COVID-19 TREND UPDATE

What's in a Space?

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THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON PHYSICAL
SPACES AND HOW WE GATHER

AN OVERVIEW

What's in a Space?

COVID-19 HAS NO DOUBT HAD A STRONG TEMPORARY IMPACT ON OUR APPROACH TO PHYSICAL SPACES, SHUTTING DOWN SCHOOLS, WORKPLACES AND RETAILERS SEEMINGLY OVERNIGHT. Many physical spaces have been creatively reimagined to serve emergent short-term needs, such as hotels and arenas becoming makeshift hospitals or testing sites, and parking lots serving as restaurants and places of worship.

More interesting than the temporary changes, though, are the bigger debates surfacing on the utility of physical versus digital spaces in the future. On the one hand, physical spaces can be critical for facilitating community interaction and meeting acute service needs. On the other hand, digital spaces offer a variety of benefits, including convenience, less risk of infection and reduced carbon emissions. In the long term, we will likely see a hybrid approach that allows physical spaces to continue providing value without sacrificing safety and well-being. There is also no doubt that the architects, city planners and designers of tomorrow will be busier than ever as we ask them to reimagine the physical world and how we live in it every day.

Recommended Reads

- The history of past pandemics and design
- Expected shifts in our built environment
- COVID-19 highlights need for digital accessibility

The Home 🏠

COVID-19 HAS RESULTED IN HOMES BECOMING A CATCH-ALL SPACE DURING THE SHUTDOWN – A MAKESHIFT WORKPLACE, SCHOOL, GYM, PLACE OF WORSHIP, RESTAURANT AND MORE. With homes playing such a big role in people's lives, the importance placed on them has increased greatly, leading many to prioritize home improvements and make their space more comfortable and functional for themselves and their families.

Real estate agents, designers and architects foresee the coronavirus impacting the features that renters and home buyers look for in a house. Many predict Americans will place a greater value on increased square footage, storage, dedicated office spaces, personal outdoor areas and even a desire for more entryway space to disinfect after trips outside. One recent study reported that 40% of urbanites would consider giving up city life as a result of COVID-19, leading some experts to predict a potential revived interest in suburban living.

Recommended Reads

- Real estate agents predict how COVID-19 could transform the home
- Architects discuss apartment design shifts
- Americans consider leaving cities

The Workplace

DESPITE INITIAL HURDLES IN THE TRANSITION FROM OFFICE TO HOME, MANY AMERICANS HAVE GROWN ACCUSTOMED TO REMOTE WORK, WITH 54% REPORTING THAT THEY WOULD LIKE TO PRIMARILY CONTINUE WORKING FROM HOME. As such, several large companies, including Facebook and Twitter, are leading the charge to allow some employees to do so permanently. However, while employees appreciate the newfound flexibility, employers are eager to ensure productivity levels remain high, with some even testing new software systems to monitor productivity and track at-home computer use.

Still, a return to the office is necessary for many industries, and employers are working quickly to make these spaces safe as quickly as possible. The new-normal workplace could include measures such as temperature checks, alternating schedules, operating at reduced capacity, creating signage to better direct the flow of foot traffic, adding plexiglass barriers to previously open spaces and more. Beyond safety concerns, companies will likely face challenges in bringing their employees back into the office space, such as parents unable to return to the office while childcare options remain limited.

Recommended Reads

- [Changes to the workplace](#)
- [Questions employers should ask](#) before reopening
- [Pros and cons](#) of working from home

Schools

SCHOOLS WILL ALMOST CERTAINLY LOOK DIFFERENT WHEN IN-PERSON TEACHING IS REINTRODUCED, THOUGH CHANGES WILL NOT BE UNIFORM. Universities and local districts are making their own decisions as the situation progresses, with some planning for continued online teaching, others promising a return to in-person teaching in the fall and many creating hybrid models. Class size reductions are being discussed across the country, along with rethinking spaces and activities where crowds gather, such as in cafeterias and during recess and bus transport.

The continuation of virtual learning is also making many teachers and students rethink their plans for the fall. Some recent high school graduates are opting to postpone college or attend a school closer to home, as the hefty cost of higher education feels less justified without the in-person aspect. There is also great apprehension surrounding a return to in-person teaching, with one in five teachers saying they are unlikely to go back to school if their classrooms open this fall, and six in 10 parents saying they would likely pursue at-home learning options this fall if given the choice. In order for students and educators to fully reengage with traditional educational spaces, school administrations will have to work hard to ensure that the comfort and safety of students and staff alike are adequately addressed.

Recommended Reads

- COVID-19's impact on higher education
- Educators and parents are hesitant about returning to normal in fall
- K–12 schools warn of drastic cutbacks
- How will schools reopen?

Public Spaces

WITH CLOSE CONTACT FACILITATING THE SPREAD OF COVID-19, PLANNERS ARE BEING TASKED WITH REIMAGINING THESE SPACES TO ENSURE THEY REMAIN AVAILABLE TO COMMUNITY MEMBERS WITHOUT SACRIFICING PUBLIC SAFETY. In fact, many cities have already begun efforts to creatively reimagine public space by taking measures such as widening bike lanes and closing streets to cars so pedestrians and businesses can maintain social distancing rules while still getting out and about.

Experts are also predicting that the attention the coronavirus has brought to parks and outdoor public areas will lead to a renaissance of public green and outdoor spaces. Even public bathrooms are being reimagined, with the installation of more automatic features and surfaces that are easier to clean. The layout, design and function of public spaces will continue to shift for some time to come, with the strongest impact felt in dense urban areas.

Recommended Reads

- Short video on COVID-19's possible impact on public spaces
- Changing urban spaces
- Rethinking public bathrooms

Commercial and Communal Space

COVID-19 HAS FORCED SOCIETIES AROUND THE WORLD TO DRASTICALLY RETHINK THEIR APPROACH TO PHYSICAL STORES AND COMMUNAL MEETING PLACES. Some activities, such as depositing checks, meeting with a financial planner or scheduling a simple doctor visit, will likely continue to trend toward digital as it offers a more convenient, efficient method of engagement over physical visits.

Some spaces, such as retail stores, are experimenting with hybrid methods that use technology to help bring customers back into stores without sacrificing safety. For instance, location-targeted messaging can help manage store density by reminding shoppers of safe in-store traffic flows via app notifications or text messages, and the expansion of mobile checkouts and contactless payment can help reduce physical interaction.

However, other activities are harder to shift to digital, as the activity itself is centered on connectivity, engagement and the physical experience. For instance, a visit to a café or movie theater is often less about the coffee or film and more about the ambiance or experience as a whole. Similarly, houses of worship, libraries and community centers offer much-needed social interaction for many, especially seniors, children and socially vulnerable populations.

Recommended Reads

- Brick-and-mortar retail stores may adopt safety measures and redesign spaces
- Retail experts on how stores and brands can adapt to COVID-19
- Communities may rally to revive local retailers