

Our Homes Are Going to Look Very Different Post-Pandemic

Get ready for ‘Zoom rooms’ and decontamination zones in entryways



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Illustration: Matt Williams

For many years, I happily worked from home in a kitchen counter setup that was ergonomically horrific but entirely my own. In March, my workspace was invaded; suddenly, people expected the kitchen to function as an actual kitchen — *all day long*. I could see (and hear) my husband’s office — formerly the dining room — from mine, and no one cared if I was on a call when they wanted to run the garbage disposal.

I'm far from alone in this new normal, and for many people, it won't be temporary. A recent [Gallup poll](#) found that three in five workers who have been doing their jobs from home during the pandemic would prefer to continue to work remotely as much as possible, even when the economy reopens. If that's the case, some things are going to have to change in the average American home: for instance, more flex rooms for offices or gyms, more outdoor space, and more storage for stocking up pantries and freezers.

“After this is over, we will all reflect on what we really, truly, need to live and be healthy and happy, and everything else will become extraneous real fast,” says [Joe Allen](#), a professor of exposure science at Harvard University's T.H. Chan School of Public Health and director of the school's Healthy Buildings program, who spent the first month of isolation working and teaching from his car because it was the quietest place he could find. (He's now reluctantly transitioning one room to a home office.)

Finding more space in our homes need not, however, require more square footage. Not everyone wants to, or can, bust out of the city or town to flee to the countryside, despite what the rash of amateur [live chicken hoarders](#) would have us believe. Instead, says Boston real estate agent [Ricardo Rodriguez](#), “real estate post-Covid is going to be all about flex space.” Two months ago, he says, agents would market a property very straightforwardly: two bedrooms, two bathrooms, that sort of thing. “Now,” he says, “we're being asked to articulate even more clearly the options for the space. Could it be a study? Space for an office or a gym?” Outdoor access, previously a bonus amenity for urban dwellers, in particular, will become critical. “People who like cities will still want the convenience and energy of the urban environment,” says Rodriguez. “But clients who just bought [a new home] a few years ago and who might not normally be looking to move so soon are calling and being, like, ‘Find me a place with a yard.’”

If there's a migration away from urban centers, suggests Allen, it may be rooted in seeking emotional rather than physical space — a desire for a more solid command of one's circumstances and surroundings. “In any kind of crisis, one of the things that causes anxiety is not being able to control what's happening,” he says. And “in a multiunit building, you're dependent on the actions of others in a way that many are realizing they really don't like.”

Large apartment buildings will need to rethink amenities like shared laundry rooms and other communal spaces. Rodriguez points to new-construction buildings he's working with that are already implementing antibacterial copper on lobby door handles and concierge desks, as well as touchless technology to open doors and call elevators.

Inside, our homes will become our sanctuaries — or, at the very least, our bubbles. Just like after 9/11, says Allen, where there was a heightened sense of concern about terrorism, now there will be a heightened sense of concern around how indoor environments impact our health. Formerly optional air purification systems are becoming standard for all units. Storage needs will increase — more room in the pantry, more freezer space — as people shift from a “just in time” model of procuring food to one that minimizes trips to the market. In Los Angeles, architect [Chet Callahan](#) is putting the finishing touches on a post-Covid renovation for a young family in which he shrank a sprawling living room to make way for a dedicated entryway and laundry room. “Pre-

Covid, it might have been a space for the kids to shed their school bags and sports equipment,” says Callahan. “Post-Covid, it is a space to shed the contaminants of the outside world.”

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Certainly, most will want their home to be more satisfying; how that looks depends on where you live and how much money you can spend. Manhattan architect [Kevin Lichten](#) predicts a return to formal dining rooms as well as outdoor kitchens. “In a place like New York, people want to congregate,” he says. “[Now] your home has to meet all of these former desires you had to [congregate at] a restaurant or to a bar, to see friends.” He also thinks home tech will improve at a design level, and foresees home studios — Zoom rooms, essentially — where kids might take music lessons online or interact with teachers or parents. What’s more, says Lichten, “All those parents who declined built-in desks for their kids’ rooms because they ‘just use their laptops in bed’ will probably rethink that decision.”

And while many of us are looking for the kind of at-home privacy that would let us close doors on our family members’ countless Zoom meetings and work calls, experts say we will not see the end of the open-concept floorplan. Social isolation has increased our need for privacy, but also our appreciation for people. A few weeks into self-quarantine, [Rachel Zamore](#), a psychologist in Brattleboro, Vermont, encouraged her teenage son to do his schoolwork in the dining room. “On one hand, it’s great we have the space for him to go to a closed-off room and get his work done,” she says. “On the other, we found that a shared space helps support him staying focused. And it’s nice for the family to have a sort of study hall situation.”

Zamore — who recently launched [CareGiving HQ](#), an information management system and app for families coordinating caregiving for aging or ailing relatives — also thinks we’ll see a move toward multigenerational living, perhaps in separate houses on adjacent pieces of property, to satisfy a new desire to be close to family and mitigate a distrust of nursing homes. For a multigenerational living project in Los Angeles, Callahan created a house featuring equal parts gathering and private spaces, with internal windows, overlooks, bench seats, and nooks to allow space for impromptu conversations and gatherings.

Mark Tebeau, an urban historian at Arizona State University and the founder of a [virtual archive](#) collecting quarantine experiences from contributors around the world, points to the most remarkable change in how we live happening right in his own front yard. In what he calls “anti-suburban behavior,” he’s seen more of his neighbors in the past six weeks than he has in the past six years. “I have never seen people in my neighborhood sitting in front of their house — everybody goes to the back,” he says of his Phoenix community. “Now everyone sits out on the front driveway at 5:30 to say hello to the people walking by.” They’ve figured out that walking is pleasant, he says, and they now understand that the risk of transmission is lower outdoors.

And just like 9/11 shaped modern airports, says Tebeau, the pandemic will forever change how we approach new construction while forcing us to retrofit the old, with an eye not toward separation but toward safe communion. “Already, the archive makes clear how much infrastructure we have built to separate ourselves from one another,” he says, pointing to

sprawling lawns, stone walls, long driveways, and the absence of sidewalks. “I think that within a couple years, much of that infrastructure is going to be gone, disappeared as if it never happened.”