

# Architecture post-COVID

## Description

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What are the spatial implications of social isolation? Demonstrators arranged themselves on a social-distancing grid at the Athens May Day gathering, conjuring up a scenario of a gridded world, where citizens move about as if on a chessboard or an early version of SimCity.




Architects gravitate towards extreme conditions as a way of unleashing new design ideas: cities on Mars, underwater restaurants, a nightclubs in a graveyard, a post-apocalyptic hotel. Such challenges provide a way to interpret the familiar in terms of the strange, amplifying aspects of ordinary life as something extraordinary. But now we are really living in the extraordinary condition.

Architecture adapts to changing circumstances and social practices. See the interesting article by Vanessa Chang that includes an account of modernism as a response to cholera and other epidemics: The post-pandemic style. Thereâ??s at least one architectural ideas competition called Pandemic Architecture pursuing the implications of COVID-19.

If clients with the funds are still available, architects, designers, planners and engineers will renovate, refit and retrofit our buildings, spaces and infrastructures to accommodate any new circumstances. Post-pandemic economists predict recession, resource scarcity, unemployment, rising national debt, austerity, and further inequalities in wealth distribution. These dire outcomes will affect priorities in the creation, modification and maintenance of the built environment. See for example the Guardian article about the shutdown of a Google smart city project.

In the following I will assume that planners, designers and other citizens are able to adapt creatively and adjust to new challenges in the built environment: new spatial practices, new configurations of

space, leading no doubt to new regulations. Here are some predictions.

## Design against contagion

**Pandemic briefing**: Temporary accommodations created for the current crisis become hard wired into post-COVID architecture. I can imagine a list of new requirements for office or public buildings: hand washing stations, design for directional flow, separate entries and exits, wide circulation spaces and congregating areas, removal of waiting rooms, wider doorways, wide pavement areas, a plethora of signage, avoidance of blind corners, touch-free mechanisms and switches, use of materials hostile to viruses, greater provision for bike travel and storage, safe changing rooms and storage for stockpiles of personal protective equipment (PPE) and cleaning gear. At a bigger scale, supermarket carparks could be designed to be easily adapted as drive-through testing sites. The designers of exhibition centres, sports arenas and parks may factor in emergency conversion of these spaces into temporary hospitals and care facilities.

**Surveillance culture**: More controversially, we might encounter increased digital surveillance, e.g. digital monitoring that warns people in spaces when occupancy levels reach risk thresholds, not to mention incorporating data from apps for contact tracing into localised warning systems.

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**Home working**: Post COVID-19 architecture is likely to exhibit a number of characteristics, speeding up current trends. One such trend is flexible home working for those who can. In my work setting, thanks to the growth in digitalisation and networked communications, people across the spectrum of university workers report little change in what they are able to accomplish: reading, writing, reviewing, processing information, and meeting with others online. It took more time for some than for others to adapt, but I predict this jolt into necessity will influence employees and their bossesâ?? preparedness to work online and at home post-COVID.




**Back to work**: There are advantages of working from home, but perhaps we will value enhanced centralised office settings as a scarce commodity that provides casual social interaction, availability of supplies and specialised equipment, proximal engagement with clients, customers, students, trainees and others under the workerâ??s duty of care, and respite from care duties at home. Most commentators agree that employers and workers will find it difficult to revert to the usual pattern of where and when work happens.

**Dying cities**: â??We are not going to be in big cities as muchâ?• said Marc Benioff CEO of IT firm Salesforce in an interview. Iâ??ve already heard of firms relinquishing their leases on office space and moving out. That saves space and travel costs. Some companies will still want shop fronts and showcases, but these can be smaller, shared and located strategically, as was already happening in the case of some retail pre-COVID. The economics of urban space usage would change and affect the character of towns and cities. Conventional office space might be in oversupply.

**Neighbourhoods**: Itâ??s appealing to think thereâ??s a move towards greater attention to the home, with employer resources directed to facilitate more effective home working, local shared work environments and resources (something like local libraries). In fact, the idea of such ideal, flexible home-work environments has long fueled architectural speculation about vibrant, diverse, and mixed use neighbourhoods.

**Large gatherings**: Live performance venues could change as they are configured to hold fewer people, with audience members isolated from one another. I can imagine perspex screens slotted between theatre seats, able to be inserted and removed according to changes in the levels of infection risk.

Performers often rely on live shows to bring in the revenue. Content delivered online will have to be monetised more vigorously than at present. Events organisers may have to devise other means (online) to compensate for the reduction in sociability from attending live performances, and content normally available at live venues may become more exclusive. Constraints on the production side of arts, entertainment and sports events will also affect what will be delivered and how. Colleagues here in ECA are looking into creative responses to the conditions in Edinburgh in light of Festival cancellations.

**Domesticated quarantine**: Homes may need to accommodate people who are recovering, or are free of severe symptoms but are quarantined so as not to infect others. I have video conferenced with several students quarantined in hotel rooms when they returned to their home countries. As travel and tourisms drops, so the stock of available hotel rooms increases. Local councils could offer hotel developers incentives to design for adaptability. Local councils could take over approved hotels for quarantine and hospital recovery. Rooms in houses and flats could be designed for quick adaptation as isolation rooms, with a glass panelled door, consideration of airflow, a small airlock for the transfer of provisions, storage for PPE and of course an ensuite bathroom.

## Where contagion happens

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Much more needs to be said, and tried. Designing for pandemics could just be good design anyway: access for all and accommodation for all, even the sick and those at risk. We think most buildings and spaces are meant to protect their occupants. Most designers would build flexibility into their projects, so that they can be re-arranged, refurbished and extended. Initially these scenarios suggest an architecture that keeps people apart. But architecture has always had to deal with the public and the private, crowds, small groups, couples and people on their own, and moving between these conditions.

## References

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## Notes

There are two other trajectories where thereâ??s **less** scope for architectural innovation.

- Thereâ??s a slim chance this particular pandemic and its impacts will end soon with a vaccine or other measure (effective tracking, testing and localised interventions). The circumstances may fall from mainstream attention, at least in the developed world. With reduced prominence, planning and design for pandemics could continue as a niche concern by a minority of advocates. This is like reverting to the status of virus experts, advisors and agencies whose warnings seemed to have gone unheeded until a pandemic really did take effect globally. Iâ??ve caught up with the BBC documentary from 2018 on the likely prospects of a flue pandemic: Contagion The BBC Four Pandemic. Did people take that documentary seriously?
- If the pandemic persists for a long time, occurring in several waves, then concern about planning and designing for pandemics may get subsumed within a portfolio of risk management challenges: security, terrorism, climate change, floods, fires, tornados, resource depletion, mass migrations. The threat of pandemic may be just one global challenge among many, acquiring no particular prominence. As a variant, the pandemic response gets formalised into regulations. Once they are established then the scope for creative responses is reduced.
- My colleague Suzanne Ewing alerted me to some further references
    - https://www.gsd.harvard.edu/2020/04/the-pandemic-may-instigate-a-radical-transformation-in-building-and-designing-for-health-but-not-everyone-will-benefit-equally/
    - https://www.newstatesman.com/world/europe/2020/04/tale-three-cities-places-transformed-pandemics-across-history
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    - https://archinect.com/news/article/150194254/princeton-soa-manual-of-urban-distance-awarded-covid-19-research-funding
    - https://www.citylab.com/design/2020/04/bathroom-home-design-history-disease-hygiene-coronavirus/609745/?utm_source=fbb%3Futm_source%3Dfbb&fbclid=IwAR18BXHhNI0BP9LF
- Iâ??ve focussed above on office work, but commercial kitchens, factories, construction sites and other places where people work in close proximity pose particular challenges. See Molteni, Megan. 2020. Why meatpacking plants have become Covid-19 hot spots. *Wired*, 7 May. Available online: https://www.wired.com/story/why-meatpacking-plants-have-become-covid-19-hot-spots/ (accessed 10 May 2020).

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