

A spotlight on

Post-pandemic life and the impact on the built environment

The outbreak of COVID-19 and subsequent restrictions and lockdowns that have followed have significantly changed living and working practices. Whilst not all experiences were alike during the pandemic, it is expected that there will be a shift to 'a new normal' rather than a return to what was before. As the vaccine roll-out progresses, it is time to envisage what the post-pandemic future may look like.

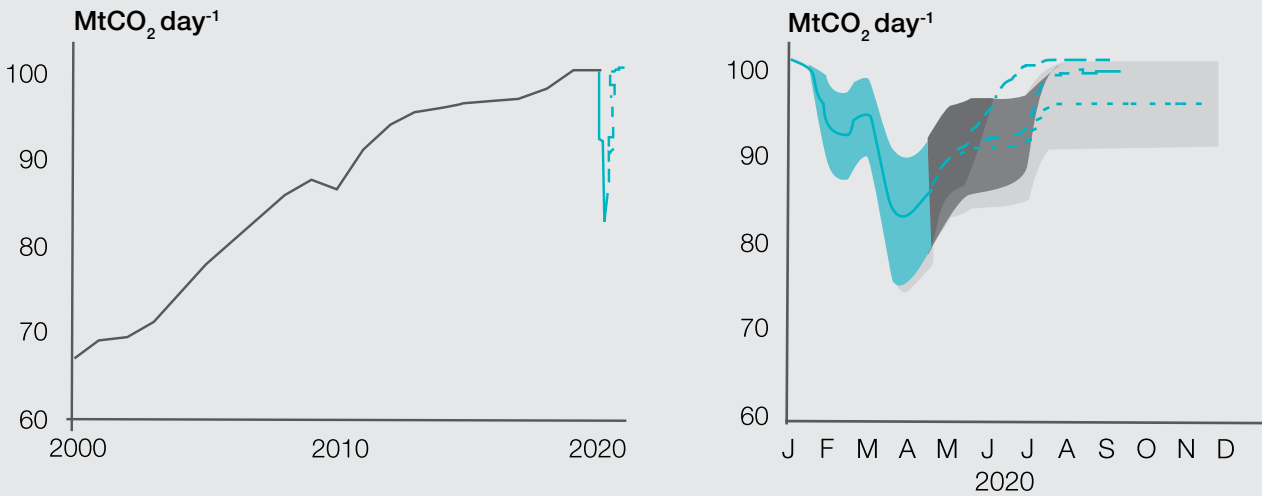
The effects of COVID-19 have accelerated trends that were being seen before the pandemic, such as the shift of retail to online and away from traditional high streets. The pandemic has also shown the importance of health and local community, and the large numbers productively working from home has provided a way for flexible working.

Restrictions during lockdown, and a reduction in economic activity, intended to combat the pandemic has had the knock-on effect of reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

A report by the International Energy Agency shows that, on the whole, 2020 saw a total drop-off in global CO2 emissions of six percent. As economic activity has restarted worldwide, emissions have rebounded, demonstrating the importance of developing clean energy and reducing energy consumption to fight climate change.



Global daily fossil CO₂ emissions



Source: Global CO₂ emissions MtCO₂ per day to December 2020

Lessons from the pandemic will shape our built assets to become more flexible, adaptable and considerate of health, well-being and sustainability, meeting local needs and the interests of our communities.

Overview

Localisation

The lockdown restrictions have shown the importance of community and services being nearby. Recently published research from Unibail-Rodamco-Westfield shows that 52 percent of consumers are shopping more locally than last year and that 96 percent of major retailers are considering introducing community initiatives in 2021.

With the increase in flexible working leading people to spend more time at home and a reduction in commuting, it is important that developments incorporate services to give life to areas and communities. 'Self-sustainable ecosystem' is a term being used so that cafes and convenience stores, etc. are nearby.

Linked to this is the concept of a '15-minute city'; an idea modelled to improve quality of life, with everything a resident would need being reachable within a quarter of an hour by foot or cycle. This could increase social links, feelings of neighbourhood and reduce emissions, all of which benefit the environment.

Repurposing and mixed-use developments

The recent changes to classes of planning use give more flexibility to the repurposing of buildings and town centres, which would better reflect changing circumstances and improve how the industry responds to the local community. There are opportunities for new uses to come to town centres — residential, education, health and community and mixed developments of these.

Consideration of different uses such as workspace, retail, leisure, education, health and residential combined in mixed-use buildings will maximise the potential of spaces. This would also lead to an increased footfall and bring life to developments throughout the week and the weekends, to help make best use of places where people want to be.

Central and local government funding and partnerships with the private sector are key for reinvigoration of high streets.

Net zero carbon/sustainability

With increasing concern about climate change and whether enough is being done to meet targets, sustainability continues to be a key consideration for projects. The UK Green Building Council notes that ‘newly constructed buildings are more energy efficient, but 80 percent of buildings [that will be in use] in 2050 have already been built, so a major priority is decarbonising our existing stock.’

Carbon calculations have become part of funding decisions and whole life carbon assessments are increasingly being undertaken to understand the impacts of design decisions and materials specification over the life of the building; for example, to understand the impact of maintenance and replacement cycles. This is leading to increasing numbers of buildings and developments being constructed to meet the Passivhaus standard, increased use of timber, reuse of existing building elements and inherent flexibility to buildings (e.g. consideration of cores for different uses/plantroom layout/position to facilitate replacement.)

Well-being and smart buildings

Well-being is a key theme as mental health has been a concern during lockdown restrictions. Research also links well-being to increased productivity and health benefits, and there are many factors which can be considered to promote this:

- **Lighting:** Good daylighting and artificial lighting that responds to circadian rhythms.

- **Biophilic design:** Natural materials and connection to green space being used to promote calm and reduce stress.
- **Air quality:** Recent research indicates that reduced levels of CO₂, Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs) and pollution have significant positive impacts on the cognitive function of a building’s occupants.
- **Sound:** Reducing noise pollution, enhanced acoustic separation and effective reverberation control.
- **Thermal performance:** Improving insulation, avoiding temperature extremes and maintaining a controllable, even temperature can improve physical comfort.
- **Water:** Maintaining hydration aids health and well-being and can be encouraged by providing local access to potable water.

Use of technology and understanding how people are using buildings can give opportunities to reduce energy consumption and improve well-being. As it is believed that COVID-19 will not be the last pandemic, smart buildings are seen to be important to manage responses to future public health issues such as tracking when buildings need to be cleaned/quarantined, etc. and to manage social distancing.



Living

A hybrid way of working is expected for many going forwards, with at least a part of the week spent working from home or remotely. Estate agents have noted that experiences during the pandemic have led to people evaluating their living arrangements. As people commute less, and look for more room and external space, they may seek to relocate themselves further out. Last year, Redrow announced a shift to focus on suburban areas, responding to customer demands following COVID-19.

Space to work/connection with outside

Consideration is being given to layouts to give sufficient space but also adaptable, flexible areas to facilitate working from home. Thought is being given to less open-plan layouts that would enable people to shut the door for work and use rooms for different purposes during the course of the day.

Amenities are adapting to support working from home and it is expected that co-working spaces/printing rooms/telephone pods will start to become more common place.

Parcel and cycle storage will be key considerations, and amenities are also being used to give a sense of community and assist with well-being, such as gardens, allotments and the like.

Alternative living tenures

There continues to be growth in alternative tenures such as Build to Rent, student accommodation and Later Living. The changes to town centres and high streets, along with the rise in flexible working, gives opportunities for these in new locations. Areas need to consider different types of accommodation to meet the needs of people throughout their lives and to create sustainable communities. A rise in mixed tenure and product developments is expected.

There are a number of schemes coming forward to repurpose department stores to provide accommodation, and these need to be carefully planned to create places where people want to live.



Working

Companies are trying to formulate a plan for their staff and offices going forwards. Some are currently planning remote working indefinitely e.g. Nationwide's 13,000 office staff. Others, such as Google, are planning a hybrid approach, expecting staff to be in the office at least three days a week from September onwards. It may well be the case that staff will begin choosing their employers on how closely their attitude to remote working aligns with their own values.

Many recognise that a balance is required, with the office playing an important part in collaboration, training and establishing its brand and ethos. Offices are expected to adjust to encourage people to come in and maximise the benefits of people being there, facilitating collaboration and connection.

Space

Offices are expected to be less densely occupied to manage social distancing requirements. Fit-outs to upgrade the office experience are anticipated to encourage people back into offices: ventilation upgrades, technology including sensors to manage social distancing, and creation of an experiential environment to encourage socialising and learning.



Playing

Following the lockdowns and restrictions, people are keen to socialise again, and it is anticipated that there will be considerable pent-up demand when measures are relaxed. In the future, spaces will focus on good ventilation and being able to adapt to reduced occupancy if social distancing measures are required, also giving safety reassurance to customers.

Customer experience

Emphasis on experiences as people crave social activity and entertainment. Consumers will look for quality and seek out uniqueness and diversity of offer.

Community

Leisure and cultural venues are seen to be important for the community. There are increasing numbers of schemes with cultural venues being planned to have other community benefits to attract footfall at different times of the day. Also use of external spaces to increase the use of and engagement with spaces.



Summary

Experiences from the pandemic will be taken forward into building and place design; flexibility, adaptability, well-being, and sustainability will focus on creating places where people want to live, work, and play. Increased involvement and partnership from the public sector will place communities and social value at the heart to create a 'new normal'.

Talk to an expert



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