

VIEWPOINT

# FLOORING DESIGN SOLUTIONS

## IN THE ERA OF COVID-19

Interior design plays a fundamental role in not only making education spaces functional, but also in creating a calm, soothing environment for students and faculty alike. Aesthetics—from color selection to layout—are crucial in helping schools re-emerge from the pandemic as safe spaces that promote emotional and psychological well-being.

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Here to shed further light on the topic are David Dembowitz, Senior Vice President for Mohawk Group; Royce Epstein, A&D Design Director for Mohawk Group; and Rebekah Matheny, associate professor of interior design in the Department of Design at the Ohio State University. Today's episode is sponsored by [Mohawk Group](#).

### **S4L: What strategies are you recommending for schools and institutions to help them reemerge post-pandemic?**

**Royce Epstein:** I'll take that. Hi, everybody, this is Royce with Mohawk Group. Um, so we've been actually talking about this, obviously, for over a year now, thinking about different strategies that our A&D customers and end users—especially in schools and universities—can really think about how to reemerge from post-pandemic. Like, do we need to redesign physical space in the built environment? Everybody, of course, is talking about this and trying to figure out what's next. So, at Mohawk, we have some ideas, and I'm sure Rebekah will share some from her experiences at Ohio State. But we've been talking a lot about delineating zones and creating functional areas through flooring. Like, it's really important to have visual cues that give intentional communication, so that people can visually see what's going to happen.

And I know there's a natural inclination now for barriers, like walls and partitions and screens. But we find that that really hinders sightlines and doesn't also allow for connectivity. So, if we can think about the floor as being the communicator of how people should move through the space, and what spaces and zones are actually called out for different functions, I think that will help put everybody's mind at ease about how you can navigate public space together. Especially in a school, where, you know, we're anticipating in the fall, everybody's going to come back to relative normalcy with density. And we want to ease people's fears about that. So we really think if you can focus on giving these visual cues and intentionally communicate to people through flooring, people will have better expectations on how to move through the space.

**And what kind of visual cues are you talking about? Would you be able to give a small, concrete example?**

**Royce:** Yeah, I mean, we always talk about mixing flooring material, so using hard and soft surfaces. So soft surfaces would be things like carpet tile, broadloom. And then, of course, hard surfaces would be LVT and rubber. We see those materials a lot in this school environment. But you can also, you know, have this different mix of materials just by changing a pattern, or changing texture, or changing color. And I always call myself a recovering interior designer, I was an interior designer for two decades. And so, one of the things I used to do quite a bit—and this was obviously well before COVID—but using blocking, like color blocking, or texture blocking, or something even called neutral blocking, which is just, again, creating zones just by using different colors or different textures. And with neutral blocking, you're just using neutral colors like taupes and light grays, and using them together instead of bright colors to really, again, kind of call out different zones.

**Rebekah Matheny:** Yeah, and Royce, I think picking up on—this is Rebekah—the color component of what you just said, is really, really interesting. Over the last three years, I've been working at Ohio State on a couple of different initiatives in learning space design and been working with a colleague, Stephanie Orr, over in the Office of Distance Education and eLearning. And she oversees all of the pool classroom design spaces and all of the public spaces. There's been sort of two initiatives we've been working on within, you know, sort of engaging the students and actually designing spaces

for themselves. So more of a participatory focus on what the future of learning environments for Ohio State and across the Big Ten is.

One is the Big Ten Academic Alliance design competition. And another is the design studio I teach that Stephanie is involved with as well. And what's been fascinating is in the junior interior design studio, we've been focusing on what the future of learning environments—but specifically the public spaces, those interstitial third spaces—are outside of the classroom. How do we extend learning beyond the actual classroom? How do we create a culture at the university? And one of the major themes that has risen up both in the Big Ten design competition as well as the studio project is this idea of color theory. And it really has a deeper meaning to it. And I know, you know, with Relaxing Floors, and some of the collections that are biophilicly driven from Mohawk's perspective, color and pattern play such a deep role in human wellbeing, and this idea of calm and happiness on campus, and how we can create a space that is going to be attractive for students to stay longer—before class, after class, stay on campus, stay engaged longer, but more importantly, promote a mindset and emotional response to the physical space that makes them feel safe. And I think particularly in a return-to-campus capacity, it's gonna become even more important.

We've seen in additional work that I've been doing last summer, I was involved with our college's return-to-campus strategies for the university. Sort of putting in place, like, what is the wayfinding? What are the spread-out spaces? How do we, you know, create queuing, sort of all of the nitty-gritty requirements of getting the faculty and

staff and students back healthy and safe, but also from a research perspective. And it was really interesting because, as I was surveying over 600+ students at Ohio State, one of the most important components that came out of that survey work was the students' mental response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

So, 37 percent of students surveyed said that they are feeling stressed, anxious or depressed daily because of the pandemic, and 43 percent weekly. So we're talking, you know, almost 80 percent of students have an increased level of stress and anxiety. And so that makes me immediately think of the objective of Relaxing Floors. And how, you know, through the use of color and pattern, we can influence and reduce stress and anxiety for students, how we can use that material to help transform the space and its approachability, to get students to come back to campus in a more productive and healthy way.

**I'm seeing a note about using school colors. Would anybody like to touch on that a little bit?**

**Royce:** Yeah, and I can pick up on that. And I think I do want to agree with everything that Rebekah said. In order for people to go back to public space, no matter what kind of space it is, people are going to need to feel compelled to go there. So, what are the things that draw people to public space, right? So, it's—in most cases, and this is beyond schools—it's really connectivity and collaborating with your fellow...your friends, and your fellow colleagues, and fellow students. And so, I think when you connect that, then, to wellbeing, and to using color and texture and pattern to really create these spaces that make people feel welcome and feel grounded and feel safe, there's also a sense of place and school pride.

If we can think about the floor as being the communicator of how people should move through the space, and what spaces and zones are actually called out for different functions, I think that will help put everybody's mind at ease about how you can navigate public space together. – Royce Epstein



And I think school colors really do that. Just like branding for corporate brands, we see the same thing with universities and colleges. You know, they have their colors that go out into their logos and athletic gear and all that kind of stuff. But that really can translate really nicely into interiors to really instill this sense of, not just school pride, but a sense of place, like you belong here. This is your environment. You're part of a community. And again, this is what's going to compel people to want to be on campus, is that interaction and joint community that you're creating together.

**Rebekah:** And I think the other thing that's fascinating about branding colors is one of the big things that came out of this Big Ten design competition was seeing the students' use of color for branding and wayfinding within their space designs. But more importantly, the expansion of the color palette beyond the traditional—like for Ohio State, it's scarlet and gray. And it was really fascinating that none of the competitions for these third spaces actually use scarlet and gray in the traditional way. And the reason being was that it felt masculine, and it felt sporty, was the response when people were surveyed. But there is an entire secondary color palette that the university branding team has. And the students really tapped into that.

So, I think this is an opportunity when we start listening to the students, the people using the space. What is their emotional reaction to the traditional versus the expanded color palette? And how can we begin to incorporate and create balance within our space? And I think the flooring is an opportunity to really do that—in addition to the wall coverings or the paint or the upholsteries, as well, within the space. But you know, we even saw this at all the other top three school submissions, was that the university traditional branding colors weren't used in any of the spaces. And it really had to do with that idea of coming back

to a sense of wellness, and delineating spaces that are intended for large groups of people and university pride, and then integrating it as sort of a pop of color mixed with a more subtle palette that was more focused on wellbeing, or approachability, or heads-down studying, or working collaboratively, or relaxing. And some of these third spaces are intended to be sort of coworking or active learning environments, or more social spaces that aren't necessarily outward projection spaces that are university but more intimate. And so, understanding that balance of...What is the function? What's the purpose of the space you're creating? Who are the user groups? And how do we use color to integrate the university setting while at the same time addressing the students' needs?

**David Dembowitz:** Hey, Rebekah and Royce, this is Dave. Actually, I have a question on that for the two of you. Traveling the country, there are times where more traditional facility directors or principals or school boards really want to focus on those school colors as being the primary focus of new interior design or renovation work. How do you talk to those customers about exactly what you've just brought up? Maybe using it, you know, in very small pops, or not making it as bold or using some alternate colors? Because I find that sometimes, there's a pushback—a big pushback—from customers that really just want to use almost that true sporty, masculine color, just across the board. And yeah, it's our school colors, that's what we're going with. How do you push back in a tactful way to get them to see the other side of that?

**Rebekah:** You know, I've actually been doing that these last two years. Stephanie and I have been presenting out to our facilities teams at the university and within the Big Ten, as well, at the other schools. Part of it comes from, I think, doing the research

by conducting the survey of student responses, and getting the data to back it up makes a huge impact. And then also, through the studio itself, seeing the students design spaces that they want to be in and not having those traditional, or preconceived, notions of what they are, you realize that those that we're designing for students—rather than designing with students—are missing the mark slightly. And so that's really what's changed the entire sort of approach at Ohio State's facility, is that we've been working together with students: doing the research, providing the data, getting the students engaged, having them design, having the students do their own participatory and co-designing exercises with other students outside of design, and then integrating that into their design strategies. And that's really changed.

In fact, we just got a \$100,000 grant to do a project space build-out next year from the university that our students are actually going to get to design and build themselves. And seeing now that we've had three spaces built over the last couple of years, serving students using those spaces, and getting positive reaction versus serving students' use of other spaces and getting negative reactions. That's sort of the proof in the pudding. Right? You have the data to back it up to say, here it is, this is what we should be doing. Now let's start creating those strategies moving forward. That's how we've been doing it, at least.

**Royce:** Yeah, and I think the word "strategy" is key. Like, every time you design something, you have to be strategic. And I think that's a big misconception about interior design is that, you know, there's some mysterious group of people who just select finishes, and they just show up on a job site. And those of us who practice professional interior design know that that's hardly what design is. Like, design is all about, you know, crafting these spaces that drive solutions for your customer base. And we're literally designing a built environment that has strategic outcomes. And so, like Rebekah said, one way is to survey the user groups and let them participate and co-design in the space that they are going to inhabit. But I think strategy's really, really important: to think about the end goal. We want students—and not just students, but faculty, staff, everyone. Campuses are really meant to be inclusive. And I think you want everyone to feel that they belong there, and they can do their best work there. So, what can an interior look like if that is the case, if that's the end goal? And so, color and using flooring is just one piece of the bigger puzzle. But it's a big part of the puzzle, because color absolutely affects people's wellbeing. And now that we're coming out of COVID, we really want to make people feel, again,

welcome back to campus, and really, most importantly, feel safe—that they're not going to get sick. It's okay to be social, but safely. So how do we do that? How do we show that through that interior language that designers are creating? I think that's kind of the goal, is the strategy.

**Rebekah:** And I think you just hit on something really important too, Royce, which is the necessity of inclusive design as we move forward, as well. And when you are co-designing, you know, what might make me happy or make me feel safe might make someone else feel intimidated. And so, it's really critical to get a lot of different perspectives brought in to develop strategies that are able to create spaces that are inclusive, equitable, holistic—spaces that are really intended for all to serve the purpose that they are intended for.

### **That's actually a really good segue into our next point: How do you envision the built environment changing to accommodate students after the pandemic?**

**Royce:** I had mentioned earlier that, you know, we don't want to have partitions and walls to be the thing that keeps us safe from the spread of COVID. We find that it's better to use flooring to delineate these specific areas. And it's important to keep sightlines open. Sightlines are really important today for so many reasons, like number one, like we want to bring daylight into buildings. And especially in education, daylight is what keeps people awake and alert and focused on their learning activities. And also, it's a biophilic measure, right? We want to see outside, we want to know that we're connected to nature. So, keeping





those sightlines open is critical. But it also ties to inclusivity. What Rebekah and I were talking about earlier, like, everybody should be seen and should be visible and should be included in the activities of the space. And so, keeping those sightlines open is really important to making everybody feel included. And then also just, the more you can see in a building without barriers and obstruction, the more you're going to feel that you anticipate the activities that are going to happen in this space. Because you can literally see what's going on, and where to walk, and where to wait. And you know, where are the activated areas? And where are the areas that I have to study and be heads-down? So, these sightlines, I think, are really an important part of design and strategy on how you're laying out a space, but also how you're finishing a space. Because the finishes can also help, again, visually guide people through space.

**Rebekah:** Yeah. And I think just to echo what Royce said, too, with the junior interior design studio, as we're designing these third spaces to extend active learning beyond the classroom, we're designing lobbies, we're designing hallways to become engaged spaces. And it was fascinating to actually look at the studio that was conducted prior to COVID. And then this past fall, which was just, you know, during the pandemic, we were hoping it was gonna be a post-pandemic; that'll be this coming year, I suppose. So, it'll be interesting to see the comparison between. But one of the biggest things, like Royce just said, that stands out is the idea of barrier-free spaces. And by that, I mean, you know, there may need to be some level of separation, but they don't want it to be overt, they want it to be subtle.

So, it might be a change in a flooring

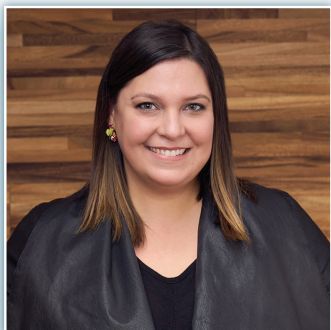
material so that it's a hard surface, and high circulation patterns, and soft surfaces like carpet installed in sort of those moments of pause. It could be more of a subtle elevational change. So, if we're looking at desks, maybe (I'm looking at a student example right now), and one student took sort of a wall—what would be like a counter-height, typically, they would have just installed a counter height. But instead, they spaced out the stools every six feet, so that there is the six-foot spacing intuitively, but they also elevationally changed the height. So, it sort of does two things. It automatically separates people without using those plexiglass dividers because of the height of the surface changing, but it also creates inclusivity. So that way, the ADA-accessible surface is integrated, again, rather than being overt. And so how do we sort of think more inconspicuous, if you will, to integrate some of these components?

I think another thing that's going to really change is the space type that we're designing for. As I'm starting to talk with the return-to-campus committee over the summer in preparation for the fall, how many classes are going to come back and use classrooms again? How many people have decided to stay hybrid? How many classes are going to go entirely online? I know one of my classes, it was actually more efficient and better serving the students to stay online. So, I think we're going to end up in the long term—across the board, as universities come back—that there's going to be a lot more open spaces, classroom spaces that aren't going to be used in a traditional classroom setting. But what I think students are going to need are more of those third spaces, and community-building spaces, those flexible spaces: like co-working, those casual lounge / social

spaces. And that's where, again, a mixture of your hard surfaces or your resilient surfaces mixed with your soft surfaces and carpet are really going to play a major role in these new leftover spaces that are going to be taken back over as public spaces.

**David:** Then, you know, Rebekah, you hit it right on the head. A lot of these facility directors and people that are running schools really need your input, because there was a big knee-jerk reaction as things really progressed in the country to make rash decisions. And talking about calmness amongst the students and faculty, it's also calmness about making the right decisions now—not only for the short term, but for the long term, like you said. You know, it may be financially viable for a school to keep a few of these classes hybrid. And it may be viable for the students and the professors to stay hybrid. And so that may adjust not only flooring and colors and textures, but technology. You know, where do we have to spend our money in order to make the classroom experience, and the experience outside the classroom, as fulfilling as possible? So, it seems as though colleges, universities, K-12, they're going to need design help more than ever to ensure that they are making the right decisions for the people in the building—and also for the people that are not in the building, or sometimes in the building, depending on how they choose to learn moving forward.

**Rebekah:** You know, it was really fascinating in the research project I did last summer to understand space utilization and prioritization, because the students...many of them said that they wanted to come back to campus for those active-learning classes. They need to be there for their labs, you know, for design



And when you are co-designing, you know, what might make me happy or make me feel safe might make someone else feel intimidated. And so, it's really critical to get a lot of different perspectives brought in to develop strategies that are able to create spaces that are inclusive, equitable, holistic—spaces that are really intended for all to serve the purpose that they are intended for. – Rebekah Matheny

studios, those kinds of things. But what they miss most about not being on campus for classes is the community aspect, the social aspect, and space utilization. You know, it's the public spaces that were being used, you know, 20 to 25 percent of the time, where the labs and the classrooms, people said that they use those about 12 percent of the time. You know, their libraries are 25 percent. So if you're thinking, really, 50 percent of the time students spend on campus are in those social third spaces that are communal.

I think that really shows that some of the classrooms need to be rethought and that some things are going to become digital or co-working, where you can take an online class but not leave campus. I mean, that was something that was really fascinating, was the number of students that said that they have faulty or insecure WiFi at home and need to be on campus purely for the technology. And so, if we kind of create these co-working environments where anyone could sit down beside anyone and work, and take their online class, or collaborate, and get online, it becomes an entirely different sort of makeup of what the university space becomes. And when we start thinking of it differently, that transforms how we design learning environments, our campus environments, and the types of material options that open up. Because we can become non-institutional in our aesthetic and much more communal or hospitality-driven, even. You know, the students are saying how much they want resimercial spaces. They want that sense of being together yet alone. They want to create connections, and they want sort of this happy, healthy, friendly place that their universities exude.

#### **Our next question for the group is, can you go into some detail about systems thinking for flooring design solutions?**

**Royce:** Yeah, I'll take that one. At Mohawk—and this isn't just true for Mohawk and other flooring manufacturers that also create flooring products, but we see this certainly in the furniture field—you know, systems thinking is all about creating a portfolio of products that harmoniously work together. So that instead of just selecting this chair here, and this set of desks here, and this flooring product here, and another flooring product there, and then another fabric there, things work together seamlessly. And so, being Mohawk, we're just talking about flooring here. But the idea is that we are designing collections that coordinate. So, there might be a ground texture, and then there's an accent, but there's even a transition piece in between. So you can use this system to create even larger floorscapes.

So the ground, maybe, is just a textural area that you have, for example, that could be under desks in a classroom. The transition could literally be a pattern that leads people to announce where the doors are, or pathways, like the corridors. And then the accent really leads you somewhere exciting, like these activated spaces, like Rebekah is talking about. These third spaces where people are hanging out, or maybe it's a breakout space or public space, or, you know, again, you want to announce some special area. So, instead of having to find different products that hopefully will work together, we're designing whole systems that automatically do that. They're individual SKUs, you can spec one of the products, two of the

products, three of the products, use all four, connect them to another system that makes sense. And therefore, now, you have all these tools like a toolkit to create, really, larger floorscapes. And this is kind of a nice language, like a flooring language, that you can use to create and delineate, again, different functional spaces based on the visual of the carpet or the hard-surface flooring.

So, I think systems thinking is so important, and especially today when our world is so uncertain. And we might try things like—moving into the fall semester, we don't know how many kids are actually going to come back to school, and how these classrooms are going to be reassembled. So modular products make a lot of sense, because you can invest in something that you can still use during the unknown and move it around as things change. As opposed to, you know, products that are much more static and don't have that ability to transform. So, I think systems thinking really, you know, it's also efficient. And, again, helps create sort of this visual language that we can all kind of understand where we're going, what we're supposed to be doing.

**Rebekah:** And to emphasize what Royce just said, I can't stress enough how imperative it is to literally think from the ground up. So, when I teach the interior finish materials course and I teach the logic of materials, we start thinking about building our palette—our material palette—from the ground up by establishing, you know, the groundwork, the floorscape, and then adding on top of that. Because typically, it's the floor—the floorscape, as Royce said—that is consistent. That flows from one space to another, that influences human behavior for circulation. And then the other pieces become some of those accents, or decorative components, that add to the overall palette, but it is really about establishing a solid base within your flooring that you can build upon.

**David:** Yeah, and Rebekah, that's a great point. You know, one of the biggest concerns for customers is not only how great it looks when it's put down, but...will it hold up to the heavy traffic at Ohio State University, or in another facility over years? And so they really are looking for something that can be maintained, very easily, almost like a worry-free-type flooring. Because quite frankly, there are less and less people able to be in the schools, to be in the universities, but to also clean and maintain them. So the people that are still there are having to clean more square footage with less time, less manpower, less chemicals, less resources. So worry-free flooring is something that customers



are looking for. And they need it in order that to make that space look beautiful for a long period of time.

**Rebekah:** And that, David, feeds right into sustainability, as well.

**David:** That's a great point, yeah.

**Rebekah:** You know, I serve on the Sustainability Institute for the university. And we're trying to establish a set of sustainable standards for space design. And it's really critical to think about longevity of product that goes into the space, as well as material content. And Mohawk is so fantastic with that philosophy. That's why I love working with you all so much, is the sort of deeply ingrained, sustainable initiatives that you have. And I think it's so critical. And as more and more universities and colleges are moving in that direction, it's going to become even more important. And just like you said, not having to replace the material, it's worry-free, it has a long lifespan, it can be recycled afterwards, it has recycled content in it. And that's important, not just from a facility management specifications and design standpoint, but also the opportunity to educate the students within the spaces to say, you know what, you're in a space that is sustainably designed. What does that mean? So how do we actually use material specification and installation to educate our students within their classrooms or their learning environments?

### What best practices can schools use to incorporate human-centered design?

**Royce:** Well, I mentioned biophilia earlier. And I think biophilic design has become really the, sort of, buzzword of this current

generation of designers, and we really need to be practicing biophilic design more than ever. Before COVID, I had read a statistic that we, as humans, spend 90 percent of our time inside. And you can imagine during COVID that was much higher. And, certainly in educational institutions, that is also a big number, especially if you're not someone who's outdoors playing sports. You know, we're thinking all the time about how to bring these elements of nature indoors so that all of us as humans can feel connected to sort of that primal, human...I don't even know what to call it. But like, you know, our DNA is human, and we belong to nature. I always say, you know, I have four nieces and nephews always on their iPhones, and I'm like, "You know, when you die, you can't take your iPhone with you." Like, people forget that we belong to nature, and we need to connect with nature. All of our senses respond to nature.

So, for example, Rebekah had mentioned a product earlier called Relaxing Floors. That is a product that we have designed based on this principle of fractals. Our eyes are made of fractals, just like many things in the human body are fractal. Most things in nature are made from fractals, and so when our eyes see something out in nature that is fractal, there's, like this sweet spot of...Dave, help me out. It's like the D factor, I think that's what it's called, for dimensional factor. And this is where your body has a physiological response and relaxes. Like, your blood pressure literally lowers and your heart rate slows. Because your nature inside of your body is connecting with its, you know, cousin nature outside. I know I'm not explaining this in a very technical way, but this is how I understand it. And, you know, we can translate those fractal patterns into flooring patterns. So that

when you put them in a space, you can benefit from having that stress reduction. So that's just one example of biophilic design.

But biophilic design extends to lots of principles, like I mentioned: daylighting, obviously, having actual access to natural things like trees and plants, and this is why the plant trend is so big and we see them in interiors now. I think too, you know, thinking about yarn, you know, we have a solution-dyed yarn that looks like—it's nylon, but it looks like wool. And that small change is huge, because now our eyes are seeing something biophilic. It's not shiny, and kind of flat like a nylon material would be. It literally looks like wool, so it's dimensional, and rich, and warm. And your eyes, again, see that, and your brain thinks, "Oh, that's nature." And so, these are just small things we do as a manufacturer that really make a big difference in the impact of how people receive the product from this sort of human-centered approach.

**Rebekah:** Yeah, and human-centered design is really rooted in designing with the human in mind. And, as Royce just talked about, that's understanding the science of human physiology, human psychology, neurology, sociology. So, leveraging—as we talked about design strategy—leveraging secondary research in these other fields of study to develop a strategic approach, in order to design with that human in mind is really critical. And making a space tap into all of the things Royce just talked about—creating biophilic spaces, creating spaces that create relaxing environments, promote wellness, create de-stressed or less anxious environments—address people that may be introverted versus extroverted, thinking about all of the different human behaviors and responses.

And then the other aspect of human-centered design is designing not just with the human in mind, but—which is where the secondary research comes in—but with the human. And that is that co-design, that participatory design methodology. And both pieces are really critical. Because while I can bring my perception as a designer to the space, I can't design for someone who's had a very different-lived experience than myself. And especially in a university setting, where you are in an institution that's bringing a very diverse group of people together, it becomes even more critical to engage the population in designing the spaces together, getting all of the different inputs. And then that allows us to develop a very holistic, strategic approach.

**From the human-centered design approach, can you talk a little bit about the—I'm not even sure this is a word, but can you talk a little bit about the cleanability of some of these spaces, some of the maintenance and the sanitation standards?**

**Royce:** Yeah, with cleaning anything, you want to make sure you're not using chemicals of concern. So, as a manufacturer, we're very careful to not use chemicals of concern, and our carpet is Red List free, for example. We want to also promote cleaning our products (and, really, any products) with safe cleaning materials so that you're not using caustic chemicals that are going to cause people breathing problems or allergy problems or whatnot. This is a conundrum for this time of COVID, because I think a lot of people's sort of initial reaction is just to take out the Lysol and spray everything. But just like we learned that if you wash your hands with warm water and soap, you can kill the



COVID germs, it's the same thing with materials. Like, you can hot-water extract your carpet, which always, traditionally, has been the standard way to clean soft flooring materials. You hot-water extract, and it's literally just like washing your hands with warm water and soap. And that is enough to kill any viruses.

The CDC does have flooring guidelines and recommendations, but we just want to remind people to really be cautious about using caustic materials. You want to have EPA-approved cleansers, because again, you don't want to contribute to someone feeling ill or getting sick. And so that is part of human-centered design, too, is really thinking about—even the maintenance routine, how is that going to affect your population of students? And there are plenty of students, as we know, that have asthma and allergies. And that comes from lots of different things, but increasingly, from VOCs of off-gassing of all kinds of materials. Our flooring materials don't off-gas in that way; they're tested to be low VOC—or designed that way, I should say, and tested. But these are things that are really important to think about, especially from a facility standpoint.

**As we start to wrap up here, I had one last question: How can schools reset not just to get back to normal, but to move to an even better place, both operationally and socially?**

**Rebekah:** That's a really great question. I think part of it is, once again, coming back to really understanding: What is the expectation that the students, faculty, staff have coming back? How do we really begin to understand what they want to redefine education to be when they return in a post-pandemic environment? And it kind of goes back to what we said earlier: What is the usability of the spaces? What are we coming back to?

What do we want to be coming back to? What is our prioritization for the university environment?

I think we do that, once again, by studying, engaging the users themselves. That really comes back to design research and engaging the population—really, truly understanding the people, their behaviors, their desires, their expectations. And that will help us not only design for an immediate post-pandemic return, but for future-proofing the university. Because it's quite possible that we're going to have another pandemic, you know, in the foreseeable future, possibly. Or, just, are people going to come back—as we're starting to get social again, I still see people who are vaccinated wearing masks. People still uncomfortable being in large groups. So, there are social anxieties that have infiltrated in a post-pandemic response that we need to be considerate of, as well.

**David:** And Rebekah, you know, one of the interesting things about it: Knowledge is power. You know, that's something that's been said for many, many, many years. What you just said is exactly right: That anxiety is palpable right now. And so, the more information that we can provide to the people inside whatever space it is, to say, "Hey, you know, we're cleaning this based on the CDC guidelines. There are no Red List chemicals in the products that are being used to be cleaning, or in the space." It makes it easier for people to come back. And I think that's very important as we move forward. Because the anxiety isn't just going to go away as soon as a governor, or a president, or mayor says, you know, "Everyone can come back." That anxiety lingers. Some forever, some for years, some for months, some for days. But if we're informing the people in these spaces of what's going in them, what's in them today, as well as how we're cleaning them,

So, it seems as though colleges, universities, K-12, they're going to need design help more than ever to ensure that they are making the right decisions for the people in the building—and also for the people that are not in the building, or sometimes in the building, depending on how they choose to learn moving forward. – David Dembowitz



**“Mohawk Group is committed to offering worry-free flooring solutions that contribute to healthier school environments. They are proud to have partnered with facility managers, education designers and industry experts in providing resources on creating clean, high-performance spaces like the information we’re sharing today. Check out more conversations, product performance videos, and an interactive product tour for K-12 and higher-ed environments at [www.mohawkgroup.com/designfwdedu](http://www.mohawkgroup.com/designfwdedu).”**



that anxiety—at least in that built environment—will be less and less. And hopefully, we’ll be able to contribute to people kind of getting over that pandemic anxiety. And hopefully, you know, getting into a better reality in the spaces.

**Rebekah:** Exactly. It comes down to trust. You know, in the survey last summer, people trusted themselves to do the right thing and to follow the CDC guidelines, but they didn’t necessarily trust their classmates. Or, they didn’t trust the maintenance team. They wanted to have controllability of cleanliness, right? And so how do we establish trust? It’s through communication, and everything you just said, David.

**Royce:** I’m gonna leave us all with, I think, a last thought, and I’m going to take it out on a more macro level. But I like to think of schools—and maybe this is more, too, in the K-12 arena—schools as refuge. You know, one of the things I learned during this COVID year is that so many kids rely on schools as a place of shelter, and refuge, and getting their meals during the day, and having a safe and steady place to go. Not just for learning, kinship and collaboration with their schoolmates, but literally shelter and refuge. And so, I think as we reconfigure and rebuild and reimagine, let’s not forget that—that there are communities of kids out there who need their schools to be that for them. And that we can’t take that for granted. And we need to build that in as part of inclusion and human-centered design. That’s definitely one takeaway I’ve learned this year. And I’m gonna definitely put that in practice as I move forward.

**That’s a really good point. Before we wrap up, I did just want to ask if anybody had any last words or last thoughts, just loose stuff that you didn’t quite get the chance to get in. And not to call anybody out, but David?**

**David:** So, ladies, it has been truly a pleasure to be part of this podcast with you. It’s amazing the knowledge that you provide to your students, Royce, to your customer base, in just the general population. So, thank you. Thank you for everything that you do every day, not thinking just about today’s spaces, but spaces in the future. So that’s really all I had.

**Royce:** I’m just really thrilled to be at Mohawk and working with Dave, and working with all of our design teams and sales teams. Because I think we’re not just a company that makes stuff and sells stuff, you know. And I think most people look at big manufacturers like that. And, you know, we have a lot to say about sustainability. We’re practicing sustainability; we’re practicing human-centered design. All these ideas that we talked about, we do put into practice. We give back more than we take. And so, these are just really things that I’m quite proud of, to be a part of Mohawk—and just in general, our larger design community. Because I know that our entire A&D design community, including educators like Rebekah, really do care about these issues. They think about these issues, they practice these issues, and we can only succeed if we do them together.

**Rebekah:** Yeah, I just want to say that it’s been really great to have this podcast as an opportunity to share the true impact of what interior design is. There’s so many misconceptions about what our profession does. But to be able to talk in a platform like this about the impact on the human experience, and human wellbeing, and the planet, our environment, and sustainability is really wonderful. Because the more we can educate the general public—even in the university setting, sitting on a panel with other faculty—it’s surprising to me every time we do it, to see how many people don’t truly understand what we do and the value we bring. So, this is a really great opportunity to do so. And I’m really grateful for the partnership with Mohawk throughout the last couple of years in the studio class, the materials course that we teach, and having a great partner in Royce for the opportunity to share our passion for sustainability, and for youth generations, and future forecasting. So, this has been really wonderful. Thank you so much for having me. ■