



ARTS

How coronavirus will change our homes — decontamination closet, anyone?

Lord Foster and others on the ways architecture will change after the pandemic



The very wipeable interior of the 5G lab at Leeza
ALAMY

Jonathan Morrison | Wednesday May 20 2020, 12.01am, The Times

Share    

Save 

Ask some of the world's leading architects what the legacy of the pandemic will be and they come up with one word: acceleration. They agree that there will have to be changes to the way we live our lives, how our homes and offices are built, how we use cities and the transport infrastructure that serves them. They also believe that many of these changes would have happened anyway, given time; Covid-19 has taken us into the future much sooner than expected. Home working, for example, was always likely to increase; now it's the norm, and, to the surprise of many, as easy and productive as going to the office.

Lord Foster of Thames Bank points to the example of the Georgian terraces that make the centre of London such a desirable and expensive place to live. We do not think of them a consequence of London's Great Fire of 1666, but they were. Largely fireproof brick buildings replaced wooden ones, given impetus and space by the conflagration. However, he contends, such fireproofing would have

occurred naturally over the years.



The Pura-Case, a portable wardrobe purifier, and Lord Foster
ALAMY

“I can remember polio and tuberculosis and poor kids being placed inside iron lungs, the ventilators of the day,” Foster, 84, says. “Humanity has been here before, and normality will eventually prevail. I don’t think the future will be two metres apart. In reality, I don’t believe that the pandemic will really change anything, but it will seem as if it has. Working from home would have happened anyway, and a move towards healthier buildings and cities, towards decentralisation and autonomy — these trends will be hastened. So it will change everything, and nothing will change.”

It is a sentiment echoed by engineers too, notably the deputy chairman of Arup, Tristram Carfrae. “Crises are a real catalyst,” he says, “because we give ourselves permission to adopt new habits and adopt them much more quickly. But some things won’t be much altered. Our cities are in the spotlight, as are offices, and some people are asking why they exist. Well, they satisfy a human desire to be with other people, to have a sense of community, and that’s not going to disappear.”

Yet in many ways the evolution of architecture is bound up with the history of disease, and periodic outbreaks have indeed brought rapid change to cities worldwide: from the cholera epidemics of the 1850s that led to London’s sewer system and the creation of the Albert and the Victoria embankments to house it, to the construction of Central Park in New York and the Emerald Necklace in Boston, largely due to tuberculosis. And TB, by 1900 one of the three most common causes of death in the US, was also a significant influence on the modernist movement, which drew on the designs of sanatoriums where patients were sent to recover. Modernist architects quickly adopted the flat roofs, terraces and balconies used for sunbathing, along with the white-painted walls and large windows to maximise the amount of restorative light and fresh air. Le Corbusier, the movement’s Swiss doyen, even dreamt of an aesthetic of hygiene. “There are no more dirty dark corners. Everything is shown as it is. Then comes inner cleanliness,” he wrote.

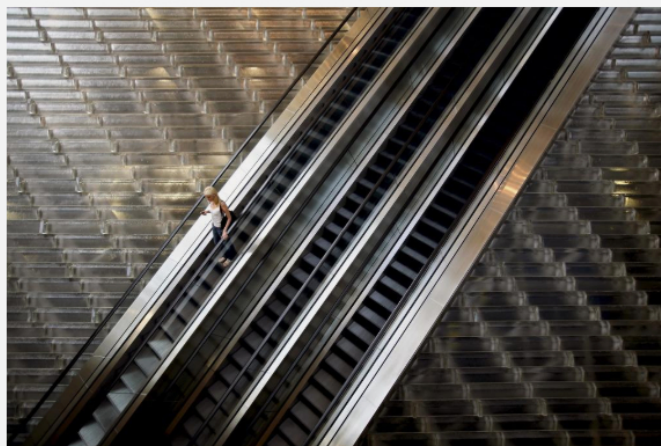
Sponsored Content by [dianomi](#)

Short of injecting bleach, as helpfully suggested by President Trump, inner cleanliness may be hard to come by these days, but outer cleanliness will certainly be designed-in from now on. There may be a return to the sleek, easily scoured furniture of the modernists — some

of which was originally designed for sanatoriums, such as Alvar Aalto's Paimio chair — but disinfecting equipment and antimicrobial surfaces will be incorporated into homes and offices too.

The Italian architect and Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor, Carlo Ratti, has recently won plaudits for his scheme to convert old shipping containers into mobile intensive care units. His latest idea is a lightweight fabric case that can be hung inside the cloakrooms of shops, restaurants and reception areas. It sterilises coats and other clothes using ozone, killing 98 per cent of micro-organisms, bacteria and viruses within an hour. Once the sanitising process has ended, the ozone is converted back into oxygen. "It's not sustainable to wash clothes every day, but you still want to go out," he says. "So this is one solution."

Kone, the Finnish elevator manufacturer, is using ultraviolet light to kill virus particles, especially on escalator handrails that are notorious sources of infection. Its latest DX Class lifts boast antibacterial and antiscratch surfaces along with powerful air filters. They are also doing away with the need to touch buttons: users can summon the lift using their smartphones and use a holographic panel inside to tell the lift which floor to go to. When they arrive, facial-recognition technology will let them walk straight in. "All our customers are worried about liability," Tomio Pihkala, of Kone, says, "but without elevators, cities cannot function, so adaptation is key."



Inside Hearst Tower, New York, one of Foster's designs
GETTY IMAGES

This touchless future is also being tested at 22 Bishopsgate, one of the tallest buildings in the City of London. Facial-recognition technology is already in use, and in the near future visitors may be screened for temperature, and therefore signs of infection — something Arup has successfully trialled in Hong Kong. The key to using the building is an app in your smartphone, which lets you control the area you work: increasing ventilation, operating blinds, even ordering coffee. It can also work as a contact tracer, checking on users' wellbeing and alerting those they have come close to if they succumb to illness. While that might seem dystopian, Karen Cook, the architect, believes the pandemic will have an upside too: an increase in the space allotted to each worker, from about 90 sq ft per person to something more like 150 sq ft. "I'm not sure sterility is the key to getting people back to the office," she says, "but generous spaces might be."

Some are questioning the need to return to the office altogether, although the architectural firm Squire & Partners believes the role of the office is about to change significantly. Now that working from home has proved effective, offices can be used more like clubhouses for events, brainstorming and even yoga. "Going to the office is going to be a special occasion," Tim Gledstone says. "It'll be a place for

mental and physical wellness where the primary purpose is positive interaction. There will have to be room to think and breathe.”

Key to the breathing part is the sort of natural ventilation used at one of the City’s most eco-friendly buildings, Bloomberg’s European headquarters, designed by Foster + Partners, which has been hailed as a game-changer for wellness. There, large bronze fins suck in the breeze from the outside and circulate it through the floor plates and central atrium, following the inhabitants as they congregate. “Natural ventilation brings real health benefits,” Foster says. “People are more alert and creative when they’re not being fed stale air. It’s something we’ve been doing from the start.”



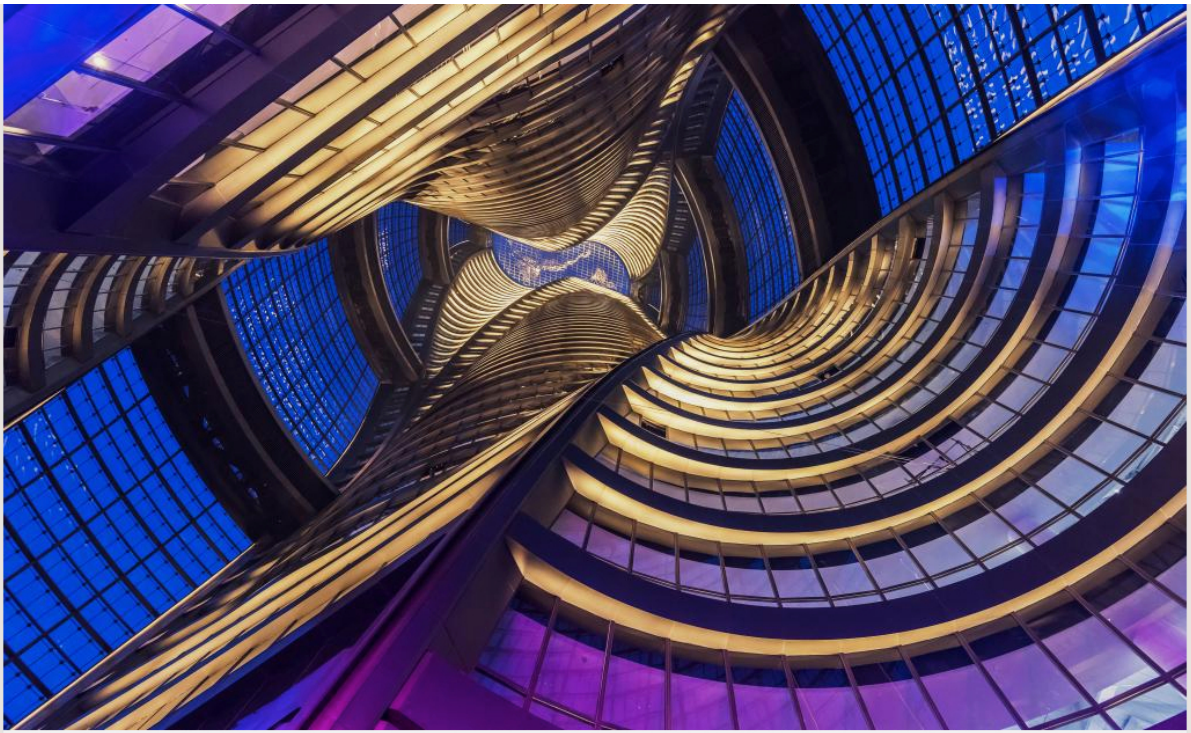
Apple's headquarters in Cupertino, California, was also designed by Foster
JUSTIN SULLIVAN/GETTY IMAGES

If the trend towards healthier buildings gathers momentum, it will also result in healthier and greener cities, Foster believes, with more and more space given to parks and fewer polluting vehicles. A keen cyclist himself, he points out that 650km of bike lanes have been installed in Paris in a matter of weeks and he is eager that other cities follow suit.

Ratti, meanwhile, predicts a boom in “micromobility”, with bike-hire schemes and ebikes becoming ubiquitous, as is increasingly the case in his home city of Milan, as well as staggered working hours. Certainly, he says, “we need to flatten the curve of transportation as much as the pandemic. We can’t have a rush hour any more.” Carfrae, of Arup, agrees: “People would have to be wearing masks and snorkels to travel on a packed Tube,” he says. “Public transport is now a weak link.”

Interestingly, all three anticipate a move towards decentralisation, even if Carfrae’s suggestion of turning the M25 into a green loop is unlikely to happen any time soon. “Maybe we need to ask how much community you need to get what you want out of life,” he says. “With the digital expansion and a physical contraction, maybe we can return to village living. Or maybe it depends on what stage you are at in life. Maybe we leave cities for the young.”





The Leeza, Beijing, was designed by Zaha Hadid Architects
VCG/GETTY IMAGES

It is a view that chimes with Patrick Schumacher. The principal of Zaha Hadid Architects would like to see freshly vacant office space turned into co-living places for “young professionals with a start-up mentality” who are presently “sitting in flat-shares in terrible conditions”. Houses and apartments will have to become more complex in future, he believes, as people choose to spend more time at home. However, there is plenty of scope for sharing communal facilities with a little original thinking.

“We need entrepreneurs to discover new models that don’t fit the rulebook, and we need the planners to stay out of the way,” he declares. “There are lots of openings for creativity. We need the politicians to leave space for experimentation.”

Kjetil Traedal Thorsen, one of the co-founders of Snohetta, the radical Norwegian practice that has just built “Europe’s first underwater restaurant”, even foresees a time when homes are a mix of internal and external spaces, with “semi-acclimatised winter gardens” blurring the distinction and former parking spaces converted into “urban farms” capable of feeding a family. “It’s time architecture was more active in people’s health,” he says. “Perhaps if we manage to pull together and beat the coronavirus, it’ll prove we can tackle climate change too.”

It’s a noble aspiration, if one that might have to wait a little longer. But what will the immediate future look like as the end of lockdown looms? Well, the pace of technological innovation will surge like an athlete given steroids, but Foster, in particular, is confident that society will emerge stronger. In fact, he thinks it might be the “roaring Twenties” all over again.





The 5G lab is on the 31st floor of the Leeza
ALAMY

“As an architect, you’re an optimist. You see the way a small change can have a big effect,” Foster says. “It wasn’t that long ago that a telephone exchange in every city would employ thousands of people moving plugs, and we’ve seen the way a handheld device has transformed that. So the science fiction of my youth is the reality of today. Will we soon be whisked away by a drone down green-grass highways? I can imagine it will happen before long. But we’ll need to remember and reward the people who really got us there — not architects, but nurses and doctors.”

Cycling

Donald Trump

US politics

United States

Related articles



ARCHITECTURE

Books: A Place for All People: Life, Architecture and the Fair Society by Richard Rogers

The architect Richard Rogers tells a story. A few years ago he was standing in front of the Pompidou Centre, the hypermodern Parisian structure...

September 24 2017, 12:01am

Review by Rohan Silva



INTERIORS

Is micro living the future?

Are you over your weird flatmates? We have good news for you. According to a recent trend report by the advertising agency J Walter Thompson...

January 05 2020, 12:01am

Becky Sunshine



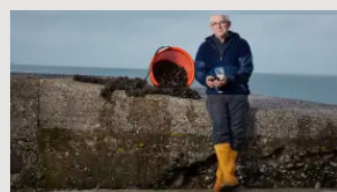
TECHNOLOGY

Review: The Globotics Upheaval: Globalisation, Robotics and the Future of Work by Richard Baldwin — this book might just save your life, and your children's

Most books about economics are dull. This one looks no exception. The title is so boring you would be forgiven for rejecting it on sight. But...

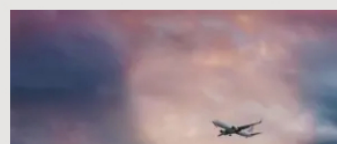
January 13 2019, 12:01am

Review by John Arlidge



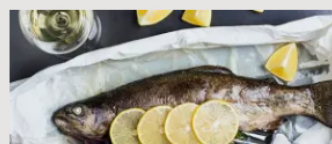
This could be the unexpected solution to social media burnout

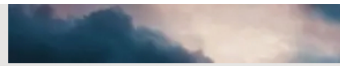
◆ SPONSORED



What can marketers learn from a pair of ad school students?

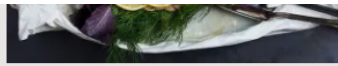
◆ SPONSORED





Is it make or break time for 'bad' brands?

◆ SPONSORED



Low effort, high reward fish suppers

◆ SPONSORED

Comments are subject to our community guidelines, which can be viewed [here](#).

Comments



[▲](#) BACK TO TOP

THE TIMES

GET IN TOUCH

[About us](#)

[Contact us](#)

[Help](#)

[The Times Editorial Complaints](#)

MORE FROM THE TIMES AND THE SUNDAY TIMES

[The Times e-paper](#)

[The Sunday Times e-paper](#)

[Times Currency Services](#)

[The Sunday Times Wine Club](#)

[Times Print Gallery](#)

[The Times Archive](#)

[Times Crossword Club](#)

[Sunday Times Driving](#)

[Times](#)

[The Sunday Times Rich List](#)

[Times Smart Traveller](#)

[Good Habits & Guide](#)