

# What Won't Change





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### *Scott Simpson shares reasons for optimism by design thinkers.*

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound effect on the A/E/C industry as well as society at large. Many design firms are finding ways to work remotely out of necessity. Backlog is dwindling fast, and new commissions are scarce. Newly minted architecture graduates are facing vastly diminished employment opportunities, which means in a few years there will be a dearth of much-needed talent, as the Boomer generation continues to retire in record numbers. Construction activity has resumed, focused mostly on “essential” projects, and, of course, there is very limited activity in the corporate/commercial sector, as landlords contend with empty offices and retail tenants who cannot pay their rent.

It all sounds pretty dreary, but believe it or not, we’ve seen this movie before. The A/E/C industry has traditionally been subject to extreme economic cycles, yet always found ways to weather the

storms. The big dip during the Great Recession of 2008-10 forced many firms to shed up to 40% of their staff. Tough times, indeed. Yet, what followed was the biggest economic expansion in history, as the Dow Jones average surged from about 7,000 points at the nadir to over 29,000 at the peak, ushering in a period of unprecedented prosperity.

All big dislocations invite innovation. Predictions abound about what will be different going forward. Will there be reduced demand for office space, as more people work remotely as part of a new normal? Will the recent building boom on college campuses come to a screeching halt, as schools face financial challenges which threaten their very existence? Will architects need to find entirely new ways of designing space to maximize social distancing and minimize physical contact with such mundane items as doorknobs, faucets, and elevator buttons?

The answer to these questions is certainly yes, but in varying degrees. It's said that the accuracy of a prediction is inversely proportional to the certainty with which it is rendered. About all that's certain is that the effects of the pandemic will be unevenly distributed. Urban centers will be more severely affected than rural areas. We can expect the pandemic will be a boon for some industries (internet retailers, delivery and logistics firms, and high tech) while it will do severe damage to others, likely driving many formerly healthy firms into bankruptcy. We know sooner or later vaccines and therapeutics will be available to combat the virus. Until that happens there are likely to be some fundamental changes baked into the way that buildings are designed, constructed, and occupied.

This is where architects can shine. Design thinking is the art of problem solving when we face concurrent complex variables, some of which may be entirely unknown. At its essence, it embodies “strategic optimism”—the belief that no matter how challenging a problem may be, solutions can be found. Design thinking seeks new ways of creating a “preferred future.” Sometimes the solutions are just process tweaks (like the invention of microwave popcorn), and sometimes they are game changers (such

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as BIM technology and IPD). Design thinking operates at both levels.

As difficult as things may appear to be at the moment, this is not the first (nor will it be the last) challenge society will have to face. Pandemics generally last for a year or two at most, whereas the normal lifespan of a building is measured in decades. Thus, designers must think both short-term and long-term at the same time. Short term thinking focuses on the bugs on the windshield; it deals with things that demand immediate attention. However, long term thinking is where design's real value plays out. When the true cost of a well-conceived and well-constructed building is amortized over its useful life, it turns out to be very inexpensive indeed. Durable value never goes out of style. Thus, while some things may change as the result of the pandemic, the fundamentals will always remain. That's why they're called fundamentals. For example:

### **CREATIVITY & INNOVATION**

These are core values for architects. Clients will always seek designers who can bring fresh ideas to the table and solve problems in new and unexpected ways. Difficult challenges will attract the best talent, and the tougher the problems, the more interesting the solutions will be. Thus, the effects of the pandemic are

fertile ground for design thinkers.

### **PREDICTABILITY**

At the same time, clients need to rely on their design professionals to deliver results as promised. This includes paying close attention to budget and schedule. Time is money, and money is a key denominator in the value equation. The pandemic will force firms to unlock new ways of eliminating waste and inefficiency. Productivity will always be a critical success factor.

### **PEOPLE**

Great design is always personal. It touches people. It inspires an emotional reaction. It has the power to influence behavior. Contrary to popular myth, great design is rarely the work of a single inspired individual. Instead, it is rooted in teamwork. To be effective, designers need to be leaders—able to harness the energy of a diverse group of contributors and inspire them to collaborate in achieving common goals. Teamwork is the ultimate trump card.

### **OBJECTS AND PROCESSES**

An object is the “what” that gets designed, and process is the “how”. Objects are static; they exist in three-dimensional space and are defined by measurable attributes (length, width, height, weight,

materiality, color, texture, etc.) Processes are dynamic. Process design focuses on cause and effect. How something is done is often more important than what is done. For example, when building a house, using a nail gun rather than a hammer makes a huge difference, even if the resulting object is the same.

### FINANCIAL SAVVY

In good times or bad, design firms need to pay attention to the bottom line. Sound financial management provides the fuel that allows the design engine to function in the first place. Rent must be paid, equipment must be acquired, and talent—the most expensive budget item—must be well compensated. In any economy, the two most important financial metrics are backlog and accounts receivable. If both are in good shape, the firm will thrive.

### TALENT

Hiring the best possible people is the single most important challenge for design firm leaders. The pandemic has made it especially difficult for new graduates to find their footing in the profession and to begin acquiring the experience they will need to forge successful careers long term. Still, past recessions have shown despite some very challenging circumstances, the cream will find a way to rise to the top. Finding, hiring, and training top talent never goes out of style.

### CLIENT SERVICE

This is especially important in challenging times as clients are faced with a multitude of problems and uncertainties. They need to rely on people they can trust, people who bring energy and ideas to the table. In good times or bad, client service paves the road to future work.

To paraphrase Winston Churchill, we are not nearly at the end of the pandemic, but we may be approaching the end of the beginning. Protocols have slowed the rate of contagion. Vital equipment and supplies are becoming more available. Hospital beds are less crowded, and the economy is (slowly) beginning to find its footing again. The road to a full recovery is likely to be a long and bumpy one, fraught with difficulties we cannot yet foresee. Nonetheless, we know eventually this pandemic will pass. Things may never fully return to the “normal” of the recent past, but those who stay focused on the long term and keep their eye on the ball will emerge stronger than ever. Design thinking can lead the way. That much, at least, will not change.

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