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Making the built environment safe post-COVID

BY DAN DIEHL
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Labs can teach us a lot about ensuring that air quality and ventilation in the built environment is safe for human return

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced countries and companies around the world to think deeply about the health and safety of their people. It is morally and economically essential that, as employees begin to emerge from lock-downs, they can be confident that their offices and places of work are equipped to minimize the risks of infection.

The bad news is that our built environment is not nearly as effective as it could be in keeping people safe, healthy and productive. The

good news is that the technology we need to solve this problem already exists and is widely used in laboratories, hospitals, and other critical environments.

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Research has shown that buildings with poor indoor air quality (inadequate ventilation, filtration, or humidity control) can promote the spread of airborne bacterial or viral infections.

This is not a new phenomenon. In 1976 there was an outbreak of Legionnaire's Disease in Philadelphia, caused by bacterial infiltration of a hotel air conditioning system. That outbreak led to a revolution in the design and regulation of HVAC systems. Today, the evidence of airborne spread of the novel coronavirus in poorly ventilated buildings calls for a similar re-examination of how we manage indoor environmental quality.

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