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COVID-19 has brought about innovation and improvement in design, but not without challenges - by David O'Sullivan

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The feeling on spring is in the air. Finally after what seems like a long winter we see the weather improve. Looking back, our winter weather has not been too bad as New England winters go. We had no long stretches of sub-zero weather or 10' high snowbanks. Maybe it just seemed long when you add winter to all the other factors happening. As the industry looks ahead to spring, things are looking good overall but it is not without its challenges.

The safety of workplace is certainly on everyone's mind. While the pandemic has improved with the protocols in place and rising rates of vaccinations, we do not fear construction sites as spreaders of COVID-19. Also with the return of some employees to their offices, communication and coordination are improving. We still are seeing supply problems with many critical items delayed or unavailable while other materials such as lumber and steel going to record high prices. This results in much additional work and delays ripple through the workplace. Labor was an issue prior to COVID-19 and continues to be problematic. Employees are still dealing with remote school and scattered daycare issues hurting productivity.

The public approval process has changed in the last year with the advent of virtual meetings and disruptions to internet connection. While the virtual meetings mean less travel, the feedback from officials is harder to understand and the back and forth input is harder. Neighbors also struggle with seeing presentations and not benefitting from direct interaction with the professionals. I think this is making for more meetings and extra work for architects and engineers to explain projects and impacts while empowering some people to overpower discussions. I think in the past with small conversations as a side meeting with a few concerned neighbors after the presentation worked well to clarify things and obtain better feedback. Now with virtual meetings, the same people seem to say the same few points over repeatedly. Hope that we can look forward to some in-person meetings in the future.

There is much talk about the impact of this pandemic on the design of our homes, stores, schools, restaurants, offices and public spaces. As we move to reopening businesses, schools and offices, trying to predict what will return to life as it was before and what it will be in the future has become a topic with no definitive right or wrong answers. Certainly for office workers the open plan tight spaces may disappear but so may the time when everyone is only working from their desk in that office space. Meetings held face to face in conference rooms may still occur but only occasionally, as many virtual meetings will remain as we return to our offices only part-time.

Our homes, which have served as our virtual social centers, workplaces, schoolrooms, workout spaces and entertainment centers have made us all realize how they work or in most cases don't work. The design on what is home will be changed forever as we seek both open spaces and quiet retreat areas. This will be combined with more practical design for what we need daily from our homes. Space has been a premium for many and privacy is another item many have craved over the last year. Building design in the multi-family market will change as some large amenity spaces where you do not feel as comfortable as before need some rethinking. Possibly with some smaller semi-private work areas and certainly a move to more easily cleaned surfaces. Ventilation and healthy indoor air quality, while a growing trend before the last year has taken on a bigger priority. Access to units through shared halls and elevators are another issue with no easy answer or understanding of what impacts will remain after the pandemic subsides.

As we emerge from our homes and return to being able to socialize with others safely again, those public spaces may be transformed. Certainly, we will have more outdoor spaces for drinking and eating, possibly more outdoor venues for music and entertainment as well. We will need to feel safe and protected while still wanting to socialize. Shopping will become more of an event with many continuing to get many items online and delivered instead of running to store the purchase them. Retail stores, which were struggling to compete with online, will need to find new ways to attract people and give them a reason to go there other than to just buy an item.

Spring this year brings hope and change to our lives like maybe never before. We should look forward to continued innovation and improvement in design which will make our lives better for the future.

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