

COVID forces us to reevaluate how we inhabit buildings



Jason Streb

For better or worse, people are paying attention to their physical space now more than ever. As the region and state continue reopening, our view of the commonplace is now seen through the lens of the pandemic. For the past few months fear, isolation and the virtualization of the world has disrupted our industries, markets and policies. Enduring a typical Rochester spring certainly didn't contribute to the stay-at-home experience.

The term social distancing has entered our lives along with an inundation of news related to our 'new normal.' Yet as the weather finally breaks and society opens back up we are confronting a world full of speculation and doubt. The work from home experiment has yielded the most uncertainty of whether we truly need offices, schools, etc. Our buildings and spaces are not so much in question as is the way we interact with the people in them. The apparent success of the virtual office and classroom has taught many things. For most, it showed we have the technology and capability to perform these tasks efficiently. Perhaps surprisingly though, is that it showed us that we truly prefer in-person human experiences. Survey upon survey have found most workers enjoy the option to work from home however still want a return to the office. Ask any parent of a school-aged child and you'll know quickly how they feel regarding online education classrooms. The biggest takeaway from this forced experiment isn't that we can successfully operate in a virtual world — it's that we don't prefer to.

This pandemic has and will continue to affect and influence every aspect of our lives. The way we design new spaces will change. How we renovate and retrofit existing spaces will also change. At current, we are seeing restaurants, offices and stores scramble with make-shift alterations to accommodate distancing. New standards of spatial arrangements and layouts will obviously focus on limiting interaction and physically distancing inhabitants. As distancing

efforts get incorporated into our built environment, we need to be cautious not to eliminate the human element altogether. If nothing else, this pandemic has shown us that we need interaction more than ever. It has shown that we need to be purposeful and equitable in how we construct our buildings and public spaces.

Major socio-economic events have always influenced the design of our buildings. Architects and architecture responded to the pandemic in 1918 by incorporating more natural light and air and reducing excess ornamentation. The need for fresh air led to new ways of designing buildings to include passive heating and cooling systems. This eventually led the way to modern HVAC systems we see today. All white kitchens of porcelain and metal started to become fashionable as people viewed the materials' color and hardness as 'cleanlier.' Today, we are already seeing our buildings focus heavily on sanitation and cleanliness. Touchless everything will become the standard. Technology related to this is already commonplace in restrooms, but you can expect to see it everywhere. Gestural motion technology as well as voice control and facial recognition will also be popular. These systems exist on our personal tech devices but so far have lagged in the building and construction sector. Touch-based surfaces and technology have already become a thing of the past. Just as designers in 1918 became aware of light and air, today's designers will be heavily focused on materials and supply chains.

What other things can we expect to see as a result of the pandemic? For now — temporary solutions such as signage and floor markings are most prevalent in every building. Yet a one-size fits all solution does not work. Truly thoughtful and nuanced solutions are necessary for each industry. Below is my prediction for how buildings/architecture will change for different industries.

Dining

While the physical space of restaurants may not change dramatically, the very act of dining most certainly will. We can expect to see cleaning and sanitization incorporated into the 'theater' of the dining experience. Restaurant furniture will likely transition to cleaner lined, lighter weight pieces. This will allow spaces to be cleaned and re-configured easily and efficiently, providing necessary ebb and flow. Pending new and updated health regulations, shared communal services in dining rooms, such as condiment areas and buffets, will likely be removed. Tableside pay and kiosk style ordering will also increase. Restaurants will also recognize the cost associated with a more intimate dining experience. By placing a premium on more space per table, diners will likely yield a higher cost to enjoy a more intimate experience. Some European models have shown individual temporary structures be-

ing constructed on site to offer additional and extremely private options (think the igloos at the Roc Holiday Village).

Office spaces

The death of the open office has long been written about over the past few years, citing noise and productivity concerns. While we won't see the return to individual private offices, we will see more employee separation. Common spaces will be transitioned to provide additional workstations as the square footage need per employee grows. Defined traffic patterns within open offices will develop to limit chance encounters. These routes will either be physically defined by temporary and movable partition pieces or furniture or more likely by graphic signage that will proliferate walls, floor and ceilings.

Above all, people are social animals and they crave interaction along with purpose driven work. The necessity of the office isn't its conveniences, it's the opportunity for impromptu dialogue and collaboration. Virtual interactions can't supplement these organic gatherings.

Schools

Global architecture firm Gensler has been conducting research on the complex topic of re-opening schools. What they've discovered is the classrooms of the future need to be agile, flexible and adaptable for both short-term and long-term strategies. Spaces will need to be quickly and easily transformed from traditional teaching environments to lounge-like social spaces.

"Schools are not just a collection of spaces. They are complex ecosystems through which students move each day on their learning journey. To meet students' needs, schools must provide a level of choice, diversity, multimodality, and flexibility. While virtual learning will likely continue, the visceral experience of place remains relevant," says Gensler researchers Mark Thaler and Patricia Nobre.

"By thinking about schools as ecosystems, school leaders will have the ability to not only use a variety of spaces to their best advantage, they can also be better prepared to meet an uncertain future."

The overall positive outcome of this situation is that it is forcing the design and construction industry to reevaluate how we inhabit buildings. Purposeful understanding of how we interact and move within a space are being thrust to the forefront of design decisions. While many COVID-related design strategies are short-term solutions, one can expect larger paradigm shifts in just about every building type. The most successful solutions will find a way to maintain safety while prioritizing human connections.

Jason Streb is an architect and associate at CPL and past president of AIA Rochester.