

Career and the profession

Amid uncertainty around COVID-19, architects adjust to a new normal

By Katherine Flynn, March 24, 2020



Architects face both short-term and long-term challenges during the global pandemic.

Last week, architecture firm principals locked their office doors behind them and implemented telework policies as part of the worldwide push to combat the spread of COVID-19. The larger AEC industry felt the ripple effects of social distancing measures later in the week as Boston's mayor placed a **two-week halt** on construction projects, setting a potential precedent for other city officials to follow.

In this time of uncertainty, architects and their firms are learning to face short-term challenges as they adapt to conducting day-to-day operations in a new, largely online way. In the longer term, navigating economic uncertainty—the scope of which is still emerging—will be top-of-mind for every firm.

New ways of working

Sarah Mannes Homstad, AIA, a sole proprietor at **Mannes Architects** in South Dakota, says that after the last economic downturn, she moved to using freelancers on an as-needed basis rather than having full-time employees.

“Because of that, I’m already accustomed to working remotely with drafters, modelers, and rendering specialists, and that won’t change,” she says of how she’ll be working in the coming weeks. She adds that she and her family are planning on following strict social-distancing measures for the rest of the month, and in the meantime, she’ll communicate with freelancers as she always does: via e-mail and file-sharing.

She says that she generally prefers not to present new design concepts to clients who aren't present with her in the room however. “If we have to hold remote design meetings long-term, I’ll have to change my attitude about them,” she says.

The biggest long-term concern, of course, is having clients to meet with at all. Homstad says that in the last few years, she’s started focusing more on custom residential design, and she doesn’t have a good feel yet for how that segment may weather an economic downturn. “It’s very hard to say what the next month, six months, or year will look like,” she says.

Adam Harding, AIA, principal of Denver-based **Roth Sheppard Architects** and the 2020 president of AIA Colorado, says that his firm started implementing work-from-home policies last Monday, with many employees bringing full desk setups home with them since not everyone in the firm is equipped with a laptop (in the past, the firm had tried to encourage people to come into the office instead of working from home). Like offices in many industries, Roth Sheppard is playing their remote work policy by ear in terms of how long it will last, with no concrete end date in sight.

“Based on how things have changed so rapidly over the last several days, I think we’re going to hold it out until we’re told otherwise,” he says.

Julianne Scherer, AIA, a managing principal at the Denver office of **HDR Architects**, says that her office implemented an optional telework policy as of Friday, March 13, which the majority of the firm's roughly 300 employees took advantage of. Employees at the firm already had laptops and a degree of ease of mobility. On Monday, those who were present for a routine start-of-the-week standup meeting stood around the perimeter of the open studio, practicing social distancing measures.

"HDR is an essential business, since we provide infrastructure and healthcare professional design, project management and construction administration services," she says.

Lauren Dundon, AIA, an associate at Denver's [Semple Brown](#), had already been working on a piece on [telecommuting at firms](#) following an injury she experienced earlier this year, emphasizing how architects are newly positioned with the means and access to work remotely. A VPN allows employees to access Autodesk Revit remotely. Work on longer-term projects from a number of clients remains ongoing, Dundon says.

"I'm appreciative that they'll keep going with us while no one knows the financial fallout from this [yet]," she says.

An unclear economic future

Harding, who has a number of restaurant clients, says that many of them are worried. Like other cities across the country, Denver has shut down restaurants to sit-down patrons, forcing a move to delivery and takeout options.

"There's a lot of uncertainty, just in terms of projects that are going to keep going or projects that come in. As a small firm owner, that's what I'm thinking about constantly," Harding says.

Scherer says that a few large-scale projects that her firm is currently working on are continuing, including several in the healthcare sector. One current challenge for the firm is figuring out how to conduct virtual community engagement for an upcoming library project.

Dundon says that several clients have reached out wanting to know how telework measures might potentially impact their projects. "They've been reassured that we're not going to skip a beat with them," she says.

"We are continuing to market, and I'm just trying to stay in touch with my clients," she continues. "We haven't heard that we're clearly on pause [with projects] yet; however, as with everyone, I am concerned with whether that may or may not happen," she says.

Another concern for firm principals is how the coronavirus outbreak impacts schedules, deliverables, and contractual obligations.

"How do you keep on pace with a contract that may be set in terms of deliverables where, if you're not getting the information from the client that you need to make successful forward movement, [it affects] some of the ways that the contracts are made in terms of delays?" Scherer asks.

It's an uncertain and challenging time, to be sure. "For all of us, I think this is testing our patience and kindness with each other," says Kaylan Kirby, AIA, also of Semple Brown, who says that her firm has had issues with overloaded phone lines and snarled conference calls.

