

Despite Likely Design Changes, We are Still Human



Martin Goldstein
Principal
Architect,
Venture
Architecture

As I write this, it's mid-April. It's my hope that by the time this goes to publication, we're in a position to begin re-opening our economy. We've all been doing our best to stay home to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus, and amidst the downtime, many of us are wondering how the world will look when it opens back up. The questions are many, but mine center around how our culture will – and perhaps more importantly, how it will not or should not – change.

Architects and designers are obsessed with people and their culture. We think about them so much because it's our job to conceptualize the places where life happens. Think about it. Everywhere you go was designed by one of us. Before you ever got there, someone thought about you – about ways to help you do the things you do there. By “there,” I mean everywhere – from schools to hospitals, offices, malls, theaters and the places we call home.

There's a lot to think about in each space, which is probably why we end up specializing. Movie theaters have massive sound issues to contend with because movies play in rooms next to one another in a row. Schools must be able to withstand much more wear and tear than a typical building, and optimizing learning environments requires specific considerations like lots of natural light. Offices have to cater to organizational needs, creating a unique blend of spaces for both quiet individual and interactive types of work.

We craft entire worlds around the activities that happen in specific spaces, each with its own social rules, needs, aspirations and humor – its own culture. When the design team really knows its audience, the result can help people live happier, more productive, efficient and meaningful lives.

I know I'm obsessed with it – with culture, but ultimately, with people. I'm always observing. I want to learn how we move through our day. What matters to us most? How do we interact with one another and with the built environment and why? What are we thinking and needing and trying to do? I always want to know.

In these turbulent times, people like me are focused on anticipating how the answers to these questions might have changed as a result of a massive disruption to the way we use and view our built environments. Understanding the repercussions of the pandemic and the resulting social distancing will be critical to creating or modifying spaces so that they continue to work for us.



Social distancing is here for now.

However, as real and as important as the changes will be, I believe it's equally important to examine what has not changed – and what we genuinely want to hold on to.

For all that's happening to us and around us, it isn't us that has fundamentally changed. We didn't suddenly grow 5 feet taller or shrink in half or add extra arms and legs. In reality, we're still very much the same, albeit perhaps more anxious and uncertain. The point is, we're all still human.

And at our core, humans are social animals. To varying degrees, we all seek interaction, validation, comradery, emotional support and release. I'm not encouraging anyone to challenge medical and scientific advice, indeed we should all keep our physical distance until the experts say otherwise. However, the distance between us now has revealed just how important our connections to one another are. Being separated from one another feels unnatural because it is unnatural. We need each other.

The biggest challenge ahead for architects and designers may be to avoid overcorrection and rigid prescriptions for the spaces we design. Before we completely upend our next generation of spaces, let's take a collective deep breath. We need to work the problem while keeping flexibility top of mind. After all, the next crisis might present a totally different set of challenges.

That means we must remember the basics.

The need for a group of professionals to meet in a conference room, for example, isn't gone, even though it may get a little larger to spread people out. We're not likely going to stop using office suites altogether, even



We still need spaces to gather and collaborate.

though they, too, may become more spread out.

While we might trade fewer huddle rooms for larger workstations and compensate with video chat, neither should radically change because of social distancing. We will still need spaces to gather and collaborate as well as spaces to put our heads down and produce. Each organization will be a little

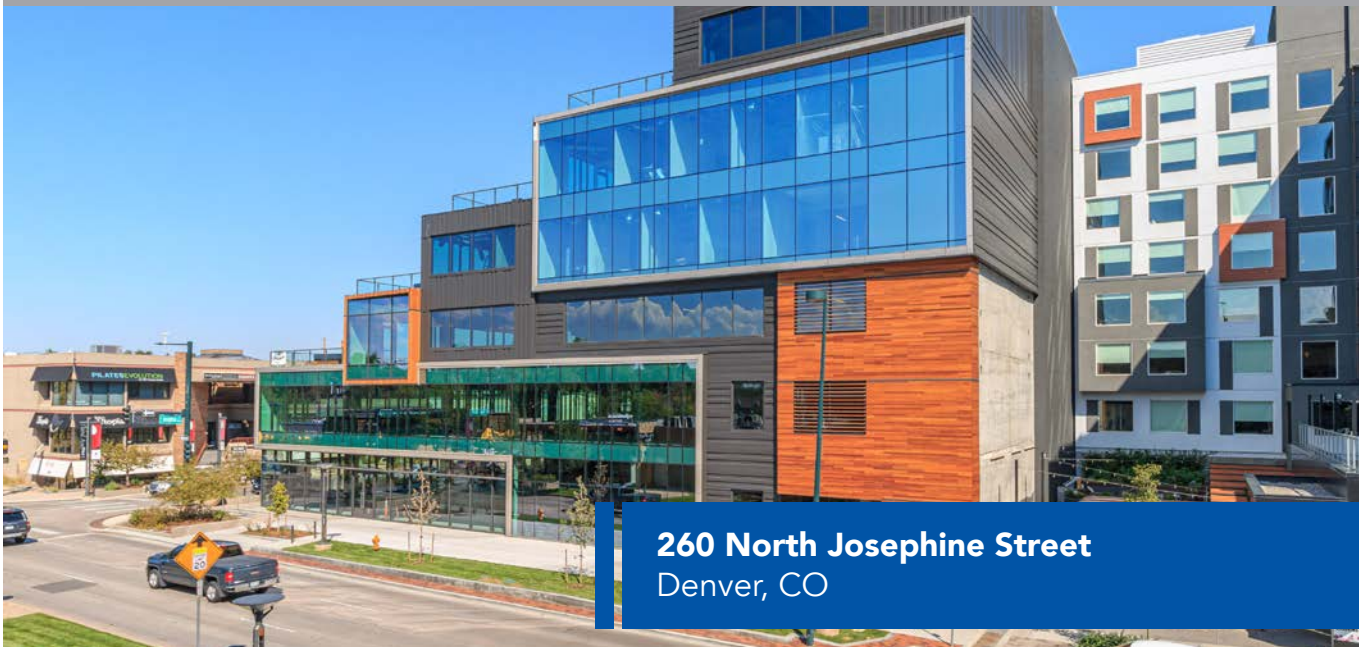
different. There will even be different subsets of solutions for various departments or individual end-user groups.

We might add more directional travel in some spaces, similar to how the shopping market has reshaped its flow of cart traffic. It's possible that we reduce occupancy limits in office suites or on elevators to provide more distance. Surely antimicrobial surfaces and increased air filtration systems common to hospitals could migrate to office buildings. Technology, particularly connectivity needs and expectations, inevitably will shift to accommodate new modes of working; it certainly has made remote work far more effective, which has been extremely helpful for those of us who have access.

So yes, some things will change. But not everything will. And not everything should. The key for designers and architects is to ensure the changes make us more adaptable – not less.

Ultimately, buildings and all of the spaces inside are a reflection of us. They tell a story about who we are as people and what we value. This crisis will have a part in our story, but it should not write the story for us. We are still creative, resilient, compassionate and capable beings. Let the robust design dialogue begin, and let's move forward deliberately, attentively and cautiously. And never forget who we are.\\

Leading and building projects with the best people and ideas



260 North Josephine Street
Denver, CO

gejohnson.com

GEJOHNSON
CONSTRUCTION COMPANY