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Uncertain times: The pandemic of 1918 had a lasting influence on building design and lifestyles - by David O'Sullivan

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We certainly have much to think about as we look forward to the next six months. There is a new president and no one is sure what effect that will have on the building industry. We have a stock market that keeps going up on hope for the future and all of us just trying to navigate the world with Covid until we can feel safe with widespread vaccinations. It has been about 10 months since our lives were upended by the virus and in that time we have adapted to new ways of shopping and working as well as learning and living our lives every day. All these items make this an exciting time but also bring uncertainty and stress and have impacted the building industry.

As architects, we see new trends in how we work, where we work and how spaces are used. Some of this is temporary but some may become the new way people use and look at the workplace. The lines between the spaces we live our private lives and where we work have become blurred during this period of many professionals working from home. The workplace for many others has become a place where we do not feel safe and are taking extra precautions and interacting with people in new ways. We have learned to appreciate the contributions of others, which allow us to live our lives and are seeking new places to escape from the stress of everyday tasks.

All this leads me to think how the events affect the way we should be designing the work and home environment. How many of these changes are permanent and which will we gladly not keep and go back to old ways of using spaces? The home as a workplace is one trend, which I think, will be important to many people as will better dedicated space for families with children to do school work. This means living space will need to increase and the issue of privacy becomes more of a factor in designing homes. The rise in e-commerce and items delivered to our homes is another trend that is here to stay. This means secure vestibules for package delivery and more storage within our homes.

The workplace is something that had been evolving in recent times with offices designed for more collaboration and open plans. This runs counter with how we need to isolate and distance at present but we also have found that being together in offices full-time is not as essential to do good work as was once thought. Offices may become less centralized and become more spaces where we go to collaborate when needed and not spaces to sit alone and do our work. Large meeting rooms or training centers may no longer be needed with the growing comfort with online meetings and software able to expedite them. The need for office space is still probably the biggest unknown, as companies have not determined if working from home for many employees makes sense for the long term.

The warehouse market is one place where we see expansion and will continue to be strong with the shift to more online shopping. Distribution centers are in demand as products shift from retail brick and mortar stores to delivery to homes and businesses. The end distribution close to the consumer is needed to replace these stores. This could create a shift or reuse of retail plazas to warehouse.

The hospitality and restaurant industry is probably the hardest hit over the last year and its recovery and changes to design are still unclear. Certainly we all love outdoor dining if the weather is good but many times it is too hot or too cold for eating outdoors. The hospitality industry will take some time to become healthy and may be smaller if business determines there is less need for travel and events held in person.

The one issue that relates to buildings and transcends all building types is indoor air quality. This has become more important in recent years but is front and center due to the pandemic. There will be changes to how systems operate, what amount of fresh air we bring into spaces and how the air inside buildings is filtered and cleaned. Engineering, maintenance and monitoring of HVAC systems will remain essential as we come out of this pandemic and healthy buildings will be an important aspect of any design.

There are many more things, which could change in the coming months as we learn to adapt to this pandemic and as vaccines have an impact on our lives. We will have to see what changes stick or if people will want to return to life as it was this time last year. The pandemic of 1918 had a lasting influence on building design and lifestyles and we will see how this one affects it for the future.

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