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What a difference a few months make: Housing, retail, entertainment & workplace trends - by David O'Sullivan

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What a difference a few months make. When we were hit with the pandemic in the beginning of March, our lives were upended. We had to adapt to a new way of work and life quickly. I am not sure about you but back then I thought this was a temporary thing which our country would get under control and we would be back to normal in a couple of months without major changes in our habits. Wow, was I wrong! Maybe I was naive or it was my faith in our knowledge of disease and medicine that lockdowns and deadly pandemics were something that happens in other parts of the world but not in the U.S. I do not think most of us realized our lives would change forever.

Well here we are, six months later, in September, and the pandemic is still a daily concern and has affected our entire way of life. Many people who had been working in an office have found they could work from home and still do their job. Others that spent time on the road have adapted to online zoom calls to stay connected with their clients and coworkers. Our work routines, school days and even shopping trips have changed in ways no one thought they would at the start of 2020.

There is much debate on what our offices should look like, what will make workers feel comfortable returning to an office environment and whether everyone should return to an office. Certainly, all hotels and meeting spaces are trying to determine what use can generate income in the short term and plan for how norms may shift over the long term to plan future renovations and uses. Then there are retail spaces that may become vacant as people are forced to shop online during the pandemic and recognize they do not want to go back to their old ways. Restaurants have been rethinking ways to serve their patrons with takeout, outdoor dining and limited spaced-out indoor seating.

So these changes put our society in a transition period without any real direction for longer term trends. We have seen a migration out of the cities and other high-density areas, there is a severe contraction of number of households as many young people move back home similar to the 2008 recession. The loss of jobs is having an impact on the rental market, as is the lack of college students returning to campuses. Small businesses near colleges and in downtown areas once populated by office workers find no customers.

People also discovered that location was not as strong a factor in choosing where they live as their shopping went online and the places they used to socialize have had to close. Private space has taken on a completely new importance whether it be a quiet place within your home or an outdoor space that we feel protected. Home has taken on new importance, now it is our eating, sleeping, working and entertainment center. Location options have opened up when we are free from the chore of commuting. The Millennials, which were slowly migrating from the city as the need for more space and lower cost sent them looking for alternatives. The Baby Boomers shift to city living has slowed or almost stopped with the pandemic. This is creating a new suburban housing shortage. Others are looking to their vacation places to take up permanent residence now that they are free from having to be in their office daily.

All of these changes open up questions of where are trends going with housing, retail, entertainment

and workplaces. We are experiencing a reaction to the pandemic at present. What are the longer term changes to our lives? Will people return to the old ways if we get a vaccine and start to feel safe returning to old patterns? Will companies realize that having everyone in the office working together is not necessary and give up the office space and the expense that comes with it? Will people want to return to their commutes?

Already, the dialogue last January was how to improve public transportation, center new development around transit hubs and increase density in nodes, now there is talk of rethinking those ideas. Maybe the answer to traffic congestion is to travel less, not have so many people commute, go to stores for shopping and entertainment. Planners need to be exploring new ways in which we will live and work, and see what patterns forced upon us by the pandemic will become the new trends for the future. We do not know how it will change our environment. It will be an interesting next six months as we sort through all the issues affecting our lives. It is also an exciting time as planners and architects and innovators are called on to respond.

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