

EXPERTS

← Go Back

Combating COVID-19 through plausible Initiatives and Innovation



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COVID-19 has affected the infrastructure and the real estate sector both; bringing the construction industry to a shrieking standstill worldwide. In order to enable a positive outlook for 2020, we as architectural, engineering,

and construction stakeholders should look for ways to alleviate the damage and stay steady until the economy returns to a solid surface. While the balance shapes between our work ethics and family life, the sheer audacity of hope to deal with the pandemic together has renewed the ideals of empathy and inclusiveness in our society.

The COVID-19 Outbreak

Anticipating the 'Great Recession' aftermath on the global economy, the world has braced itself for the COVID-19 recession. As the countries worldwide are dealing with this catastrophe and the further unprecedented repercussions thereof; escaping the adverse effects of the pandemic doesn't seem to be a very likely scenario for India as well. We have been a larger part of the intertwined nature of the global economic supply chain with a slowly coming to its feet real estate sector. Hence, the crisis has come as a dual whammy for our nation as well.

COVID impact and Government Initiatives

Starting with the direct impact on real estate, the epicenter lies amidst the construction industry, with the immediate extension to trade of raw materials to be utilized in the construction process. Considering the time after the lockdown, delayed procurement of raw materials would mean reduced construction activities for ongoing projects in the coming months. The uncertainties around labor returning to construction sites from their hometown post lockdown are the other adverse impacts that will result in an increase in the cost of construction.

However, predicting the larger perspective, the extraordinary times can be seen as an opportunity to give a thrust to the 'Make in India' campaign. Within this regard, the Government of India has been encouraging companies that manufacture raw materials such as steel, aluminum, to increase production capacity and hold a larger market share. The same concept can be applied to other domestic construction industry suppliers and manufacturers in India like solar panel manufacturing companies.

Therefore, it can be concluded that seeing this situation as an opportunity in disguise, enough measures can be taken at the National level in order to protect our Indian business sentiments.

The three-month moratorium on loan repayment was a much-needed breather to all homeowners and specifically the lower-middle and middle-class segments. This is a major announcement by Reserve bank of India concerning borrowers many of whom are facing the menace of loss of income owing to the lockdown. The moratorium covers both the loan principal and interest, however, must not be confused with the 'waiver'. The moratorium on loan EMI is just a postponement for installments falling due between March 1, 2020, and May 31, 2020.

Another way that the Government has tried to alleviate the damage is by introducing 'The Garib Kalyan' scheme which is a relief package launched on March 26, 2020, by the Finance Minister of India. The package amounts to Rs 1.7 Lakh Crore to ease the stress of economically weaker sections. A part of this amount, Rs 31,000 Crore has been funded for the welfare of migrant workers and construction laborers to ease disruption caused due to the lockdown.

Is the Corona pandemic a force majeure event? Our construction industry is the 2nd largest employer after the agriculture sector and is estimated to have engaged around 51 million people. With such a scale, the COVID-19 hit on the market that we are witnessing today has been massive.

The major setback that developers and builders are facing is the timely delivery of real estate projects. Therefore, Force Majeure is a provision under the Real Estate Regulation and Development Act to aid developers in case the conditions beyond their control hamper the timely construction of a project. Force Majeure means 'unavoidable accident, chance occurrence'. The framework by RERA mentions that the representative of a real estate project will be granted an extension of registration of the said project for a maximum period of one year if force Majeure conditions are met. It is essential to determine whether the coronavirus outbreak will be deemed as a force majeure event or not.

Augmenting Connected Practices in the Construction Industry

Perhaps, making the most out of these unprecedented times is the immediate and the best course of action. Hence, the architectural, engineering, and construction industry stakeholders have also come up with a plethora of initiatives to engage customers, protect employers, and sustain connectedness during work from home phase through cloud-based solutions. We have not been as connected as citizens of the world in the decades gone by. The workforce is focused on everyday goals, while the organizations function on a result-oriented approach. Communication has become crisper, real-time, and to the point.

Inviting and engaging customers. Sales via video conferencing, virtual walkthrough experiences, and convenient online payment gateways can provide aid to developers. Optimizing technology and moreover making it a usual practice to gather sales will take some time. Innovation such as artificial intelligence-based chatbots, the Internet of things, and leveraging 3D imaging to replicate the experience of a site can transform the way the industry operates and functions.

Distant Project Management Practices. Gone are the times when the idea of technology replacing humans was largely based on fear and insecurity of termination of manpower. In the meantime, through cloud-based connected practices in the construction industry or precisely the present 'work from home arrangement' can be made successful while using cloud-BIM integration technology.

Cloud computing technology like Building Information Management (BIM) Development is a major transformational force that will produce another wave of change across the construction industry. This technology enables real-time collaboration on complicated built forms. Apart from being useful at the planning/ design and construction level this technology can prove to be a major game-changer on various stages – operations and maintenance, facility management, energy efficiency, and building life-cycle management.

Should one let go? Allow unfolding an observation here. Amongst all the resources that we are collecting, time is the most valuable asset, and adapting to technology through action or deliberation can save us a lot of time, even post-pandemic. The way the present generation has adapted to the changed scenario, it can be largely speculated that there will be an increased tendency to switch to software operating methodology.

Traditionally, the AEC industry has shied away from the extensive use of technology and now we have arrived at a point in history, where remaining puritanical is no longer a choice. Every disruption has a hidden meaning, let this one be interpreted to coax and guide us all in the AEC industry to be more collaborative, connected, and transparent.

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