

SHIFTING PREFERENCES

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by Jodie Walker

Change is the one thing that is a constant in our lives. Sometimes we are forced to change, other times we evolve naturally.

There is no doubt that all of us have been forced to change how we do things in recent months as a result of COVID-19. Quarantine has meant new habits have been put into place, many of these may stay around even after the virus dissipates.

This report, Secret Agent will look at some of the things that may change in terms of property preferences as a result of the time we've had to spend in quarantine.

Many of these changes will likely be amplifications or deviations of existing trends, rather than dramatic shifts, as will be discussed.

CHANGING HABITS CREATE CHANGES IN PREFERENCES

Prior to COVID-19, many of us used our homes as places to sleep and to store our belongings. After commuting, working all day, going to the gym, going to the shops and going out for dinner with friends, time spent at home was not a large component of the day. Weekends were perhaps the only time when we had a significant amount of time to spend at home to clean, relax or entertain.

Then the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic unfolded and we had to get used to doing everything in our homes. This included work, exercise, cooking all our meals, schooling children, and even getting fresh air.

What we value in a home will likely change a lot, post COVID-19. Many things we thought were important have become less so after being forced to be at home full time. Other things we took for granted or dismissed, have been highlighted as essential.

Whilst quarantine isn't forever, the fact we have been at home



Many people have converted their garages into home gyms.
Source: Working Out in My Garage by Kyra Anzaldo (Youtube)

for so long, means that we have had to change many of our daily habits. We haven't just been able to take a break and go back to our regular routines a week later. We've had to keep going on with life, in a very different environment.

It has been found that on average it takes 66 days for a behaviour to change.
(Lally, 2010)

Once we get used to doing things a certain way, and integrate that habit into our lives, it becomes part our new normal. A good example of this is when transport infrastructure gets upgraded. With train lines closed for a period, a commuter who has relied on that train to get to work for 5 years, may start cycling to work instead. They get used to the ride commuting, and may even begin to enjoy it. When the trains go back to normal, rather than reverting back to their old method of transport, they choose to keep riding. It's easy to do what is already a habit.

The quarantine period has been a perfect amount of time for us to ingrain some of our new habits. Life may return to normal; nobody knows for sure. Yet, it doesn't mean that we will return to all of our old habits. We might have discovered new ways of doing things that we like, as well as realising a lot of our old habits were inefficient or not enjoyable. If we can get the same outcome in a more efficient way, for example by

working out at home rather than trying to get to a gym, then we may continue to do so.

The changes we choose to keep could involve all areas of our life. Those relating to our homes, how we use them, where we live and where we work will be the most interesting things to watch in future years.

HOW SPACE WITHIN THE HOME IS USED

There are two aspects to consider when it comes to the principal place of residence. The first one is the internal home. Most of us have now experienced what working from home is like. Some have also had the rest of the household around at the same time. This has potentially brought up many issues that may not have been apparent before COVID-19.

For example, with everyone at home all the time, separate space for each member of the household has become highly desirable. It's fine to have an open plan living area for lounging around and entertaining purposes. But if there's work to be done and schooling to complete, open floor plans can be a detriment to productivity. Perhaps open plan living, which was already losing steam, may be on the out, as families look to create separate rooms where members can have their own space.

Another problem that will become apparent with more people at home for longer is energy use. It's fairly affordable to run heating at night time when everyone is home from work and school. It becomes less so when it needs to be on all day to keep warm.

As a result of increased bills and awareness around energy usage, there could be a greater desire for natural light and energy efficient features within the home.

Something that was highly valued previously, especially in the inner city suburbs, was having a car space or two. These have still been valued during the pandemic, but for different reasons. Instead of a secure spot for a car to stay overnight, many garages and carspaces in apartment blocks have been converted into home gyms. With cars left on the street, or simply being unused, many people are questioning whether having a car, or more than one car, is worth it.

Even when life returns to "normal", it's likely that the use of some garages will change. More people could decide that it's possible to get by without a car after all. Instead of using the garage as a car safe haven, it could be turned into a gym, a home office or a retreat area for the kids.

Whereas garages had a change of use during the pandemic, the kitchen was perhaps used more than ever before. With no restaurants or cafes open, and many of us having to tighten up spending, all of us have had to get used to preparing our own food at home. Using the kitchen full time has meant that we are constantly reminded of any issues or inconveniences that might have been easy to ignore previously. If the oven isn't working properly or if the kitchen is small and poorly laid out, it will have been highlighted. Many have learnt new cooking skills with the extra time available at home. Any limitations, in terms of lack of equipment or lack of space, would have become obvious. Having a well functioning, spacious kitchen has become essential.

It's likely that many will choose to upgrade their kitchen into the future. If looking for a new home, spacious and quality kitchens, with energy efficient appliances, will become highly sought after.

The second aspect to consider is the home's external environment. This includes not only the immediate area outside the home, but also the suburb as a whole. Living in an

area that is close to amenity has always been desirable and still is, but the amenity requirements may have shifted post COVID-19.

Before, many had the preference to be close to nightlife and cafes. Now it may be green areas and walking trails that are most desirable. Some of the best parks are in the inner city, or far out in the country, whereas some suburban estates lack quality parks and gardens. Being close to the ocean or a body of water has always been popular but will become even more so post COVID-19.

The demographic of people that comprise most of the neighbourhood is crucial too. When walking around, even if it's just to the mailbox at the front of our homes, we want to feel a sense of safety and community. Being at home more may have highlighted how important this is. Having the chance to walk past a neighbour's house and say hello over the fence is something we may value more than ever into the future.

Just like open plan living, backyards have become less desirable in recent years. They require too much work that many don't have time for. The shortages at the beginning of the pandemic brought attention to the fact that there could be



Kitchens are now used more frequently than pre-COVID-19 times.
Source: Pexels

food supply issues in the future. Moving forward, being able to grow our own food in the backyard, could see them regain some popularity. Those that didn't have a backyard to spend time in during the pandemic could now desire one, especially if they were also living in a suburb that lacked green space.

Communal outdoor spaces have become the norm in the modern day apartment building. In some cases they replace private balconies. There may be a shift away from these within the apartment market. Older style buildings with private outdoor spaces will continue to grow in demand by both renters and investors.

WHERE WE WORK

Some industries require a permanent address in order to conduct business. Many industries do not. They can be adapted to an online environment. This doesn't mean that they are most suited to this though.

COVID-19 allowed many employers and employees to trial remote working. Working from home has some benefits, the main one being the extra free time gained since there is no need to commute.

However, more time doesn't mean increased productivity. In many cases it can result in less actual time if it's spent by sleeping in and slacking off more during the day since it's possible to put off work to later into the evening.

Getting to sleep in and work at home without anyone watching may be exciting at first. It's fun whilst it's new but it quickly gets old. There are increased distractions at home, and it can be hard to block these out. It's easy to end up in the kitchen each hour instead of at the computer, or scrolling through social media for hours instead of getting work done.

Without a dedicated work space like a home office, it can be harder to separate work life from home life. When the home becomes the office full time, unfinished work is harder to leave behind once 5pm comes around. The feeling of 'always working' is common.

Collaboration also gets more difficult when everyone is working from home. It's a lot harder to connect properly through technology. Those chance encounters that happen in the office are impossible. Random opportunities to create and share ideas generally happen less without face-to-face connection.

There may be a rise in the number of workplaces allowing more employees to work remotely on a permanent basis as a result of COVID-19. However it's likely that many will go back to normal or working from home will be a part time arrangement for a day or two a week. Having a dedicated space for a home office could boom as a result. Even if it's not used full time, having it there will be valued.

Working from home has been touted as about to take over the old way of doing business for many years now. It's suggested that going to a physical office will become a thing of the past. This seems unlikely.

While more flexible working situations may become more common, commercial centres have constantly found ways to be more dense. Knowledge creation happens in dense clusters of industry and this is a key determinant of economic success. (Storper, 2003) "Clusters provide a context where economic actors with complementary but often ambiguous and incomplete information can find partners and exchange this information." (Cortright, 2006) It seems likely that density and face-to-face contact are here to stay.

WHERE WE CHOOSE TO LIVE

For the past decade or more, urbanisation has been a theme across the world. People want to live near where the opportunities are as a priority. They are attracted to places to live where employment and incomes are good, where the education is reputable for their future offspring or for themselves to up-skill. Younger generations are perhaps looking for a combination between education, job opportunities, and nightlife.

Initially, COVID-19 equalised the city and the suburbs. With everything shut down, the vibrant, action-packed cities became just like a regular suburb. In fact, it allowed the suburbs to shine for a second since those living there likely had bigger houses and more space to enjoy.

There could be a change in preferences when it comes to where we choose to live, with more urban dwellers recognising the limitations and choosing to move back to the suburbs. However, this also seems unlikely. COVID-19 is not a permanent event. The cities and the inner suburbs will spring to life again in the future and the people living there will enjoy the many things that drove them to move there in the first place. They're used to less space already so it's likely that they haven't even missed it. You don't know what you don't know.



We may see a greater appreciation for green environments close to urban areas, such as the Capital City Trail.
Source: Urban List Melbourne (theurbanlist.com)

Plus with less traffic on the roads resulting in less pollution, the city wasn't such a bad place to be during quarantine.

Cities will still be desirable places to live. What will become more important is access to nature within these areas.

Being able to walk to a park or water bodies has always been valued. This value is going to increase post-COVID-19. Those that have been able to easily go for walks in parks or green environments will have a greater appreciation for them. Those that have not, will likely be feeling the lack even more. The properties that have direct access or views of nature, will become more desirable comparatively, especially those that are located in urban areas.

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 will change not only the economic conditions within our communities, but also the many preferences that people had leading up to COVID-19. There are numerous commentators calling the end of the city and the way we work, but long-term trends are hard to dislodge. Remember, many felt that same way in Hong Kong after the SARS outbreak.

There are significant benefits to density due to the scaling benefits that cities create; and cities are always reinventing

themselves, generally for the best, by learning from the shocks that come along.

It's likely that the "change" to occur will be a deviation rather than an outright reversal of current trends.

Globalisation could be argued to now be in retreat. But it's unlikely that we, here in Australia, will all move to the countryside and take up farming.


Instead, many will change their preferences by doing things such as swapping their inner city apartment for a terrace close to parklands. Businesses might seek to have less office space while improving the location of the space.

Of course, the economic reality that emerges in the aftermath of the virus will help shape things more greatly. While the virus financially impacts the majority in a negative fashion, there will be winners that benefit greatly from these shifting preferences. What we have tried to articulate is that some trends will just be amplified from this event, while others will deviate along the same lines, and other trends will be completely new and are likely unpredictable at this stage. ♦

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