The New Norm
a Report by Peter Piven, FAIA
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Introduction

My sequestering began on March 13, 2020, the day that the World Health Organization described the corona virus manifestation Covid-19, as a pandemic. I have had a home office for some time, but circumstances changed for me and, I quickly realized, for all of you.

Staying in touch with colleagues and clients is a vital part of my practice. Knowing more and in more detail about the design professionals I serve is important for me: what you are experiencing, how you are adapting, what technology you are using and, most important, what you believe will be different about the profession in the future – a new norm.   On April 1, I conducted the first of 34 interviews with principals of firms in Boston, Chicago, Fort Worth, Los Angeles, St. Louis, New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Washington, D.C. What follows is a compilation and evaluation of responses that I hope will be helpful, even useful, to you as we look at how the pandemic may change our profession in the future.

Context

A few weeks into sequestering, 21 respondents (60%) said they were the same size as they were when they started. Ten respondents (30%) said they were smaller, having furloughed or laid off a few people. Only three respondents (10%) indicated they had increased staff. The size of the firms I interviewed ranged from 4 people to 300 with a mean of 61 and a median of 32.

Diminishing work/workload issues included projects that suffered slowdowns, projects that had funding cutbacks and were stopped, state regulations that prohibited construction except for projects deemed essential, difficulty in scheduling public meetings, difficulty in getting required approvals, failed bond referenda, projects that prohibited entry into buildings to maintain health safety of the

occupants, and political chicanery. None were due to firms' inability to serve clients for any reason.

Work/workload increases were experienced by firms with projects in particular markets, especially manufacturing, warehousing, some healthcare projects and schools with opening deadlines.

The most important adaptation, universally cited, was the change from working in-office to working remotely for almost everything: meetings with partners, staff, project teams, clients, contractors and prospective clients, but also drawing reviews, and social events.

Of 18 programs mentioned, Zoom and Teams were brought up most frequently, but many firms used several, including some that are relatively new in the marketplace. (See Appendix)

What do you believe will be different in design and construction once a new norm is reached?

The quantity and quality of the responses to this question made it clear that the respondents were thinking about different futures. What follows are descriptions of the differences envisioned in technology/ working remotely, in markets and marketing, in work life and culture, and in our society.

Differences in technology/working remotely

Before the pandemic, some design professionals reluctantly allowed employees to work remotely for special circumstances, such as remote home location, personal illness and child care needs. The reluctance stemmed from technical insufficiencies, fear of malingering, imagined (or actual) lack of control, and in some firms, an underlying belief that working remotely was counter-cultural, meaning "that's not how we work around here" or "close face-to-face collaboration is an important part of our design process."

The most significant change resulting from the pandemic appears to be the development, acceptance and widespread use of new technologies, especially those that permit working remotely. There was almost no other reasonable choice once sequestering was required or recommended. Principals quickly learned that the technology works and works well, easily, facilitating virtual

conversations, collaborations and meetings of all kinds. Not only does working remotely work, it works better for some things and for some people. Trusted
employees remain trustworthy. Efficiency and effectiveness continue. That said, some principals still look forward to a return to practices in which face-to-face conversations are an integral part of their design process.

Individual responses regarding future differences in facilities are listed in the Appendix.

Differences in facilities

The advances in technology and the newly-found practice of working remotely have led to a realization that space and the way space is used will be different, not only for the design professions themselves, but also for related professions, commercial enterprises and institutions. An initial forecast and determination of the proportion between in-house and remote workers may reveal that decisions will need to be made regarding the amount and kind of space that will be required as practices move ahead. Such decisions will likely include consideration of hoteling and benching, along with a more traditional office. The notion of appropriate personal space will also enter the equation, even after Covid-19 is vanquished and societal health returns.

Will hospitals, other healthcare organizations and the physicians themselves require the same amount and kind of space when tele-medicine becomes a fixture in medical practice? One of the five cases described by Michael Crichton's *Five Patients,* first published 50

years ago, described a case in which a patient's medical issue was diagnosed and treated remotely. Now it is becoming more common and will likely affect the amount and kind of spaces that are developed for the practice of medicine – in hospitals, medical offices and walk-in urgent care centers.

What about lawyers, accountants, insurance agents, bankers and others who have worked remotely themselves or with others who have? It is reasonable to assume that they will not need the same amount or kind of space to which they
have become accustomed. And what about the furniture, utilities and systems

that fill and serve those spaces? They will change, as well. What will grow, what will shrink and what will neither grow nor shrink - but will change?

Individual responses regarding differences in facilities are listed in the Appendix.

Differences in markets and marketing

The advantages of working remotely have resulted in anticipation of differences in the markets themselves, and the way that marketing will be different. Even if overall market volume remains stable, the need for different sizes, configurations and fit-outs of facilities will trigger demand for new and renovated healthcare, office and institutional facilities, especially schools. Firms that have focused on markets where growth is less likely may need to re-focus on other markets.

The way architects and other design professionals market and sell will also change. Diminished interest in travel by both professionals and their clients, and the ability to connect remotely will change the marketing paradigm. Although developing and maintaining relationships will remain an essential aspect of marketing, more will

be done long-distance. Personal charisma will remain an essential ingredient for some, but it may be manifested differently. As remote connections become the norm, there will likely be more cross-boundary affiliations for both doing and getting work.

Individual responses regarding differences in markets and marketing are listed in the Appendix.

Differences in work life and culture

There is little question that the daily lives within the firm will change, in some cases drastically depending on the percentage of the work that is done by those working in the office and those working remotely. One beneficial result of working remotely is learning that work can be done and done well. Project efficiency and effectiveness are maintained. Collaborations, conferences and

other regular communications are achieved. Despite this, it isn't the same as face-to-face relationships. The human connection in our lives is important; some who work remotely feel that difference more strongly than others.

The work-life balance is likely to shift, especially for those working remotely, and the shift may not be positive. It may take more time, usually later in the day to complete one's work due to personal distractions during the day.

For some, personal collaboration and spontaneity are important, particularly in front-end conceptual design discussions. Without careful monitoring and maintenance of operational protocols, they could easily erode.

Individual responses regarding differences in work life and culture are listed in the Appendix.

Differences in the society

Although future differences cited by the respondents sometimes focused on their own offices or their professions, others related to the larger society in which we live and work. Some responses expressed a cynical view of the future: "the economy will be down" and its corollary "there will be less money around," but also "Five years from now this will all be a memory … societies have short memories." Most responses were distinctly positive, e.g., "sustainability will become a large part of architecture" and "The next big issue will be treated as more life sustaining."

Individual responses regarding differences in our society are listed in the Appendix.

The principals with whom I spoke adapted quickly and maintained their practices. They have mastered new technologies and adjusted to the new paradigm of working remotely. They understand that things are still changing and that the future is still unknown. The profession and its practitioners are more flexible than one might have imagined. That is a very positive sign for the future, whatever it may be.

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Appendix

How did you adapt to the work/workload issues?
- Staff reduction via furlough or layoff
- Time reductions, usually but not always combined with salary reductions
- Changing staff status from employee to consultant
- Travel cancellations
- Elimination of non-essential overhead expenses
- Extending line-of-credit limits
- Applying for small business loans,
- Applying for Payroll Protection Program (PPP) loans
- Renegotiating rent
- Planning/brainstorming the future

Technology. What programs did you use?

- Asana: project planning, collaboration and management
- Blue Beam: markup and collaboration technology
- Cisco: enables data communications between phones and computers
- Egnyte: file sharing and storage
- Enscape: 3-D visualization and walk-throughs
- Flock: team communication and collaboration, with team messaging and project management
- Google Hangouts: to keep in touch with one person or a group
- Gotomeeting: online meetings, video conferencing and web conferencing
- IPCS: shows information about shared memory segments, message queues, and semaphore arrays
- Monday: intuitive and collaborative tool that includes time tracking and file sharing
- Mural: visual collaborative tool that lets remote teams research and brainstorm design ideas
- Revit: architectural, structural and MEP design and detailing
- Rhino: 3D modeler used to create, edit, analyze, document, render, animate and translate
- Skype: messaging and video chat for conference calls up to 25 people

- Splashtop: provides remote desktop connections and support
- Splashthat: helps market, manage, and measure live, virtual, and hybrid event programs
- Teams: shared workspace for team conversations, files, meetings, and apps
- VPN (Virtual Private Network): uses advanced encryption protocols and secure tunneling techniques to encapsulate online data transfers.
- Watchfire Ignite: tools for managing contacts, contracts, sales and inventory.
- Zoom: cloud platform for video and audio conferencing, chat and webinars; the current market leader

Responses regarding future differences in technology/working remotely.

- Working remotely will continue … at some level
- Because of remote work, there will be changes in the way the working day is used: more short meetings, communication with consultants
- Greater acceptance of on-line conferencing, etc. People will realize conference calls can take the place of face-to-face meeting
- Remote communication with (engineering) consultants
- Thought management procedures and protocols developed
- Clients will feel they can save time by working remotely
- Less project-related travel
- Construction site video communications
- Employees working in consultants' offices
- More readily hire young people with families needing to work at home
- Possibly long-distance employees in other cities
- A real impact on reimbursable expense dollars
- We will more readily hire young people with families needing to work at home
- Accelerated collaboration
- Another level of collaboration is needed – 3 at table with trace and models, talking about concepts, a fluidity of ideas. Serendipity hasn't yet been achieved

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- Firms will reduce discretionary spending; big companies will support major charities
- Low-end work drifts to higher price people; no more secretaries – more than today
- Greater acceptance of on-line conferencing, etc. People will realize conference calls can take the place of face-to-face meetings
- Possibly more cross-boundary mergers
- More acceptance of digitized signatures
- There will be a remote norm only if encouraged by government for social distance; I don't think it's as good or profitable for people to work remotely.

Responses regarding future differences in facilities
- Less or different space will be needed
- Less or different space needed for ourselves and clients, e.g., multi-use classrooms
- Smaller work space; it will be harder to decide in favor of larger, more comfortable space in the future
- May affect offices (space) the way retail was affected in the change from offices to open plan
- Mid-size practices will allow more flexibility to work from home, reduce space needs
- Offices shrink.
- Apartments get bigger
- Less retail and entertainment
- Re space, a major consideration, possibility of being less facility dependent, like the "hoteling" concept, which is also visible in HC – tele-medicine.
- Companies may reduce their leased space because they have learned that their people can be as effective at home.
- Developers and users of office space may reverse the trend of the last 20 years which shrunk sf/person to 6'x4" per cube, and start making bigger work spaces to create more distance between workers.
- More prefabrication; it's been coming
- Hard office space less in demand

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- There will also be an effect on the office market for financial and legal communities.
- Covid19 advanced our process of assessing our desire for growth, doing projects where teams weren't working in the same space – the need to blur the lines, improve communication, decide on tools, and how to manage client communications and distance.
- We are still getting RFP's and still getting Pharma work. Other things (higher ed, cultural/museums, workplace) have slowed down.
- Less office space, which will be a big difference for us

- More unisex bathrooms, front doors more automatic, metal handrails
- Re space, a major consideration, possibility of being less facility dependent, like the "hoteling" concept, which is also visible in HC – tele-medicine. May be true for everything including retail.
- Trucking will explode.
- Decrease in rental space, renegotiation of leases; understood change from "need more space" to "touchdown spaces" rather than permanent
- Higher Ed facilities that now working remotely may question spending on travel and may impact physical plant
- In HC people figured out tele-medicine, a savior for primary care physicians; that structure will be here to stay (and will affect) how much office space is needed
- Re acute care, every bedroom will adapt to critical care needs; emergency rooms will be prepared for the next crisis
- Apartments get bigger

Responses regarding future differences in markets and marketing:
- Ability to seek more distant work
- Healthcare systems will embrace telemedicine, and will learn how to respond to mitigate current risks
- Higher education institutions will change to embrace distance learning
- More rehabilitation/adaptive reuse of existing buildings, especially C+U
- Business model for schools and higher ed will change; there is a rebellion by students who want credit for distance learning, while the university incurs expenses to buy technology and train teachers; most will not be

able to charge the same, and will need bigger population limits and standards
- Some markets won't be as vibrant, e.g., independent schools and universities; applications are down in PA state schools therefore we need to expand our markets.
- Less retail and entertainment

- Multi-family projects will increase rentals and remain strong.
- Dramatic needs in HC: mental health, virtual medicine (which is harder with young children)
- The part of the profession focused on private and smaller work will have a long road to recover, large firms not

Responses regarding future differences in firms' work life and culture
- Will be more open to work differently, more inquisitive, more experimental, redefine what virtual work is
- I see myself working longer hours due to technology
- Work quality and intellectual quality may suffer
- More comfort working at home (but) more back to normal as before
- Clients become dependent on individuals (as opposed to firms)
- Potential to incubate smaller practitioners, erode larger firms
- Development of a freelance culture, turning our office into TV studios
- The millennial work-life balance is changing; was forced, now accepted
- Three hours longer, the pandemic workday has obliterated work-life balance
- (For me) personal collaboration and spontaneity are still important
- There will be a remote norm only if encouraged by government for social distance; I don't think it's as good or profitable for people to work remotely.
- Less dependence on interaction
- More remote work, which is only good up to a point; person-to-person service won't be replaced, especially in the early phases
- I feel more productive, not as harried; there's no line between work and home
- Another level of collaboration – 3 at table with trace and models, talking about concepts, a fluidity of ideas. Serendipity hasn't yet been achieved
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- I will not promote working from home (despite) pressure to permit and use it. Some who require less design and documentation could make it work

Responses regarding future differences in society
- Economy will be down
- Less money to go around
- Emergency care will change; the next big issue will be different, be more life-sustaining, more versatile;
- People will take sickness differently
- Centralized institutions trying to catch up with a decentralized world.
- Five years from now, this will all be a memory
- Most can't see the Earth destroying itself
- Sustainability a larger part of architecture; nothing similar happening now
- It will be historical; think of Watergate: minor changes but then no major improvement
- Bigger role for government
- After Sandy Hook there was a lot of activity re security; that level of concern went away. There is a similar automatic openness for sanitary reasons.
- Cynically, societies have short memories; I see a 1-2 year transition period