid rate.”

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