



## See You Soon, IRL

By Clayton Holmes, *Director of Commercial Architecture, Forge Craft Architecture + Design*

**No one needs reminding** that we are smack-dab in the middle of an historic pandemic. Perhaps you are reading this from your dining table workstation, taking a "bio-break" from an hours-long Zoom call, or fixing your children's lunch before all hell breaks loose.

Last month, [Bloomberg](#) wrote that it will take 11 more months before we can vaccinate 75% of the American population--the target for U.S. population coverage that science officials, including Dr. Anthony Fauci, have suggested it will take for things to return to "normal". This puts New Year's 2022 as the day you can potentially kiss your parents or grandparents again safely, or even be together in the same room.

Unfortunately, the way things are currently feels pretty "normal" to me at this point. Mask-wearing, by now second-nature, means I make a point to "smile" with my eyes in public and have become proficient at communicating in mime-speak when shopping at HEB. I have forgotten what the bottom half of my co-workers' faces look like. My #lifegoals now include getting up to stretch more often than my cat does.

The resurgence of much older, traditional activities now also feels "normal" and quite enjoyable--the bread baking, needle-pointing, and other sundry Amish aspects of our new existence. (Not to mention, at some points, having to boil water and burn candles to survive, which were much less enjoyable.) After all, the incredible resilience of people to adapt to insane external conditions is what makes us successful as humans. It's an innate survival skill, our instinct of self-preservation; it helps us find comfort and calm at the eye of our swirling hurricane of collective societal turmoil that is this pandemic.

We are rightfully normalizing many of the comforts we now enjoy in the work from home (WFH) environment, in large part thanks to technology. Not being stuck in traffic every day is a blessing to our peace of mind as well as the environment. But there are many other inadvertent behaviors that are in fact detrimental to our mental and social health as well as our urban fabric; these should be identified and improved as we look toward the "next normal."

### **Mental & Social Health**

While the WFH "evolution" may seem predetermined, it should not be a foregone conclusion. As we insulate ourselves from risk, we suffer in other ways. Consider the effects of remote learning: according to [Community Impact](#), AISD students, 80% of whom are learning remotely, have reported course failure rate increases of over 133% during the pandemic. Can we not honestly say that mentoring younger co-workers in the remote office environment has felt, as educators have often quipped, like doing your job with one hand tied behind your back?

Humans suffer in isolation. Depression, domestic violence, alcoholism, and health risks associated with sedentary behavior are all on [concerning rise](#). Social patterns we had previously established have been put on hold. We are social beings at heart. We need to see and to be with each other, to be out in the world, and to participate in our communities. It's not natural for us to be apart, and this temporary inconvenience for the sake of safety can only be a temporary solution, if we want to truly heal our communities in time.

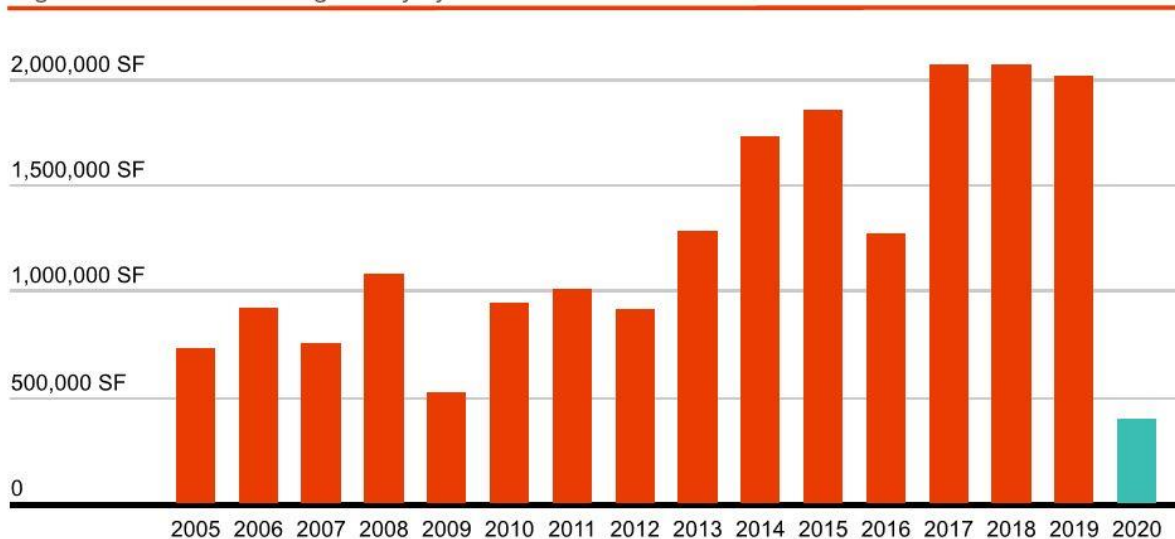


## Urban Fabric

While we work from home, much of Austin's cultural scene is eroding, out of sight, out of mind.

The corporate class is hedging its bets on the viability of Downtown; the rising costs of physical space in the CBD easily justifies the convenience of cost-cutting by remote working and foregoing downtown rents, and the cracks are starting to show. Austin, arguably the nation's brightest beacon for attracting top tech talent, currently has [43 towers underway](#) or planned in or near downtown. Many of the companies who had taken on leases in those buildings before 2020 have since either downsized, opting to [sub-lease their space](#) at bargain rates, or completely backed out, deciding they will be [fully remote](#) for the foreseeable future. Disturbingly, [new lease starts](#) are now at an all-time low in Austin's downtown, lower even than in the depths of the Great Recession, in 2009.

Figure #3 Total YTD Leasing Activity by SF in Downtown



While many [Fortune 500 Companies](#) have fared exceedingly well during the pandemic, downtown bars, restaurants and retail establishments face unprecedented disinvestment by downtown workers. Such establishments have permanently closed at a rate of 800 small business per day across the U.S. last year, according to [Yelp](#). The hospitality leisure and retail sectors, which make up nearly [22% of Austin's workforce](#), suffered incredible losses, according to [FiveThirtyEight](#), with job losses reaching nearly 50%. Many of these bars, cafes and restaurants never had access to the critical PPP grants other businesses enjoyed until mid-January of THIS year, 2021, per [Eater](#). Their essential recovery has barely begun.

These are the restaurants, shops, bars, performing arts and music spaces we all adore; they are the life-blood of Austin. Second Bar & Kitchen, Sway and Easy Tiger, iconic eateries where so many fond memories were made, all closed their [storied downtown locations](#) last year, as just a small example.



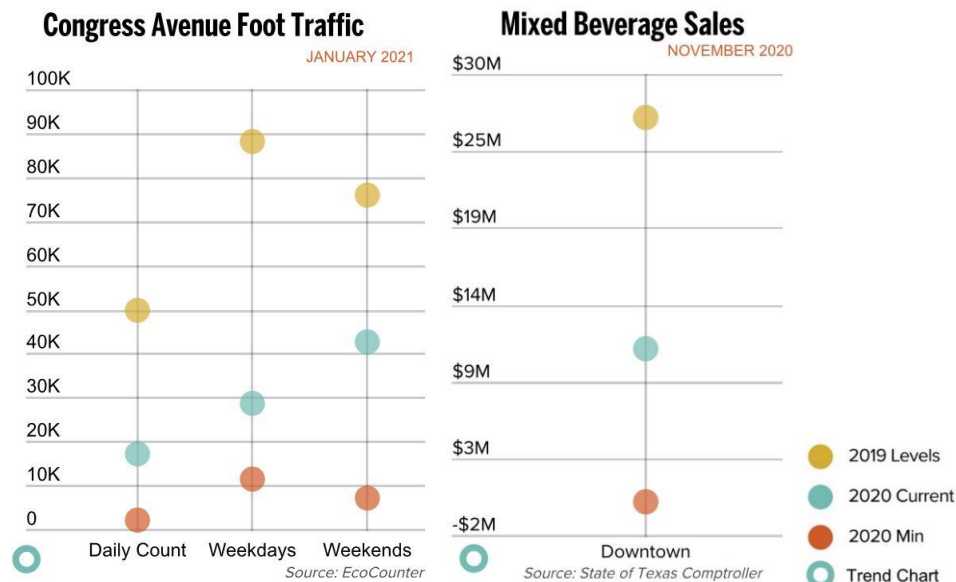
INDUSTRY	EMPLOYEES (MILLIONS)			
	FEB.	MAR.	APR.	2 MO. % CHG.
<b>All leisure and hospitality</b>	<b>16.9</b>	<b>16.4</b>	<b>8.7</b>	<b>-48.3%</b>
Arts, entertainment and recreation	2.5	2.4	1.1	-54.5
Performing arts and spectator sports	0.5	0.5	0.3	-45.4
Museums, historical sites and similar institutions	0.2	0.2	0.1	-26.1
Amusements, gambling and recreation	1.8	1.8	0.7	-59.9
Accommodation and food services	14.4	13.9	7.6	-47.3
Accommodation	2.1	2.0	1.2	-42.3
Food services and drinking places	12.3	11.9	6.4	-48.1

SOURCE: BLS.GOV

At this point in the pandemic, our downtown urban environment is sicker than we are. We are currently managing our personal health crisis, but we have been neglecting our urban health crisis. The healthy ownership of public spaces in our cities is our responsibility as citizens, and when these spaces suffer, so do we all. What is the downtown we want to experience when we do come back to the office? Will we embrace it or regret it? Will we want to stay downtown and enjoy it? How can we be intentional and collaborative in re-envisioning our downtown spaces adapted to a Post-Covid (Po-Co) lifestyle?

### Solutions

So what can we do? We need to commit to "being present" and investing our time by spending it downtown as we once did. Just like all our new habits learned over this past year, it may not feel comfortable at first, but it can be done safely and responsibly. More importantly, downtown Austin is depending on us, all of us, to survive. [PPP](#) alone will not save your favorite downtown business, but PPE and regular patronage can. It's up to you, to [spend a few hours](#) and a few dollars, safely, to save Downtown Austin.





If you've driven or walked through downtown this past year, you've seen the desolation and disinvestment in the boarded-up storefronts. But in Seaholm District, Rainey Street, and South Congress, the signs of life have returned. What makes the residential towers and the residential blocks any more safe than office blocks elsewhere downtown?

The big difference is the perception of spaces where we are quarantined, those we share with our "social bubble," feel safer than public spaces that we share with strangers. In quarantine is safety, but we all must go out in public from time to time. We can work to change the perception that public spaces are unsafe by fortifying them and committing ourselves to re-engaging with them safely.

Firstly, let's shift the perception back from spending time where we "have to be" to spending time where we "want to be." Let's enlarge our social bubble to include our "work bubble." It is another perhaps uncomfortable but necessary step toward the "next normal," but we already know how to do it safely: 1) mask wearing 2) social distancing 3) hand washing and 4) contact tracing. The 4 Quarantine Commandments, if you will, which we all know now by heart.

If you are a firm owner or manager, take this time to evaluate your office infrastructure and ask: How can my office space perform better for my employees? What will motivate my employees to put on pants or pantsuit in the morning and NOT work from home? What old habits or outdated practices could we jettison? What does the role our office, as a physical space to come together, actually serve for our staff, our consultants, and our clients, that can out-perform the virtual meeting space to which we've grown accustomed?

Technology and design, both new and old, can provide potential solutions to our current predicament. It requires vigilant research and synthesis of design ideas that adapt specifically to the constraints of the current pandemic and much of this work is already well underway. Forge Craft have written a white paper, dubbed "[The Covid Companion](#)," which summarizes much of our research on safely adapting public spaces both during and beyond the current pandemic. These design strategies can have drastic positive impacts to the function of a space, employing minimal means to achieve maximum result.

The re-positioning of public spaces to adapt to a pandemic is not unprecedented; in fact, the devastating Influenza pandemic of 1920 inspired the early Modernist work of Alvar Aalto in Finland, who developed the [first modern hospital](#) nearly a century ago. The design principles he applied are not so far-fetched to us now, but at the time they were revolutionary. Plentiful light, natural ventilation, outdoor roof decks and durable, cleanable surfaces were the key design features he employed to aid in rest and recovery from illness. Such examples from the past, as well as the gamut of newly developing technologies, can inform an appropriate response to the current situation we face. The work we have before us may not feel as significant as Aalto's, but nevertheless, history writes itself with or without our help.



To that end, bring back the office happy hour safely! Hold your event at a local downtown business, and lobby to make sure that business gets the support it needs to open a [safely proportioned outdoor patio](#) for all its guests. Humans require comfort in each other, and safe public social spaces inspire comfort, especially in these times. Let's support public spaces, local businesses, and embrace the return to the office as the "next normal" for all our sakes, for our collective sanity, and ultimately for the success of our beloved Austin as a whole. The design community is ready and able to usher in this new era of social interaction.

Cheers, and hope to see you soon, IRL.

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