

Much of modernist architecture can be understood as a consequence of the fear of disease, a desire to eradicate dark rooms and dusty corners where bacteria lurk.⁴

COVID-19: AN ARCHITECT'S PERSPECTIVE

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching impact, with tendrils extending into virtually all facets of life and work, temporarily or permanently changing many concepts we thought were absolutes. This redirection extends to the profession of architecture, as well. Fear of contamination has long controlled the kinds of spaces in which we want to be.¹ The question is how it will change design and what the pandemic will mean for the built environment.

In this paper, Jerry Sparkman, AIA, NCARB, of Sweet Sparkman Architecture and Interiors in Sarasota, FL, looks at this phenomenon, providing his perspectives in the context of his primary areas of expertise: higher education, high-end residential, and public spaces.

HEALTH, HISTORY AND ARCHITECTURE

For those who know of late futurist architect Buckminster Fuller, it is not hard to draw a comparison between the current situation and his quest to combat infection with architecture. It began in 1922, when Fuller lost his young daughter Alexandra to meningitis and pneumonia – a situation he attributed to the unsanitary conditions of high-density urban housing. His vision was global, with hygienic shelters affordable to all and scattered far and wide to reduce risk of contagion.² This lofty plan, which involved air drops and zeppelins, obviously did not take root. It did, however, point to an important possibility.

A decade later, architect and designer Alvar Aalto completed the Paimio Sanatorium, a facility for the treatment of tuberculosis in southwest Finland. The building was modernist, but not driven by aesthetics. Instead, Aalto sought to create a building that functioned as a medical instrument, making architecture part of the cure for what was then a scourge.³

As tuberculosis is said to have shaped modernism, COVID-19, too, is making its mark on architecture and space design with the not unfamiliar call for safety in the face of a medical threat.

In a survey taken before COVID-19 struck, 21% of finance professionals at higher education institutions reported they were not at all confident in their institutions' ability to quickly and easily adjust strategies and plans in the face of change, and 65% were only somewhat confident.⁶ Those predictions now are being tested by an unprecedented challenge.

MAKING IT WORK

Like many people, Sparkman found himself working from home during the pandemic, communicating via technology and adapting to something other than business as usual. While the experience has had its pluses and minuses, he said it also has given him insight into the convergence of what is happening, what he does, and how it may be done going forward.

Higher Education

Sparkman has begun to look at the future of higher education through the lens of his work with Eckerd College, a private liberal arts college in St. Petersburg, FL. He has seen the effects and uncertainty of COVID-19 on residential institutions as they shut down, reopened, and plan for the future.

The financial ramifications are harsh both in revenue loss, unanticipated costs, and a dearth of factors on which to base planning. Capacity issues have impacted tuition earnings, as some students are choosing to wait, and see and others reportedly are postponing their education due to changes in economic status. Colleges and universities are seeing dramatic declines in their international student population. A similar situation applies to public institutions and their out-of-state students.⁵

On the cost side, institutions are dealing with outlays of funds to reallocate space due to social distancing and hygiene requirements, in addition to the cleaning expenses.

These higher education institutions are also trying to deliver the experiential side of a college education, which, in addition to campus life, includes hands-on learning and laboratory settings that require teamwork and group settings.

For Eckerd, an ameliorating factor is its location in Florida, enabling it to offer outdoor classes, Sparkman explained. With a preponderance of teachers on board, the college sought ways to provide instruction on class patios, in tents and shelters, and under shady trees, becoming widely recognized for its ingenuity.

A recent Zillow survey looking at the nexus between the pandemic limitations and consumers' visions of their next home, indicated that those visions included more rooms, the return of doors, a dedicated home office (or two), and more insulation for noise control spaces that separate children from their working parents.⁹

Working with Sweet Sparkman to facilitate creative use of outdoor space, Eckerd is reorganizing indoor teaching areas to be safer. Students are distancing in spaces such as large lecture halls, which are being redesigned by the Sweet Sparkman team to meet COVID-19 parameters. If this becomes the norm going forward for U.S. colleges and universities, it obviously will mean either larger or more rooms under roof in the future, as well as new business models for institutions.

Home is Ground Zero

As COVID-19 precautions took hold, homes became schools and workplaces. Business travel was replaced by computer conferencing. A lot of us enjoyed it. In fact, a survey on the subject disclosed that 43 percent of respondents said they would like to work remotely more of the time going forward, and interest in homeschooling and on-line classes have increased.^{7,8} This greater connection to home, Sparkman says, has in his experience put a “hyper focus” on the domestic environment. “Home,” he added, “is Ground Zero for all they do.”

“These clients are people who formerly spent a lot of time traveling the world to do business,” Sparkman said. “When that stopped, they found it didn’t stop their business, that the technology was in place to get the job done more efficiently and with less time, travel, and jet lag.”

As a result, Sparkman’s firm is seeing fewer clients wanting to retire to a high-end coastal home in Florida. “These clients are thinking more about taking advantage of the climate and greater access to the outdoors to create a hybrid environment in which to work, play and relax. This has resulted in a greater stress on office space,” he said, “with more square footage allotted to the working environment.”

“It’s been fascinating to see people looking at home design as a way to address the challenges of COVID-19 social distancing and build on the lessons learned during the pandemic,” Sparkman said. The question has become “How does your home environment provide for the wider range of needs and functions required today?” he explained, “and it’s been exciting to work with our clients, looking more broadly at their whole life experience, day in and day out, hour to hour.”

While Sparkman has designed nearly a half dozen homes to balance these work/life aspects, he said the concept doesn’t stop there, extending even into apartments, where a den is considered a valuable amenity.

With privately operated destinations like shopping centers, movie theaters and theme parks closed, people naturally started turning to the public spaces that remained open. At a time of need, our parks, beaches, and trails revealed themselves as the essential civic infrastructure they are.¹¹

Community Spaces/Parks

In Sweet Sparkman's work with local communities on public areas, the architectural firm has discovered that the isolation and distancing of the pandemic has led residents to develop a greater level of appreciation for the outdoors and a heightened understanding of the value of "public space – public open spaces, in particular," Sparkman said. This phenomenon, some say, could play a role in reversing the decades-long global decline in the amount of time people spend outdoors.¹⁰

A cause of the decline is often put at the feet of the constraints of the normal work day and its commute. This factor is changed by the ability of more people to orchestrate their work from home to allow time for other activities. Sparkman, however, believes it has more to do with people who have been sequestered seeking "relief valves" for urbanization and pent-up activity.

Going forward, architects and space planners see long-range changes, with plazas and parks designed to be destinations themselves, rather than programmed areas for events, incorporating hygienic building materials, design that limits crowds and circulation routes with passing areas.¹²

CONCLUSION

The current pandemic is not the first time cities and buildings have been reimagined in response to an increased understanding of disease, and the consequences of this episode will play out for some time.

COVID-19 already is changing the way spaces are designed and built, making architecture a powerful agent in the fight against the virus. As noted recently by Michael of the MASS Design Group architecture and design collective, the spatial choices made today, during this emergency, might make or break our ability to survive both this crisis and the next one.¹³

SWEET SPARKMAN ARCHITECTURE AND INTERIORS

Sweet Sparkman Architecture and Interiors is a multi-disciplinary architecture and planning firm specializing in community-oriented projects and high-end residential, as well as interior design. Since its beginnings in 2004, the award-winning firm has designed and built over 50 public buildings including fire stations, parks, and libraries.

RESOURCES

1. How the Corona Virus Will Reshape Architecture, New Yorker, June 17, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/dept-of-design/how-the-coronavirus-will-reshape-architecture>
2. As Cities Re-Open, These Visionary Architects Will Help Improve Supply Chains And Disease Prevention, Forbes, May 22, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jonathonkeats/2020/05/22/visionary-architecture/#38ac6b7b5fd6>
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Four Ways COVID-19 Is Hurting Higher Education And Why That Matters, Forbes, May 4, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidrosowsky/2020/05/04/four-ways-covid-19-is-hurting-higher-education-and-why-that-matters/#7474435559f1>
6. COVID-19: How the higher ed business model is changing University Business, April 13, 2020, <https://universitybusiness.com/covid-19-how-the-higher-ed-business-model-is-changing/>
7. 2020 Schooling In America Series: Homeschooling Experiences And Views During The Pandemic, Edchoice, August 18, 2020, <https://www.edchoice.org/engage/2020-schooling-in-america-series-homeschooling-experiences-and-views-during-the-pandemic/>
8. Infographic: Growth of K-12 Digital Learning, Connections Academy, <https://www.connectionsacademy.com/news/growth-of-k-12-online-education-infographic>
9. The End of Open Floor Plans: How Homes Will Look Different After Coronavirus Zillow.com press release, June 22, 2020, <http://zillow.mediaroom.com/2020-06-22-The-End-of-Open-Floor-Plans-How-Homes-Will-Look-Different-After-Coronavirus>
10. More Time Out in Nature Is an Unexpected Benefit of the COVID-19 Sheltering Rules, Scientific American, April 26, 2020, <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/more-time-out-in-nature-is-an-unexpected-benefit-of-the-covid-19-sheltering-rules/>
11. A Park Planner's Perspective on the COVID-19 Pandemic, NRPA, April 8, 2020, <https://www.nrpa.org/blog/a-park-planners-perspective-on-the-covid-19-pandemic/>
12. Six Ways Urban Spaces May Change Because of Coronavirus, Boston, April 30, 2020, <https://www.bostonmagazine.com/property/2020/04/30/urban-spaces-coronavirus/>
13. The role of architecture in fighting a pandemic, Boston Globe, April 6, 2020, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/04/06/opinion/role-architecture-fighting-pandemic/>