

After the lockdown

It is pretty mad to have a home, leave it empty all day, squeeze yourself into the city in a polluting tin box of one kind or another. All at the same time. That way madness *lay*.

Planning in London has been published and edited by Brian Waters, Lee Mallett and Paul Finch since 1992

One of your editors recently 'bumped into' the CEO of one of London's leading shared-workspace providers in the empty streets of a locked-down leafy suburb. Of course, we actually stood two metres apart admiring his motorbike (he gave up public transport a while back).

"Whether we'll have the same business after this, we just don't know," was his response to the sort of questions we've all been asked recently. "Everybody's gone home. We don't know if they'll come back. Even if they do, it will be a different business."

Some people believe in the resurrection of normal demand for offices, and other forms of space we do stuff in. A lot of us have familiarised ourselves with ways of not needing to go near the office, possibly ever again, usually involving improved technology that now makes all sorts of things achievable at home.

Lockdown has transformed how we use our environment in all sorts of ways. The experience offers profound lessons for Planning, with a capital 'P'. We don't need to commute so much. We can do it at different hours. We don't need so much office space shoehorned into the city centre. We don't need traditional High Streets. And if we could self-test remotely for Coronavirus and its anti-bodies, and treat ourselves using new medical technology, or phone diagnosis, we might not need traditional forms of medical infrastructure either.

The list goes on. Teachers have been preparing online lessons for students at home - less commuting, fewer cars, less rigid school space required, perhaps? Service industry workers had already been vacating offices and migrating at least part-time to either a room in their home, or the local coffee shop.

Giant robotically-operated sheds on the outskirts orchestrate our online purchases, then deliver them to a growing swarm of inner-city 'last-mile' depots, perhaps for delivery by automated electric vehicles that don't, or won't soon, need a driver.

Planning has to manage this evolution - which now has a capital 'R' in front of it. And to get in front of that revolution, planning has got to get back into the visioning game. We need to be 'gaming' the scenarios that have been playing out in the time of Coronavirus as indicators of what will happen, what is happening, to the ways we use our villages, towns and cities. How we service and inhabit them. How we enable the opportunities they will continue to offer and how we avoid the negative things they have generated, using technology to do that.

When you think about it, as we've been forced to, it is pretty mad to have a home, leave it empty all day, squeeze yourself into the city in a polluting tin box of one kind or another. All at the same time. That way madness *lay*.

A form of planning, not just development control, is essential for the time that will come after Lockdown and C19. One that is national, regional and local and is led by much stronger visioning. Lack of vision got us into this mess. ■

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Home working isn't what it was in 1974

The crisis lockdown and consequent working from home may hasten the existing trend to create workspace buildings which are flexible and adaptable enough to absorb new ways of working

Those old enough to remember Edward Heath's three-day week, miners' strikes and the economy in the wake of the oil price crisis may also remember the near impossibility for architects, planners and indeed most other people, of effective home-working. It was an analogue and physical world where the effects of strike action, for example, could bring instant havoc compared with how we can respond today, thanks largely to digital technology.

Once the Corona Crisis is passed, there will be a repeat of the perennial claim that the office is dead: as building type, as workplace environment, and as economic necessity. The British Council for Offices, which has been forced to postpone its annual conference due to have been held in Toronto this June, may find that our attitude to home working has changed our view about office life. Possible, but unlikely. Although there are people in offices who would clearly prefer to be working at home (note the vacant stare, the cheerless demeanour, the non-communication) for most, office life has social benefits as well as its burdens.

Millennials seem positively to relish the idea of the shared contemporary office, replete with amenities and facilities way beyond anything provided back in the 1970s. While WeWork may be struggling to justify its recent excessive stock-exchange valuation, as an idea it has transformed the market.

Digital players like Google have meanwhile reinvented the office as a bespoke environment for thousands of workers all regarded, in some way, as key. The old mantra beloved of developers, that compared with overall costs, the price for office accommodation is a drop in the ocean, has been reinforced by the workplace investment of the 'fintech' sector. That other mantra, that office design should 'attract, retain and motivate' staff seems to be alive and well. At least until the virus crisis arrived.

Given the ability of people to 'work' almost anywhere, how has the office market managed to retain its appeal for employees, as well as investing institutions and hence developers and their architects? Partly because many people work better in teams where they know the other players, and where ideas can bounce around in a quite different way to email exchanges.

Moreover, for many institutions, it is the chance meetings and the possibility of generating ideas as a result of people from different teams interacting in the same environment that is valued. This explains designs based on increasing the likelihood of chance interactions, whether in the world of commerce, or in institutions like universities.

As many are currently experiencing, it is easy to work remotely if you can communicate collectively with your colleagues – but that is because you have worked with them physically in an office. Would this sort of working happen so easily if the people involved scarcely knew each other? We predict that the world of offices will make a big come-back once we are back to normal – except that it will be a new normal, where all concerned with design and delivery will need to ask themselves why people would want to work in their buildings when they could do it all from their kitchens?

This could have a significant effect on the London office market, and may hasten the existing trend to create workspace buildings which are flexible and adaptable enough to absorb new ways of working, or accommodate totally new sorts of use. ■