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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.

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