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Coronavirus: What next for architecture?

By Ike Ijeh | 14 April 2020

Britain embraced an architectural vision of a better world after the shock of WWII. Ike Ijeh asks if coronavirus might have the same effect

Source: Shutterstock

Park Hill was a pioneering part of the post-war construction boom which promised people a better life. It has recently been given a new lease of life by developer Urban Splash working with Hawkins Brown, Studio Egret West and Mikhail Riches

The current coronavirus pandemic represents the world's biggest political, social and economic shock since the Second World War. While, mercifully, we do not have to contend with military hostilities, the way of life of virtually every person on the planet has been disrupted beyond recognition and in a manner that would have been utterly unthinkable just weeks ago.

But what happens when the outbreak has ended? Will things instantly revert back to normal? Will building sites fill up again, planes fly again, public squares teem with people, offices fill up, commuters get back into their cars? Or will there be longer lasting changes that will see the way of life we have all taken for granted for much of the late 20th and early 21st centuries permanently changed forever?

The Second World War offers a sobering precedent. Once it ended, life in Britain did not revert back to its pre-1939 state, instead it assumed a completely different socio-political trajectory that still defines our way of life today. Famously the victorious wartime government suffered a shock defeat in a general election. A new reformist government established the welfare state in Britain and the NHS, rightly the source of so much adulation in our current circumstances, was formed.

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The war also had a significant impact on architecture. Modernism, largely and sceptically viewed here as a middle-class European affectation before the war and practised only by the likes of Berthold Lubetkin and Charles Holden, was suddenly established as the default British style. The steel and concrete of Modernism made it quicker to fulfil the urgent need to build millions of new homes and stylistically looked forwards to a better future.

To date, these new homes formed the largest house-building programme this country has ever seen and the 1950s consumer boom in which they were built was partially encouraged by the bitter memory of wartime privations. This boom led indirectly to the smartphones and domestic appliances we enjoy today

Will coronavirus have a similar impact on architecture once its threat has receded? Here we ask some key players from the architecture industry what they think the outbreak's long-term impact will be.

Architects:

Simon Erridge, director at Bennetts Associates

Sarah Featherstone, founding director, Featherstone Young

Justin Nicholls, founder, Fathom Architects (Responses were also provided by colleagues Adam Clemens, Rebecca Taylor and Tom Bulmer)

Henry Squire, partner at Squire and Partners

Judith Sykes, director Expedition Engineering

OFFICES

Source: Hufton+Crow

The need to mix with colleagues at work is a key part of going in to the office. This is Fletcher Priest's White Chapel building in London's east end for Derwent

The crisis has driven millions of people to work successfully from home. Do we need to go back to office working?

Simon Erridge: As architects the current crisis has taught us that we are more adaptable than we thought. In the space of a week we have transitioned from a studio-based practice in three cities to a virtual office of 70 people. The technology has made this transition almost seamless and we are able to carry on in much the same way as before. But there is a caveat; to be effective, remote working must be relatively rigid, meetings and conversations require pre-planning and organising to be effective. This formality is fine but has made us long for one vital aspect of office life; serendipity. We miss spending at least some of our time working alongside team-mates in a studio environment which encourages chance encounters and shared ideas. We have learned to be more effective remote workers but we still need to spend some of our time in a physical office to produce our best work.

Sarah Featherstone: I certainly hope there will be more homeworking after this is over. There might also be the prospect of more people coming to and staying in the countryside which could invigorate villages by creating more places to

The Coach: This is not the new normal

Construction industry warned lockdown could last six months

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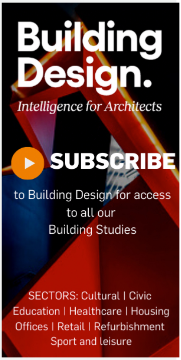

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meet and share and encouraging the communal re-appropriation of old agricultural buildings. Providing potential childcare issues are resolved, this kind of working can definitely be more efficient.

Fathom Architects: The office is still important for social bonding. Current remote working communication tools generally rely on a specific purpose for making contact. In offices communication happens informally, often with conversations being unrelated to work. This interaction expands your network of friends who are invaluable for mental health, while creating informal routes which facilitate creativity and problem solving.

Henry Squire: The culture of our office is incredibly important. We are a team and, just like a premiership football club, our best performance involves us working together to focus on a single end result. Our teams support each other mentally and emotionally as well as in their design work, something which relies on a level of face-to-face human interaction. Leaving home for the office is also an important mental shift and change of scene. For me home is where I switch off from the working day, to relax with family and friends. It's harder to separate work and personal life when the physical spaces overlap.

Judith Sykes: We'll still need offices to gather together and share ideas but they might not need to be as big as they are at the moment. We've already seen trends towards flexible working with an estimated 20 to 25% of the workforce comprising home workers. I think this will accelerate.

PUBLIC SPACE

Source: Shutterstock

People gravitate towards Townshend and Stanton Williams' Granary Square at Argent's King's Cross redevelopment

The crisis has taught us to treat public spaces with caution. How do we reoccupy these safely?

SE: Our lives are spent balancing risk and reward and, as the risk of infection recedes, we will begin to venture out again, as we did after 9/11, 7/7, Sars and bird flu. Humans are naturally sociable; we thrive on social gatherings and live events. Pubs, restaurants and theatres will re-open and we will find safe ways of making this happen. Like Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, who learned from previous epidemics and appear to have managed covid-19 better than most, we have to hope that we too will have strategies in place which will allow us to control and contain the risk, even if mass testing and tracking of our movements may be the price we have to pay for our freedom to go to the theatre.

SF: People will inevitably want to come together again even if that linkage might happen in new and different ways. But do I believe that the virus will be a threat to the principle of social gathering in public places? Definitely not.

FA: Hopefully, the lockdown has enabled us to become more respectful of each other. Safety begins with the feeling that you have a right to be in a space and to be comfortable in it. The first obstacle is making people feel that it's OK to start occupying these spaces again. Then we need to provide facilities to help people feel safe such as handwashing stations and clear refuge locations.

JS: I agree with Sarah Featherstone, public spaces are essential. But a key way in which the virus may affect these may be improvements in air quality. Even before the outbreak, poor air quality led to multiple deaths so if the virus causes a permanent fall in pollution that will lead to safer public spaces. Stanford University has calculated that the reduction in air pollution in China caused by current economic disruption has saved approximately 20 times more lives there than have been lost due to the infection. That's an incredible statistic.

DENSITY

Source: Shutterstock

Did high urban densities help spread the virus quickly? This is the densely populated Monster Building in Hong Kong

The governor of New York has said that one reason why the virus spread so quickly was because of of high urban densities. Could this spell the end of densification?

SE: The reality is that the problem we face is universal. Cities are hit hard as there are more people but the virus has no respect for boundaries, urban, suburban or rural. Just as the density of cities creates the close proximities upon which pandemics thrive, dense cities also present opportunities to overcome this and any future pandemics. Proximity to the best healthcare, knowledge districts leading innovation and creating solutions, a younger and more resilient population, the potential for more focused implementation of mass testing. Dense cities will thrive because they also present some of the solutions.

SF: We can't avoid density; it's not realistic for us all to start living in bungalows. The bigger threat is population growth and regulations should be in place to try and discourage this. For instance, people should really be having less children, 2.4 is the optimum figure but having no more than one or two would have a huge impact. The way we live has contributed to this crisis.

FA: No. This would be an over-reaction to poor preparation and mobilisation in New York. Other high-density cities such as Singapore, Toyko, Taipei and Seoul and are doing well. Let's ask them for some lessons learnt.

HS: Definitely not. Cities are an integral part of our society and have survived a long history of pandemics. Urban living brings humanity together in fantastic ways and has immense cultural and community benefits. Coronavirus has spread fast in New York, but other equally dense cities have dealt better and faster with quashing the spread. Rural areas are also reliant on human interaction with local pubs, social clubs, shops and community groups acting as a fertile breeding ground for viruses.

WELLBEING

Source: Tim Crocker

Norwich's Stirling Prize-winning Goldsmith Street by Mikhail Riches with Cathy Hawley was designed to foster a strong sense of community

Self-isolation may protect physical health but can be detrimental to mental health. What, if anything, can future design do to improve our wellbeing?

SE: Forced to spend weeks and months in self-isolation, the design and quality of our housing stock has never felt more important to our wellbeing, nor more unfairly skewed to those with good-quality space in which they can both live and work. Just as we need to refocus on the need for quality housing for all, we also need to harness the re-energised sense of community that is one of the few positives to emerge in the last few weeks as people volunteer to help each other through the crisis. The coming together of neighbourhoods has helped tackle loneliness and contributed to personal wellbeing, even without physical contact. We must provide communities with the facilities to build on their newly energised sense of purpose and engage with this new sense of belonging.

SF: Slowing down the way we move by getting people out of cars and getting them walking and cycling will create more chances for social contact. Physical isolation has meant that our network of digital and online communications has become even more vital and the lockdown has actually led to people interacting more with their families and communities. We also need to invest in the health service so we're fitter and healthier and more resilient to the risks from pandemics.

FA: We need to build strong communities. We can design for communities, encourage social interaction before pandemics so people know their neighbours. This includes provision of local shops and facilities as well as internal and external communal spaces in residential developments. Homes need better connections to the outside world. Self-isolation can then be achieved while still waving to neighbours you know, watching passers-by, having a conversation across a balcony or over the garden fence. We're looking at recent innovations in retirement living for clues.

JS: Not having to commute has placed a new emphasis on the importance of physical health and exercise which is hugely important and could lead to a significant expansion in digital and green infrastructure. It's also had a profound impact on the aging population, forcing us to consider how we better design for and support them.

CLIMATE CHANGE

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Source: Shutterstock

The focus on climate change has shifted to stopping coronavirus spreading

Coronavirus has shown that climate change might not actually be humanity's most pressing challenge after all. Does architecture need to wake up to the fact that epidemiology might become the new environmentalism?

SE: Climate change remains the number one threat to our existence. Pandemics are incredibly disruptive, but they can be overcome. Climate change represents the long slow decline of life as we know it. However, the current situation does offer us a choice. We've seen a remarkable reduction in air pollution in cities across the world. When this is all over, do we go back to our old ways or will it have exposed the profligacy of our pre-covid lifestyles? We'll probably travel less, we'll continue to work remotely as much as we can, we'll value our homes, communities and our healthcare infrastructure more, but we still have no choice but to maintain the trajectory to net-zero carbon.

SF: The virus isn't a permanent threat, climate change is. But the virus has given us the opportunity to see that the kind of radical change we need to save the planet is feasible. Less aviation, less car use, less commuting, less pollution, more working from home, more sustainable transport, more localism, more responsible agriculture, these are the same things the environment needs.

FA: We need to find the answer to the coronavirus and climate change. Sustainability remains our most pressing concern because climate change is only one aspect of the issue. It requires us to determine how we meet the needs of the present such as surviving a pandemic without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs. Changing our patterns of governance and behaviour to ensure future generations inherit a society which has reduced its reliance on complex global supply chains for things like food and energy. Many of the current responses to the difficulty of carrying on daily life are also good examples of a sustainable, low-carbon future. The increased use of bicycles for local trips within quiet, walkable neighbourhoods being a good example.

INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL

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Source: Shutterstock

Restrictions on travel have grounded most of the world's airline fleets

With aviation fleets grounded and question marks over the risks posed by globalisation should we go back to business as usual once the outbreak has ended?

SE: We have all become aware of how much of our time is spent travelling, and to have that time back through working remotely has been a revelation. But it's hard to believe that there won't always be some essential air travel, even if there'll probably be more scrutiny of whether a flight is really necessary. Face-to-face meetings and visits to international clients and sites are, after all, important to the way our industry works. International travel brings us valuable experiences and perspectives that we can't easily get any other way.

SF: It's not just a question of globalisation; our entire economic system must change. We've already seen how socially minded a "right-wing" UK government has been in dealing with this crisis. Afterwards we'll need to reevaluate the role of the state and create a more balanced eco-system that doesn't prioritise economics and GDP but sees a much fairer distribution between social and environmental concerns.

FA: If fewer people will be able to afford travel those that do will hopefully only do so when they must. Coronavirus may prove to be an important initiator in progressing environmental conversations, nationally and internationally.

JS: Are we seeing the peak of globalisation? Possibly. But the more pressing question is, can we become more resilient? Can we go back to more seasonal harvests and local food produce rather than having shelves fully stocked with the same produce 365 days a year? Resilience will become the key rather than efficiency. It's also important to note that sustainable travel modes like cycling have the potential to make twice the contribution to GDP that aviation does. The aviation sector is worth around £22bn but Cycling UK has found that if cycling increased to 25% of annual journeys by 2050, it could yield a cumulative annual benefit of £42bn.

SUPPLY CHAINS

Source: Shutterstock

Could coronavirus promote a move towards more resilient, local supply chains and less reliance on shipping goods around the world?

Border closures have caused large, international supply chains to collapse. Should we move towards smaller, more efficient and less risky supply chains in the future?

SE: Locally procured building products and materials reduce carbon emissions, provide distinctive local character and contribute to the local economy. But local supply chains in the UK are limited in scope, and many of the more complex and high-performing products essential to modern buildings need to be sourced globally. Like the automotive industry, the construction industry is currently dependent on global trade. But it is tempting to envisage a future where using more locally sourced materials is possible and there will be opportunities particularly in the rising demand for net-zero carbon construction materials. Could the UK develop a home-grown structural timber industry for instance? And could re-use of materials and the circular economy present opportunities for local supply chains that can't be globalised?

SF: Greater reliance on local supply chains is inevitable but it will happen slowly over time. This will ensure the industry is no longer beholden to mass volume housebuilders building thousands of homes based on prescribed house-types and will open the market to smaller, more nimble contractors more willing to experiment with delivering Passivhaus and zero-carbon design products.

FA: Our resilience as a country is dependent on having a balance of economic sectors – primary (farming, mining), secondary (manufacturing) and the service industry (banking, retail, tourism and so on). This will provide the ultimate resilience to many crises in health, the economy and the environment.

JS: This is the way the industry has to go. It's ridiculous that we're creating buildings that rely on materials such as granite sourced from China. A greater reliance on local materials and manufacturing is good for the UK and the environment.

Coronavirus