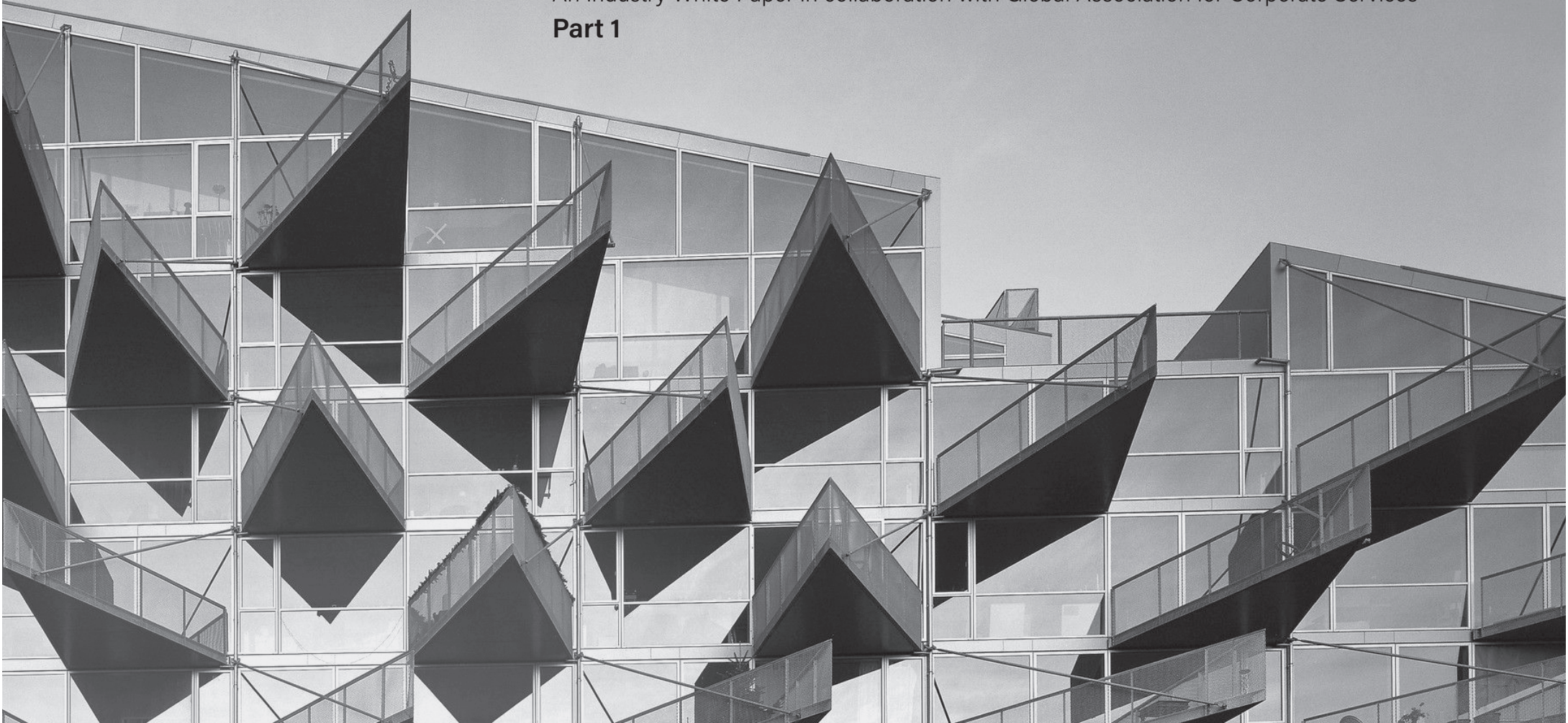


# ENVIRONMENT BRANDING IN THE AGE OF COVID

An Industry White Paper in collaboration with Global Association for Corporate Services

**Part 1**



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## **Part 1**

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### **RESEARCH & INTERVIEWS:**

Sameer Saxena, Marsh & McLennan Companies

Rahul Lal FRICS, Dalmia Bharat Group

Kapil Khera, Frankfinn

Anthony Lopez, Lopez Design

### **WRITTEN BY:**

Sujatha Shankar Kumar, Lopez Design

Layout: Mohan Godwal, Lopez Design

Graphics: Saumya Mittal, Lopez Design

*“But is it possible that the satisfaction and productivity people experience working from homes is the product of the social capital built up through countless hours of water-cooler conversations, meetings, and social engagements before the onset of the crisis? Will corporate cultures and communities erode over time without physical interaction? Will planned and unplanned moments of collaboration become impaired? Will there be less mentorship and talent development? Has working from home succeeded only because it is viewed as temporary, not permanent?”*

*McKinsey Report, Reimagining the office and work life after COVID-19  
June 8th, 2020*

As organizations brace themselves for the return of their employees, they will be tackling varied constraints imposed upon business and civil society world-over by the COVID-19 pandemic. These physical challenges are real and organizations have quickly risen to the task — maintaining six-foot safe distancing by increasing spaces between workstations and creating one-way pathways; adapting common use spaces like cafeterias and toilets by minimizing touch and lowering the potential of transferring the virus through contact; putting in regulations that monitor employee behavior, requiring a complete reorientation of how people conduct themselves in the workspace. While these are all definite measures taken to give people safety and security, for most of us dealing with the threat of an unseen virus and its consequences is functionally and emotionally destabilizing.

# How does one deal with the sense of uncertainty and fear, and the lack of clarity about how exactly to behave in the new environment?

**“We must make people comfortable in the New Normal by reducing harsh rules. At the same time, we need to convey the pertinent information and connect with an organization’s people in a way so it does not increase anxiety but allows people to live normally with the given conditions.”**

**Anthony Lopez, Lopez Design**

Anthony Lopez, Principal Lopez Design says, “Environment branding during the COVID times is not about instructions and warnings. It is important to create environments which are humanistic, which help bridge the gap and induce behavior change naturally. We must make people comfortable in the New Normal by reducing harsh rules. At the same time, we need to convey the pertinent information and connect with an organisation’s people in a way so it does not increase anxiety but allows people to live normally with the given conditions.”

This paper takes up the proactive measures implemented by three large organizations, with the intent to look at how design intervention in environments can supplement these post lockdown regulations put in place. In conversation with Sameer Saxena of MMC, Kapil Khera of Frankfinn and Rahul Lal of Dalmia, we investigate how organizations are dealing with work environments during the pandemic.

# MERCER CONSULTING

## IT and ITES sector

Marsh & McLennan has initiated several plans, putting the individual at the centre of everything. Various steps have been taken to ensure Social Distancing, Sanitation Practices, Sanitization of Premises and Contactless Service Management. India Real Estate Services Leader at MMC, Sameer Saxena reinforces their efforts to go touchless. While the framework has been laid out, MMC is backing up their initiative by creating awareness through communications, and instructions on safety and perception management. This includes myth-busting, to deal with the fear of the virus being transmitted through various touch points. MMC plans to do Perception Management to remove primary fears through multiple communications such as mailers, messaging and videos. The approach they have taken is to reorient the employees by giving them factual information that can assure and give confidence by depicting the realistic scenario.

### Threats and concerns

The biggest threat for all organizations remains the undetected and asymptomatic COVID carrier. Each time a lockdown is relaxed, the meeting of people and the resumption of 'normal' activities push the COVID-19 positive cases to rise, throwing companies into panic-mode and forcing them to reinstate a shutdown. Further, family pressures also force the employee to stay at home. With these impending threats of quarantine and fears of children being left alone, families are also considering shifting back to their hometowns, where they have an extended support system.

**The question rises — how do we keep the warning signal on, and yet lower the pressure, so that we are able to function in a space which is constantly teetering into the danger zone?**

The other major worry is human complacency about the rising numbers, which Saxena notes, have lost their impact on us. It's the famous 'boiling the frog in water' syndrome: If you drop a frog in hot water it is sure to jump out. However, if you put a frog in cool water and slowly raise the temperature, it's too late before the frog realises it's being cooked. The question rises — how do we keep the warning signal on, and yet lower the pressure, so that we are able to function in a space which is constantly teetering into the danger zone?

### **Protecting the work zone and virtual work culture**

Offices have planned various permutations and combinations of workspace reorientation and staggered workdays that have become part and parcel of the COVID era, where we look at optimisation instead of maximisation. Saxena talks about an open-ended approach, "All major organizations – all structured MNCs, are of the opinion: Let's not push employees to come back. Many organizations have not even opened up. 99% of organizations are operating below 5% workforce." While Saxena predicts that by July end, we would start seeing a trickle, the industry type has a big role in determining who gets to come back to work first, such as IT and Facilities Management personnel.

The transition to 'work-from-home' during the pandemic was unsurprising, as so many are used to multitasking with video-calls, con-calls, email chat groups and WhatsApp calls, an essential part of the culture of this age. Online Video calls have become the norm with this shift. The tension around looking well-dressed on a video call was countered by the use of an audio bridge, so that participants are less conscious with the camera off. In one of the large organisations where intensive collaboration was required, a tool was created which allowed nearly 2000+ people across cities to collaborate and exchange ideas.

Sameer Saxena says, "Everyone has found innovative ways of working from home, especially in the IT and ITES industry and the ones who did not have machines to work were shipped CPUs. Productivity levels are over 95%."

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**Sameer Saxena, MMC**

## Rethinking our future

All said and done, people are looking forward to getting out of their homes and being at work physically. Enterprise solutions are being developed for facial recognition, thermal levels and using protective gear. These minute by minute restrictions imposed will create many layers of discomfort and unease.

This has also been downtime for people all over the world, to recap what we really need and rethink our future. People are extensively questioning our needs and desires. Can we reduce our usage and needs? Can we live more minimally? The pandemic is a lengthy period of time, which forces us to innovate by posing stringent restrictions.

Keeping physical distance  
has its advantages.





# LOPEZ DESIGN'S EB DIRECTIONS:

How Environment branding can make the Mercer environment unique to its ethos

This is yet another time for humanity to demonstrate - Creativity flourishes under constraints. Branding the workspace ensures that the ethos is built into the framework creating smart environments that are in tune with the Age of AI, where we constantly connect to objects and interfaces, and actually communicate through them to other people. The ennui or boredom that settles in with long periods of lockdown leaves people frustrated and disoriented. Creating calming environments can go a long way

to establishing empathetic spaces that support our emotional needs. This is key to productivity in the long run. Organisations are also in a unique position to explore minimal approaches that can counter excess and align with a greener planet. The wider ramifications of COVID and how to live in harmony with nature can become a wonderful turning point, innovating the company ethos for this challenging period of human history.

# DALMIA BHARAT GROUP

## Manufacturing and Corporate Sector



A pioneering company established in 1939 pre-independence, Dalmia has witnessed the country go through many different periods, changes and innovations. Their 24 plants (Cement, Sugar & Refractory) are spread across the country and union territories. With a deep sense of nationalistic pride and a responsibility towards their employees and families, the Dalmia management has rapidly envisaged a holistic approach to get their factories and offices operational during the pandemic. The Group's mantra for the 'new normal' exhorts action with RE-start, RE-shape and RE-imagine. This entails a slew of preventive measures energised by a forward-thinking outlook, bringing the Dalmia Bharat Group together to act with compassion and putting people first.

Rahul Lal FRICS, National Head for Infrastructure, Facilities, Real Estate & Security, Dalmia Bharat Group notes that their pioneering corporate video, following GoI guidelines was crucial — they could not afford to have anything wrong go in any plant as a lot was at stake. "It's a joint team effort," says Lal. "We had to do it pretty fast and the Unit Heads took personal ownership to do this."

## Creating a supportive environment

The building of group consensus is evident in the Group's directives which advocate keeping the faith, belief, bonding and meeting challenges together with a united front. The management has also rapidly created the new operational structure by adopting a multipronged approach. This ensures that each activity can succeed in its space — working from home, collaborating with others, factory operations, office norms. The foundation for the transition is established through a network of support systems. A 24x7 hotline ensures you have access to Dalmia Support which includes responding to calls, sharing information and giving advice, and making various arrangements for all work-related issues as well as personal safety and wellness. The entire work-from-home transition was systematically made operational, and backed up by a holistic wellness program, which includes clarifying the WHO guidelines, COVID-19 awareness, yoga and mental well-being sessions.

## Be Indian

From urging people to do namaste instead of shaking hands, or signing off with Jai Hind, using 'gamchas' that is, face masks — at every step in small but significant ways, Dalmia instils the pride of being Indian. All measures taken up at Dalmia are compliant with Government norms, and one must have Aarogya Setu App on when entering the factory or workplace. The support program also takes inspiration from our Indian culture and tradition with yoga, Gita classes and meditation.

**From urging people to do namaste instead of shaking hands, or signing off with Jai Hind, using 'gamchas' that is, face masks — at every step in small but significant ways, Dalmia instils the pride of being Indian.**

**“Visual Cues are the only way to ensure that the awareness is generated on the loop. It is easy to slip and miss on the critical aspects, hence a constant reminder in the form of visual graphics is imperative. Our campaign, ‘REstart – REshape – REimagine : The New Normal’ helped us overcome this really fast.”**

**Rahul Lal FRICS, Dalmia Bharat Group**

## **The Workplace**

Prime for consideration are the new compliances that will be implemented to make the employee feel hundred percent safe and secure. These specific on-site procedures aim to sanitise and disinfect office spaces, do maintenance checks of machine and equipment and ensure sufficient stock of all consumables and safety gear. A complete and thorough plan for maintaining hygiene and keeping the environment sanitised and safe, plays a big role in giving employees assurance that they need not worry. At Dalmia, where a huge acreage of plants is involved, the system extends right to the street level, and making sure waste collection is done in a sanitary way, and reducing or even eliminating risks in common areas.

The list of operating instructions for factory and plant workers is more extensive.. Separate norms and guidelines are set out for transport personnel, mines, project sites, sales offices and guest houses, office shop floor, plant shop floor and so on. The complexity of the multi-layered levels of communications necessitates visual messaging. Says Rahul Lal, “Visual Cues are the only way to ensure that the awareness is generated on the loop. It is easy to slip and miss on the critical aspects, hence a constant reminder in the form of visual graphics is imperative. Our campaign, ‘REstart – REshape – REimagine : The New Normal’ helped us overcome this really fast.”

## **Preventive Maintenance Strategy and Safety**

Overall, the strategies for keeping people safe all hinge around preventive maintenance. This is practiced at many different levels such as restricting entry and exit of vendors, minimising contact, doing safe-distancing, keeping equipment sanitised and use of PPE for personnel who will come in contact with many others. Aside from the standard operating and procedures which are distinguished for every space, the manual sums it all up with a list of Do’s and Don’ts. Lal says, “Awareness, Assurance and Adaptation, this has been our approach. At all points, we are assuring our employees by generating awareness about how we have been adapting to the guidelines and directives; we are driven to provide a safe and secure environment to our employees.”

**STAIRCASE**

**348**  
STEPS TO  
STAY SAFE  
& GET  
HEALTHY

Planta

# 2

- 4 Acceso Sala Mirador
- 3 Exposición
- 2 Espacios
- 1 Oficinas
- 0** Bodega / Área COCB
- 1 Hall / Tiquetes / Exposición
- 2 Auditorio

Acceso: ...  
Bodega: ...  
Oficinas: ...  
Planta: 1

# LOPEZ DESIGN'S EB DIRECTIONS:

How Being Indian in the COVID scenario can bring the Dalmia ethos alive

The coupling of preventive measures and visual cues can be brought out more impactfully through Environment Branding with an emphasis on Being Indian. That Indians can achieve better will get fused with the actual measures, and this becomes the driving force for the visuals. A work person on the factory floor will immediately connect through the graphics on the shop floor and get directed. Everywhere, and at

every stage, cues will orient them guiding and channelising their behaviour to adhere to the new norms. Circles drawn on the floor became the most common visual cue in the COVID era. A well-thought out scheme that aligns with the specific needs of the organisation can set in visual stories and signs for every action and behaviour requirement. The corporate culture will seamlessly connect with a nationalistic pride.

# FRANKFINN

## Institution and Training sector



An organisation which is involved in training for the aviation, hospitality and travel sector, as well as Customer Service, Frankfinn has already set up a way to continue its training services online and preparing its call centre to align with the upgraded requirements. Kapil Khera, Administration Head at Frankfinn tells us that the changes were put in place within three weeks. "It took two weeks to make arrangements to ensure a safe and healthy environment with sanitisation and UV", says Khera. While Frankfinn restarted with just 250 employees, they expect to ramp-up to 700 over June-July 2020.

### Using a graphic language

The Frankfinn call centre is a hub for the younger crowd and this, says Khera, was harder to control. Hence, they thought of coming up with visual communications, aside from the safety instruction modalities. One way to impress the dangers of the virus and also to impart knowledge was the need to talk about COVID-19 symptoms. These and other visual posters were put up all over the call centre.

**At the core, Frankfinn's policy to deal with COVID at the workplace is to make each individual responsible for themselves and to the community. "After all, this is their own office, their second home," says Khera.**

## **Making every individual responsible**

At the core, Frankfinn's policy to deal with COVID at the workplace is to make each individual responsible for themselves and to the community. "After all, this is their own office, their second home," says Khera. Every person who came in to work had to sign a self-declaration that they had not come in contact with any COVID patient in the past 14 days, they did not have symptoms, and they had not travelled out of the city.

## **Re-designing the workplace**

Apart from these compliances, Frankfinn made many changes in the current work environment. Everywhere, they installed sensors and taps so that many of the operations are now touchless. Tea/coffee can be procured through a sensor based technology. "Gone are the days of the pantry boy. You have to go and pick up your own stuff!" Luckily, the firm had sufficient real estate, so maintaining the 6.5 ft distance was very do-able. Other than the single person shift, work-from-home protocols have been put in place. Frankfinn has, in general, followed the Government guidelines in line with the Aarogya Setu App, and the zones of red, yellow and green.

Khera notes that problems mostly stem from a person's fears. With all the cross messaging and media stories, as well as rumours going around, it is likely that a person may suppress information about themselves out of fear of stigmatisation. "As a corporate sector we should be educating people, and talking more about the percentage that has recovered," says Khera, emphasizing the need to convey positive stories.



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## **Where the problem lies**

Khera notes that problems mostly stem from a person's fears. With all the cross messaging and media stories, as well as rumours going around, it is likely that a person may suppress information about themselves out of fear of stigmatisation. Quicker testing, self-isolation and quarantine can help stop the spread of the disease. The fear associated with the viral disease also forces individuals to commit suicide. All these problems can be resolved with clearer messaging about COVID to help allay rumours and to give confidence to people. "As a corporate sector we should be educating people, and talking more about the percentage that has recovered," says Khera, emphasizing the need to convey positive stories.

## **Getting back to work**

Being an institution, Frankfinn is at present conducting online classes. While much of India is sceptical about transiting to the online mode, Frankfinn had actually already restricted travel for meetings a year back in a cost-saving bid. "We are used to this kind of atmosphere," says Khera who describes their Zoom calls as mimicking the office environment, as they need to be well-dressed and give a corporate performance. A constructive approach helps to bring people back to the missing office atmosphere. "We feel lethargic at home and there is less physical activity. There are cases where people develop obesity just sitting and talking. A work-life balance is necessary so we are encouraging people to cultivate a way to pick up home time and adapt to work from home.

## **Learning from the pandemic**

One major learning for Khera has been the success of certain key sectors, and he suggests we follow their lead to deal with facilities and operations. "A lot of good work has been done by doctors and police as well as cleaners. If cleaners can come out and do the job, why can't we? We are seeing productivity from many such people in an eight-hour shift. Let's rise to the occasion and complete the task!"

# LOPEZ DESIGN'S EB DIRECTIONS:

How Environment Branding can distinguish Frankfinn and give its people a sense of commitment

Design intervention can create spaces that give people a sense of "this is my office" and naturally bring accountability. You begin to feel responsible for the space and for your colleagues. The actual appreciation of work culture versus work-from-home can also be heightened through the design of the workplace. Within this, educating

employees about COVID through stories and graphics will help to see the problem as not something separate, but very much part of one's own environment. The idea of zones, moving from red to green — these are all triggers that can be used to create a sense of progress of fighting the virus through an individual's personal action and behaviour.

# CONCLUSIONS

Major organizations from three different sectors have all addressed the ramp up in safety and security of their employees through preventive measures, changes in layout and operations, technological interventions and instilling a fresh behaviour code. The changes in infrastructure and operations by organizations gearing up for work shows several commonalities.

A key component of the messaging is the integrated approach — ‘taking everyone together’ and connecting employee needs to personal safety and family needs

Emphasis on behavioral change and connecting this to safety and security of all personnel.

Giving assurance to employees by reinforced messages at many levels, from videos to emails and Instant messaging, as well as new programs that allow people to stay in touch with professionals specially engaged in an advisory role.

Setting up a detailed and systematic plan for deep-cleaning and sanitizing work environments, and reducing touch by introducing new technology.

All norms and procedures depend on individual adherence and therefore lay emphasis on the individual by reducing anxiety and making them comfortable so that they are responsible and feel accountable.

Technological devices and measures have been put in place, reducing human intervention.

# TRANSFORMING PEOPLE THROUGH ENVIRONMENTS

Branding design specialist, Anthony Lopez says, "Behaviour change happens when you deeply connect with your people where they align on common values. Environment graphics can help you in making these meaningful connections." Spaces become visually active with the new ethos, instilling the required behavior without the need to keep looking at a reference manual.

**The new changes summarised all require a vast system implementation and rigorous behavior change that has to deeply penetrate all functioning levels. The constant reinforcement of the revised behavior as well as the need to bring people together to act for the common good is imperative.**

Environment Branding is an important component of facility management in the COVID situation. Designing environments with communications, can make your organization more humanistic and instill the corporate ethos, making your people feel safer and comfortable. These are some of the ways in which Environment Branding can transform your office and factory spaces:

- 1 Helping people adhere to the new norms by reinforcement of the messaging in the environment, making learning tactile and accessible.
- 2 Unraveling the complexity of recalling many new instructions by introducing them into the environment, giving a sense of immediacy and comfort.
- 3 Instilling a sense of pride of place about the organization and 'India can do it' so that the workplace-set examples transfer over to the new normal lifestyle.
- 4 Making the environment friendly and approachable with the use of text, visuals, stories and graphics which become a support system to adhere to the new norms and to give people a sense of positivity.
- 5 Reducing anxiety and making every individual feel a sense of responsibility and accountability.
- 6 With the greater reliance on technology, the individual spends more screen time and also working their way through devices and gadgets, increasing the need for a human touch.
- 7 Helping to deal with long term compliance when slip ups start to happen with a sense of complacency, by making the messages relevant and active, with the capacity to introduce new norms as the COVID scenario develops.

# ABOUT LOPEZ DESIGN

**Lopez Design** is a branding firm in Gurgaon. They work on branding, identity and communication system projects. The firm specializes in bringing out the human values of the brand, making meaningful connections with its people for long term strategic intervention. Lopez Design's pioneering work in branded environments in India has given companies such as Mercer, PwC and E&Y extraordinary spaces. For the Government of India's Ayushman Bharat HWCs and UNICEF the branding has drawn from the local and tuned into the universal. In these environments, users experience an elevated sense of the brand ethos through a system of visual signs, cues and graphics. Through storytelling, illustration and graphics, the designers create a transformed work space that creates better productivity, and celebrates the company's ethos and values. With the onset of the pandemic, environment branding can bring ease and comfort into the everyday operations of firms, and assure complete alignment with the new norms.



**LOPEZ** DESIGN



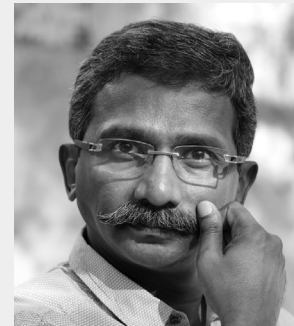
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