

MAY 2020

Design on Slow-Forward

How Will the Global
Pandemic Impact the
Future of Design?



A report by CatchOn, a Finn Partners Company

CATCHON
FINN
PARTNERS

Introduction

Tragedy has historically kindled a flame in design, often by necessity.

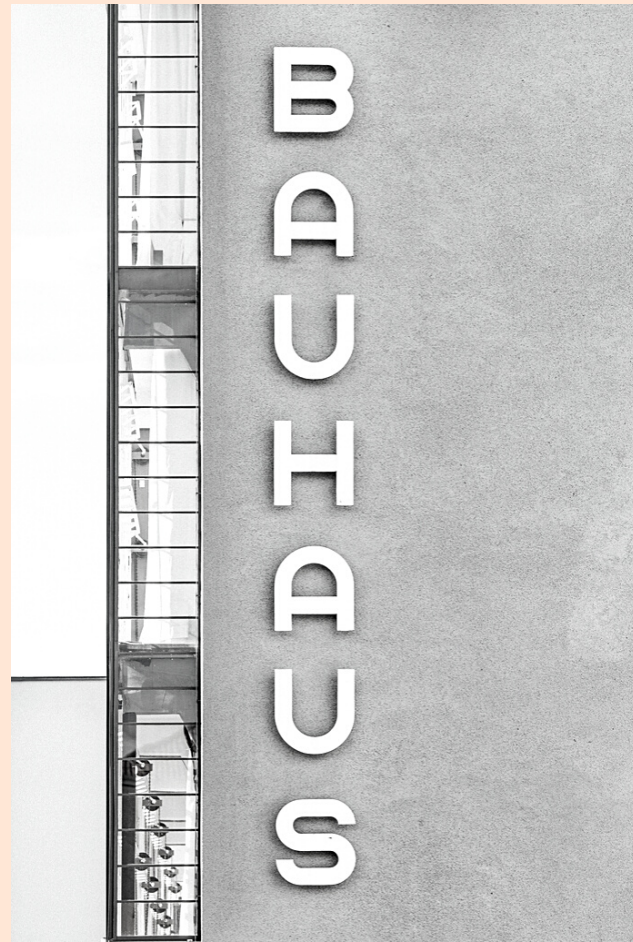
Take the Black Death, which plagued Europe and Asia in the mid-1300s and led to the advent of the Italian Renaissance. Or the tuberculosis outbreak in the early 20th century, after which vigilance against illness prompted an inclination toward stark cleanliness—allowed by negative space, sleek lines, and minimalism—and inspired the rise of Modernist architecture. Following the Roaring '20s and the heyday of the art deco movement, scarcity during the Great Depression democratized design and made way for a simpler, more practical aesthetic seen in the work of the likes of Charles and Ray Eames, whose name has become synonymous with midcentury modern design. And while other pandemics such as the Spanish flu and cholera may not have birthed seminal design movements, they did, however, alter public policies and urban planning moving forward by emphasizing the importance of healthcare systems, social distancing measures, and housing reforms.

Like Covid-19, these cataclysmic events were unprecedented—and they ushered in, whether directly or indirectly, remarkably powerful periods of creativity. The sequence is plausible: After long intervals of isolation and stifled expression, humans emerge with a sharpened perspective and an extreme desire to create, leaning into hardship to reintroduce beauty and radical change into a battered society.

For many across the globe, the passage of time feels slowed, or even on pause. In examining the state of our world after 2020, it is with a renewed sense of optimism that we anticipate and rethink both the challenges and the possibilities that lie ahead. No other event in modern history has had such a profound disruption across cities, countries, and industries, and it's difficult to imagine any individual, business, or economy that will be left unchanged.

But it is with hope that we propose this: Perhaps collective disaster is what will ultimately spur the world to rebuild together. Exploring the opportunities and key movements ahead, this report draws from research and conversations with respected architects and interior designers, as well as insights from CatchOn's recent webinar entitled "Catch the Experts: How is Covid-19 Impacting the Future of Design?".

When quoting ideas and information from this piece, please credit "CatchOn's Design on Slow-Forward: A Special Covid-19 Report". For more information, email coinsights@finnpartners.com or visit www.catchonco.com.



1

Conscious Design

For reasons of sustainability, the new normal will entail reconsidering production cycles and breaking consumption patterns.

Around the world, designers such as Amsterdam-based Studio Formafantasma have been exploring design's role in overproduction—a concern echoed by Infrastructure co-founder Darrel Best, who notes that "the design cycle has become almost as frenetic as the fashion cycle. Designers felt a compulsion to be producing new collections, regardless of whether it was truly relevant to the moment or not."

Architecture firms are putting the climate crisis at the center of their practice. Take Snøhetta, which has taken carbon-neutral several steps further with the invention of a new standard, "Powerhouse," referring to their "carbon-negative" designs. "As one of the worst polluters, the construction industry could come under heavy scrutiny," predicts Sean Affleck, Director at Make Architects. "To reduce its carbon footprint, the industry will have to look more closely at reuse, pre-fabrication and modular construction, material choices, and intensive landscape greening."

Best says that there is a long way to go for the industry to be able to shift completely to a more circular model. But, he says, "As long as we're making an attempt to transition toward something that is more ecological and environmental, we're still winning a battle. This should give us pause to think about how we can integrate more sustainable design into what we're doing."

An effect of the comfort brought about by emotional resonance and tactility, consumption will be more conscious than ever. As the trend forecaster Li Edelkoort boldly predicted, "owning less things will make people happier." Having discovered that to survive, they don't really need much, people's mindsets will shift to more selective consumption of objects that they feel a true attachment to.

Says Suzy Annetta, editor of *Design Anthology*, "In small spaces where we can't splurge on a nice big sofa or things which take up a lot of space, it might be cabinetry, or the taps in the bathroom—these things we touch every single day can bring quite a bit of joy."

As the trend forecaster Li Edelkoort boldly predicted, "Owning less things will make people happier."



2

Hyper-Localism

When it comes to production, sourcing, and consumption, provenance is key.

As far as trends go, the value in localism might have first broken through in the food and beverage industry, in which renowned restaurateurs and chefs place a premium on the provenance of ingredients. In 2020 and beyond, where a product is sourced or made will be just as important on a mainstream level—a direct result of how global lockdowns have deeply disrupted, and in many cases even halted, supply, production, and trade in the industry.

Forced to look around and inward for alternative options when it comes to furniture and accessories, designers and consumers alike are finding that supporting local shouldn't be a last resort; rather, it should be their first choice. With burgeoning design movements in cities big and small across the world, the possibilities are endless if one is willing to experiment, think out of the box, and take pride in local talent.

An early expression of this perspective was the Naples design fair, Edit Napoli, conceived in 2019 to shine the spotlight on a new generation of designers and,

according to its founders, “focus[es] on the rise of the designer-maker who is at the forefront of a movement that is challenging the traditional chain of production and distribution.”

Less optimistic observers may point out that hyperlocalism connotes a contracting pool of options, for both producer and consumer. Yet the silver lining lies in its potential not only to encourage a new breed of creativity, but also to supplant a system that has long been dominated by a storied, if small group of brands.

“China and Italy are relied on for so much of furniture and construction trades, so it's an opportunity, perhaps, for other companies to step in and step up,” Charmaine Chan, *South China Morning Post's* design editor, reflects. “It wasn't until this crisis hit that we realized how little is made locally, so we might be seeing more local manufacturing.”

“It wasn't until this crisis hit that we realized how little is made locally, so we might be seeing more local manufacturing.”



3

The Bot Revolution

The pandemic will catapult the world into even more advanced and ingenious technology.

Forget refrigerators that talk—we want refrigerators that disinfect.

Just when we thought we had seen everything, Covid-19 brought into focus a need for sharper, consumer-attuned innovation. Smart gadgets are bound to get even more creative, particularly in tackling personal hygiene. And while technology in the home has flourished for years, the pandemic is poised to elevate every household's standards of cleanliness, as well as physical and mental health, for both older and younger generations. More than convenience, the features of a smart home, such as reactive technology, remote control, and automation will be desired for their efficiency and ability to fortify the home.

As a result, innovation will stem from real needs and experiences. Frank Chou, a Beijing-based furniture and product designer, has come up with a sterilizing lamp, which functions as a tray and lamp that emits UV light. Users can place keys, phones, and other small items to be cleaned

before proceeding to use them in their homes. Casetify launched a UV sanitizer for mobile phones, claiming to destroy 99.9% of germs that live on one's handheld gadget. And then there's Arizona-headquartered Zero Mass Water, which invented a solar hydropanel that generates ultra-pure water from sunlight and air. The company strives to make a basic need—drinking water—widely available even in low-infrastructure places like Mexico and the Philippines; in the US, the product is used in residential homes and commercial establishments.

Not far behind are existing technologies not commonly seen at home. In bathrooms, for instance, the high-tech toilet and portable bidet prevalent in countries like Japan, and automatic faucets and dryers typically only seen in public washrooms, have been a long time coming. Now that these are presenting concrete solutions to problems such as the shortage of napkins recently experienced in Asia and North America, perhaps these will find their way into private sanctuaries.

The bottom line? Consumers will be emerging from crisis with a wholly different mindset—and in the post-pandemic era, it's tools and developments that can readily demonstrate value which will be deemed more urgent over gadgets that are merely nice-to-have.

Innovation will stem from real needs and experiences.



4

A Room of One's Own

Will open floor plans remain desirable in coming years?

Open floor plans have been a dominant trend in residential design for years, and are a defining characteristic of many modern homes today. While this allows for spaces to flow freely, that connectivity can be detrimental to functional privacy, as many working from home have come to grasp.

With the pandemic suddenly forcing us to use homes simultaneously as offices, classrooms, meeting rooms, and gyms—often with multiple residents at once—people are realizing the negative consequences of open floor plans. This experience will spur a spatial organization in homes, equipping spaces with flexibility for different uses and offering aural, olfactory, and spatial privacy.

JJ Acuna, founder and creative director of Hong Kong-based design studio JJA Bespoke, anticipates a shift toward designated home offices or even rooms dedicated to productive work. “People are going to invest in proper spaces where they can operate businesses from home, to really forge a live-work environment that’s not just a selling point,” he says.

“One can only work for so long on the sofa or kitchen counter table without getting distracted by the kids or sitting uncomfortably for too long.”

In a time when many are drawing consolation from cooking, the kitchen, too, has come into the spotlight. Stylish open kitchens might begin to lose their appeal, as dedicated kitchen spaces become more ideal for experimentation.

With homes as our last refuge, practicing good hygiene in every possible way has also become imperative. We might see a cultural shift in which the West adopts more Asian practices, such as removing shoes prior to entering any residences. Mudrooms, a typical feature of farmhouses, could become a prominent addition, with its potential to be designed with washbasins and sterilization equipment to mitigate germs. It’s clear that cleanliness, efficiency, and flexibility are the drivers to watch in the interior design space.

This experience will spur a spatial organization in homes, equipping spaces with flexibility for different uses and offering aural, olfactory, and spatial privacy.



5

The Not-So-Secret Garden

Flipping the switch on nature, a return to courtyards may be on the horizon.

In the exhibition “Countryside, the Future” at New York’s Guggenheim museum, architect Rem Koolhaas explores a pivot from cities to rural areas, challenging the idea that urbanization is the world’s destiny and proposing the countryside as “a frontier for experimentation.”

With billions sheltered in place, similar, albeit less drastic articulations of Koolhaas’ train of thought have emerged. After all, when the best thing about living in cities is the buzzing energy outside, what happens when one can’t step much farther out from the front door?

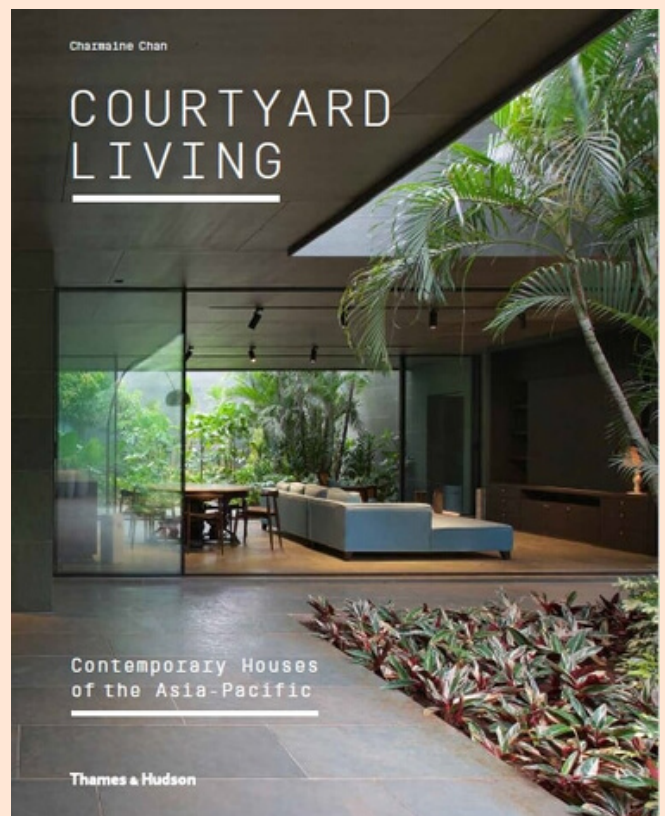
Bringing a form of the outdoors in, courtyards will become an important source of inspiration in both home and retail design in the years to come. As Chan, author of *Courtyard Living: Contemporary Houses of the Asia-Pacific* (Thames & Hudson), explains in the *South China Morning Post*, “These types of dwellings continue to be desired for many of the reasons they were built in the past: Internal gardens and voids admit air and light; create social spaces; extend

living areas by becoming protected outdoor ‘rooms’; enhance privacy; and cater to indoor-outdoor living.”

Amid the pandemic, the benefits of sunlight and open air to one’s health have been emphasized. Adds Affleck of Make Architects, “Natural ventilation will be more popular than air-conditioning systems that simply recirculate used air.” Lockdowns have also intensified a hunger for the outdoors. It makes sense, then, that when restrictions are lifted, there will be a greater appreciation for spaces that blur the divide.

Not limited to the realm of home design, renditions of the courtyard concept may increasingly become prized features of commercial spaces, from hotels and restaurants to retail establishments. Foster + Partners, for one, recently made a strong case for outdoor spaces in its designs of Apple’s flagship stores in Miami and New York, which have been transformed into community plazas that encourage interaction with nature. In the months ahead, businesses may return to normal—but what they look like, and what they value, will be very different after this.

Courtyards will become an important source of inspiration in both home and retail design in the years to come.



In the design volume *Courtyard Living: Contemporary Houses of the Asia-Pacific* (Thames & Hudson), author Charmaine Chan explores homes across the region. Photographs by Thilina Wijesiri (top) and Ira Gosalia and Sebastian Zachariah/Photographix (cover).

Questions

In this report, we aim to provoke thought and inspire discussion on the way forward. We'd love to hear your thoughts on the following questions. Email us at coinsights@finnpartners.com.

- What will homes, apartments, and commercial establishments look like in five years?
- In this day and age, which design movements will emerge, and which will continue to have a place in the world of interiors?
- Will technology amplify or reduce the role and voice of designers in the future?
- How will designers and businesses adapt to new requirements and preferences shaped by the pandemic?
- Will circularity in design ever be feasible?

About CatchOn, A Finn Partners Company

Founded in 2001, CatchOn is a brand communications consultancy with offices in Hong Kong and Shanghai. Armed with a hybrid expertise in branding, integrated marketing communications, market research, and public relations, we create and communicate brands throughout Asia. In 2019, we joined Finn Partners, a global integrated PR and marketing agency. Visit the website at www.catchonco.com and follow us on Instagram at [@catchonco](https://www.instagram.com/catchonco).