

**How will our experiences
during the Covid-19 lockdown
affect how we design the built
environment in the future?**

On the 20th of August, we brought together Buro Happold staff and external friends to take part in a virtual design sprint. We reflected on our personal experiences of the pandemic, thinking about what recent learnings we might want to keep and apply to our design and consulting.

It was as much an exercise in capturing the zeitgeist as one of taking stock of how rapidly we adapted to changing circumstances. How much of these things would and should realistically stick as we come out of this current phase of the pandemic?

In essence, how sticky is Covid-19?

We split into three groups, trying to reimagine our **living, work,** and **public spaces** based on our personal experiences and answer the following questions:

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What will we want to keep?

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What must we keep?

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What will we want more of?

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What will we want to get away from/get back to as quickly as possible?

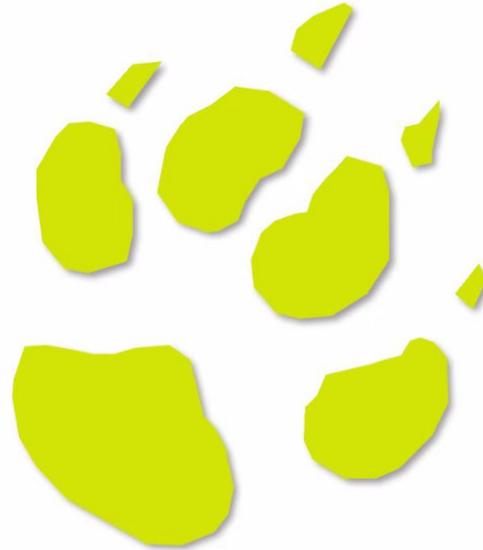
It was interesting (and refreshing) to see that each of the three break-out groups, which comprised a mixture of both Buro Happold staff and external friends, addressed issues such as **flexibility, adaptability, humanity** and the need for **empathic design**.

Discussing complicated issues with a diverse group of people, who had mostly never met, to produce answers and forge bonds, built faith and threw another spin onto the question of travel beyond the confines of distance and carbon emissions as barriers.

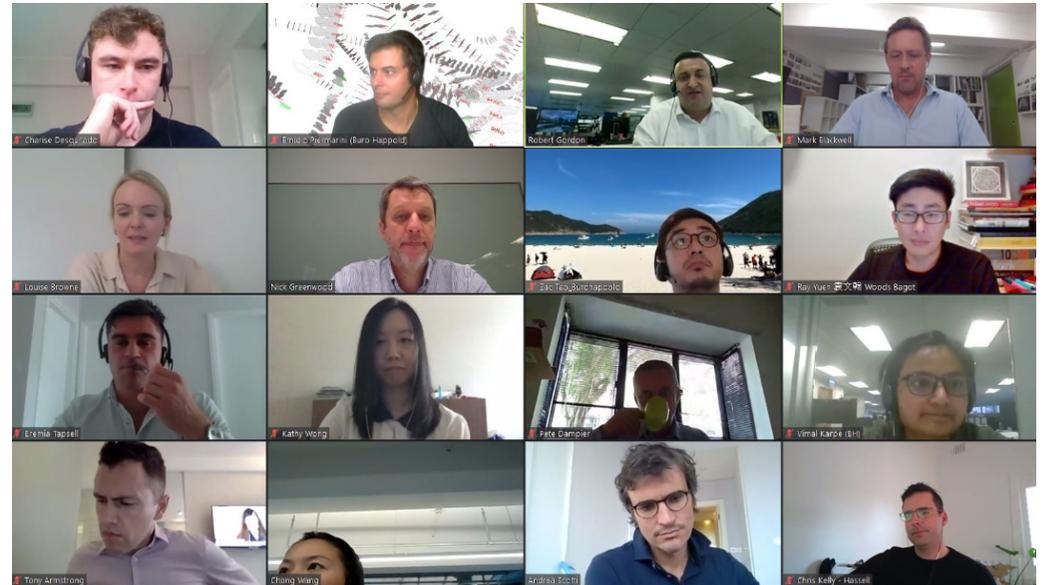
There was also an important recognition that as the boundaries between living and working spaces blurred, so did our understanding of liveability and workability begin to merge with one another. This revealed cross-overs and exposed tensions that collectively sparked imaginative ideas towards the next phases.

How sticky is CV-19?

C:lab Sprint Brief



A Eulogy for Dogma



**The Human ...
not just the colleague.**

**We adapted and then
we thrived, why?**

**“We were allowed
exclusive access to the
person, not just the
professional”**

- **We were allowed exclusive access to the person, not just the professional.**
 - We thought that the remote working environment would leave us less engaged with our colleagues compared to the office. In reality, we gained a new insight into the lives of our colleagues. Whether it was via *Teams, Zoom, Skype, or TikTok (maybe?)*, the humble laptop camera became a portal into the ‘living-turned-working’ spaces of our colleagues and clients.
 - Consciously or sub-consciously, we could relate to a toddler racing across the screen or a nearby jackhammer roaring into life. **We should keep this level of understanding with our colleagues, long after Covid-19 has left us.**
 - The development of community spirit and engagement during Covid-19 was serendipitous. Members of the community offered to help others who would naturally struggle during the outbreak. Volunteers took food and household supplies to elderly citizens, the latter avoiding densely populated streets. Others found opportunities for social engagement through technology.

There are things we
have missed.

**“... look good, feel good,
play good ...”**

- Face-to-face interaction with our colleagues.
- The absence of informal, opportunistic meetings with colleagues in an elevator or a lunchroom has robbed us of some of the creative ‘magic’ that companies rely on for innovation and progress. Humans need social interaction but also it seems to be increasingly clear that the use of planned meetings and catch-ups only can also be detrimental to productivity.
- Dressing to impress.
- The adage of ‘look good, feel good, play good’ comes to mind. It appears that one’s office attire fosters a feeling of professionalism, motivating them to perform in their job.

The Physical...

**“...spaces, systems,
self-cleaning surfaces...”**

Thinking about design.

“... just as humans have done throughout history when faced with such problems ...”

To prevent the spread of Covid-19 and limit its impact, we are innovating and designing our way out of the situation, just as humans have done throughout history when faced with such problems. Steps to improve public health have been prioritized and indeed embedded into regulatory frameworks. For example:

- Stringent air-quality standards for buildings
- The development of anti-septic, 'self-cleaning' surfaces
- Contactless user-interfaces for things such as elevator buttons
- User-controlled workspaces i.e. temperature control
- *Empathic* Design for people rather than profit.
- Personal devices such as watches to prompt the user to wash hands based on location and hand movement.
- As we learn more about viral pandemics, it may become the norm to have permanent infrared cameras or temperature machines at building entrances.

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- **Multigenerational households are a common model in Hong Kong.** In the future, there should be an allowance for the separation of spaces to differentiate the vulnerable elderly from the young, promoting privacy and creating a hygienic threshold by minimising shared air flow and common touchable surfaces. Similarly, the design of care homes needs to prioritize the protection of elderly citizens.
 - One of the biggest challenges of the Covid-19 era has been the need to juggle both 'work from home' for parents and 'school from home' for children. Interior design should cater for the partial separation of space to enable a semi-private work environment, whilst retaining the ability to supervise children during online school classes.
 - **Covid-19 gave us the opportunity to take back control over our time.**
 - Rather than being across a city, the commute became across a hallway. This revelation, combined with the removal of rigid office working hours, meant many people had the freedom to structure their day around work and recreation to suit their needs.
 - **A perceived increase in available time was weighed against a decrease in available space.**
 - For example, having gyms largely closed for business meant that the value of flexible floor space in the home and of outdoor spaces such as parks and harbour esplanades sky-rocketed, especially in dense, urban centres such as Hong Kong.
 - Connection and access to nature and green space are invaluable to wellbeing. People's accommodation should incorporate outdoor spaces. For example, apartments with balconies or blocks with shared rooftops and other outdoor areas.

When Covid goes, these should go with it:

- The partitioning of workspaces as a means of physical distancing.
 - The rise of the open-plan was an attempt to leave behind the 'cubicle farms' of past offices. There is apparently little desire to return this.
- A necessity for hygiene purposes, single-use plastics should be replaced by more environmentally-friendly alternatives. An issue for many industries not just healthcare, but, creating a more environmentally friendly way to protect ourselves rather than the explosion of plastic-based face coverings we have seen in 2020 is essential going forward.
- Closed borders. We want the option of travelling to other countries – for work and for play.
- Unnecessary flying where a video call would suffice.
- A decrease in stress and anxiety
- Seeing time as a zero-sum game – ask yourself: can the time I spend travelling be used to improve my wellness or produce work?
- Time spent away from family and friends
- The work from home model gives rise to the possibility of living further from the office. At the same time, the relaxation in rental price growth gives the opportunity to live in more desirable locations.
- Covid-19 forced us to realise that there is not a singular physical location where work must be done. In fact, working from an office and working from home each offers its own benefits. Going forward, the question of "What will I work on today?" will drive the answer to "Where will I work today?".

A look ahead:

- **Are the long commutes and business trips necessary?**
 - Travel-related fossil fuel consumption dropped, giving the planet some respite from greenhouse gas emissions.
 - Productive time was freed up.

Outdoor spaces and the environment...

Covid-19 has helped
reduce emissions,
clearing the air, and
letting our lungs breathe
it without hindrance.

In Hong Kong, popular and busy outdoor streets became more pedestrian-friendly with the onset of the pandemic and the instigation of social distancing. The same effect was observed in playgrounds. Fewer crowds and more frequent sanitization routines made these places more accessible, enjoyable and more attractive.

Covid-19 has helped reduce emissions, clearing the air, and letting our lungs breathe it without hindrance. No small feat in Hong Kong and China. Around the world, multiple reports of wildlife returning to urban areas remind us how many species have been displaced by human activity.

Lockdowns and the consequent spending of excessive time indoors has meant that we are all the more appreciative of the time we are able to spend outdoors.

All these good things about the pandemic prompt this question: How do we design the built environment better so that it continues to have better air quality, fewer carbon emissions, and is a better place to live for all living beings?

**“... we are all the more
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outdoors ...”**

Thinking about design:

Bearing in mind the reduced access to space and other people in the pandemic environment of social distancing and lockdowns, the following design ideas were proposed:

- Outdoor spaces where we feel safe to walk, cycle, jog, eat or sit and relax.
- Spaces that facilitate connection with other people and nature.
- Stimulation of local economies – Shanghai’s night festival or Farmer’s market to get locally grown food distributed to local communities.

Empathic Design in the Built Environment.

“We are responsible for creating meaningful and memorable experiences, to connect to the soul of the place, orchestrate a platform for an ensemble of moments”

One key design consideration coming out of the Covid-19 experience is the need to incorporate the physical and emotional well-being of the user, whether in an office, park or subway system. There is unprecedented health, economic and social uncertainty in the world. As designers of the built environment, we have a unique opportunity to alleviate negative experiences in this space.

As designers, we need a greater responsibility for what we refer to as the inner beauty of invisible design. The Danish urbanist, Jan Gehl* neatly summarises this approach as, ‘First life, then spaces, then buildings.’ In other words, as designers, our responsibility is for people by making conscious decisions towards emotive design.

We are responsible for creating meaningful and memorable experiences, to connect to the soul of the place, orchestrate a platform for an ensemble of moments. Crucial to this is the health and wellbeing movement and the ability to ‘connect with nature.’ Nature can create a living sensorium, a space of tactile experience, an understanding of the symbolism of place. Protecting and enhancing these essential ingredients is key to celebrating the unique identity of place and experience for our evolving needs.

*J. Gehl (2011) Life Between Buildings: Using Public Space. Washington DC: Island Press

Creative physical cues, which give directions about social distancing, cleaning routines, and hygiene instructions ensure physical safety, putting the minds of users at ease. For example, chalk circles in grocery stores to administrate social distancing.

Public spaces where sitting on grass is discouraged or where shade is limited hinders one's interaction with nature. Let the kids (or adults) play!

Workspaces need to be designed to foster open and frequent dialogue amongst colleagues and clients, facilitate participation, and increase one's sense of belonging and ownership towards an organization.

Public places such as retail stores, malls, hospitals, and construction sites are places where higher densities of people are common, making visitors and staff concerned for their own well-being. What design changes are needed to ensure that staff feel safe to work at these places?



Fig.1 Creative way of ensuring social distancing



Fig. 2 Social distancing circles in parks

*Stock image

Questions.

Still to be answered in the ever-growing eulogy for dogma...

How, how, how...

Inequitable working from home arrangements. How will companies address this disparity in the future?

How do we design the built environment better so that it continues to have better air quality, fewer carbon emissions, and is a better place to live for all living beings?

The pandemic has made us realise that we desire flexibility, openness, greenery, and sanitization in the home space. How do local regulations and frameworks need to change so that these requirements are incorporated into existing and new buildings?

Do we need to change the rules of retail design? Should 'How quickly can you get to the desired product?' rather than 'How do we increase footfall?' be the governing question?

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C:lab background.

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C:lab is a programme initiated by Buro Happold to explore emergent change within the built environment.

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Through a series of activities ranging from field trips, academic research and workshops/sprints, to debates and conferences, we aim to explore topics that will shape the future of design in the built environment.

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Our membership is a global mix of young leaders and experienced practitioners who work with some of our closest friends and collaborators. We engage leaders in their field to widen understanding and forge new relationships.

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C:lab's logo is the pawprint of a skunk! This is a homage to the concept of a 'skunkworks', an enriched environment where exploration and innovation are encouraged, free from organisational process and corporate boundaries.



<https://www.burohappold.com/clab/>