

Texas Architects and the Coronavirus Pandemic

In the first months of 2020, the architecture profession was flying high. Projects were plentiful, and in cities like Austin and Dallas, large, ground-up construction was booming. News of a new virus in China was making headlines, but concerns in the States, especially in Texas, didn't begin until late February. It seemed a dramatic shift when the novel coronavirus took over the headlines and became the center of everyone's conversations. We were bombarded with statistics and graphs, then overwhelmed by new rules and guidelines delivered by various entities, each different, and changing daily. Unlike the Great Recession of 2007-2009, when construction ground to a halt, spreading misery everywhere, the pandemic's impact on the profession has been more varied, and its long-term effects remain uncertain. To gain perspective on its impact on architecture in Texas, I spoke to architects across the state about their individual experiences.

Sean Guess, AIA

In mid-April, when I first spoke to Sean Guess, AIA, architect and owner of Faye and Walker in Austin, he had been working from home for over a month. His three-person firm had recently signed a new lease, and the uncertainty had led to two projects going on hold. He was in the midst of writing a proposal for a project type the firm had no experience with, a Hail Mary to get the office through the next couple of months. He had applied for the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) to no avail and was cynical and frustrated by the process: "My struggle is not knowing where the tipping point is. I'm personally financing all of this right now. I don't know how long I can do that. My fear is that the day I decide I can't anymore, it will have been a month since I needed to make the decision." When asked about his outlook on the future, he commented: "I feel like it's hard to form an opinion right now. I'm experiencing shock that is hard to internalize or articulate."

Sharing space with Guess were his wife and their two children, ages eight and 10. He had worked from home in the past, but with child care in place. Now he and his wife were working in shifts, hers from 6 a.m.-1 p.m., his from 1 p.m.-9 p.m. Both kids were inundated with school assignments, and with both parents having 40 hours to fulfill, he described their weeks as "absolute chaos."



Sean Guess, AIA, took shifts with his wife while working from home, swapping sketches and redlines for homework review with his second- and fourth-grade children.

By early May, Guess' PPP application had been unceremoniously funded, which he described as "plugging a hole that was created in the beginning of March." He was able to negotiate some rent relief with his landlord and was considering pivoting to a design/build method for a small project to open a new revenue stream. In the meantime, two projects had resurfaced, and he was feeling cautiously optimistic. On the home front, his children were progressively losing interest in schoolwork, and he was feeling the pressure of his new teaching role.

At the end of May, over two months into working from home, it was the last week of school for both children. The firm was busy, and another new project had come online. The state was

reopening, and Guess too was trying to envision what a return to the office would look like. He is opting to follow the mayor's recommendation of June 15, but says his biggest question right now is how his personal life will look during the summer. "We are staring down 100 percent child care, and that will impact what I do with the office." When asked about his current outlook, he says he worries when the other shoe will drop. Unlike the 2008 crisis, the pandemic's impact seems to be short-term, but he worries it will have a greater impact than he can foresee. Regardless, he says he feels pretty optimistic at present, especially when their workload has him asking "Holy shit, when am I gonna get all of this done?"

PHOTO BY LEONID FURMANSKY



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Above Andrea Batarse moved to Austin instead of back to College Station after Texas A&M University decided to suspend in-person classes following spring break.

Right Anastasia Calhoun, Assoc. AIA, launched her new business amid the pandemic. Formerly a side gig, an unexpected layoff has pushed it to the forefront.



Andrea Batarse
In mid-April, Andrea Batarse, a Master of Architecture candidate at Texas A&M University, was living in Austin. The TAMU campus was shut down due to COVID-19, and instead of returning to studio after spring break, she was now finishing her final semester via Zoom video calls. Her father is considered high-risk, so she opted to “quaranteam” with friends. Graduation ceremonies and the College of Architecture’s “Celebration of Excellence” were in limbo. Her long-planned Camino de Santiago pilgrimage in Spain had been abruptly cancelled. Batarse was feeling disappointed and missing her studio mates. While many of her fellow classmates were

struggling to secure jobs, she was still holding out hope that her job offer with BRW in Dallas would stand.

Nearly a month later, she had finally found the courage to email BRW to discuss moving her start date up and was giddy that they were agreeable. She would start with the company on June 15 and move to Dallas on the first. The “Celebration of Excellence,” which had ping-ponged from cancelled to on, had finally been transitioned online, and the winners would be announced at an online ceremony that would also recognize graduates. Batarse says the unprecedented end to her final semester “has been a weird thing to go through, but there is a

lot of solidarity.” Amid a pandemic, she was still experiencing many of the traditional post-graduation transitions, like apartment hunting (albeit online) and planning a move. She was feeling excited about the end of school and looking forward to her new life and the end of quarantine.

By the end of May, Batarse was a resident of Dallas after spending time with family in Houston and seeing some friends in College Station as she packed up her apartment. She’s still sad that her pilgrimage is postponed. “I’ve wanted to do this for seven years,” she says. “I wanted that ‘me and God’ time.” She’s hopeful she can use the time to save more money and convince her new employer to let her take a leave. While she is not certain of the numbers, she says most of her classmates are still without full-time jobs and offers continue to be rescinded. As excited as she is about her new start, it’s been hard to share that with others who have not been as fortunate. She says: “I was really bitter about COVID in the beginning, but now, I think it gave me a different way to say goodbye to the last seven years of college. At some point, you just have to let it go. No one will ever graduate the way we did.”

Anastasia Calhoun, Assoc. AIA

Anastasia Calhoun, Assoc. AIA, a designer out of San Antonio, felt the pains of the pandemic early on. Her office, Overland Partners, began shutting down over spring break, and by mid-March, she was working remotely just like everyone else. Her position as manager of research and innovation meant she was heavily involved in the early stages of projects, and the WFH model changed her work immensely. Suddenly, new projects were fewer and farther between, and two weeks in she was furloughed.

Prior to COVID, Calhoun had begun work on a side gig — a “spa in a box” concept that melded together design and wellness with a focus on quality CBD products. Noting the uninspired organic products she purchased and the amazing spa products that were full of toxins, she saw a gap that needed to be filled. She was set to launch the new business on April 21, but the shake-up of supply chains required a rushed refresh of the website and pricing as she pivoted to an e-commerce model. The furlough was “weird, perfect timing for my personal business,” Calhoun says. “As the Overland thing started to crumble, my other gig started to naturally build up.”

The launch went well, but a few weeks later, she got the news she had been laid-off. Her new business, which she was now running out of

Right Cale Lancaster, AIA, returned to the office in mid-May. He was glad to be reunited with his co-workers so they could collaborate in person instead of emailing sketches.

Below Ron Stelmarski, AIA, jokes that he’s wearing several layers of masks these days — both figurative and literal: his freshly grown beard, sometimes a cloth face covering, and on most days, the videoconferencing screen.



her apartment and a storage unit, was sustaining itself but not providing an income. She was receiving unemployment but only had enough funds to get through the end of July comfortably. “I’m single, living alone with a cat and dog. I’m relatively mobile, and if I didn’t have the business established here, I would just throw everything in storage and go.” Her family is in Oklahoma, and she thought they might welcome her back temporarily. The thought of dissolving her newly formed LLC and starting over was painful. “I feel trapped in my head trying to make pragmatic decisions when there are a lot of emotional decisions tied to them.”

By the end of May, Calhoun’s situation had not changed much. She was still operating in what she described as a “weird limbo land.” Her brother in Oklahoma was not keen on having her move in, and while she had been approached about some potential jobs in architecture, nothing had panned out. Meanwhile, she launched a new product line and is hoping that as the state reopens, so too will people’s hold on their wallets. She is keenly aware of the struggle as she manages her own spending, which, she says, has “pretty much consisted of food, Netflix, and rent for the last few months.” July 31 still remains her deadline for determining her next move. When asked about her current

outlook, Calhoun says she remains relatively optimistic because of her large support network. She’s coming around to the idea of continuing to focus on her new business, noting: “As designers, we are hyper-controllers. This is a situation where you have to let it all go.”

Cale Lancaster, AIA

Things in Midland, which has been hit with both the pandemic shutdown and a downturn in energy, are even more strained than in other Texas cities. Cale Lancaster, AIA, an architect with Rhotenberry Wellen Architects, hails from Midland and notes that locals are intricately tied to the energy sector and familiar with its cyclical nature. He admits that, while this is the strangest downturn he’s experienced, it has forced reflection on the way business is done. The firm applied for PPP early and was funded. Though the impact on their projects varied widely, they had enough work for their current staff. In early May, Lancaster was feeling optimistic.

Although the city never instituted a shelter-in-place order, Rhotenberry Wellen gave the staff of 18 the option to work from home, with a handful of staff members continuing to work at the office and separated on two floors. The firm chose to follow the governor’s direction, and by May 18, everyone was back at their desks. The office looks a bit different. There are COVID posters and hand sanitizer. Lancaster and his wife, Angela, who both work for the firm, continue to keep their kids out of day care. She is working from home and watching their two daughters, ages three and 10 months, while he spends most of his time at the office.

Things are slowly reopening in Midland, but Lancaster admits he’s not ready to brave the restaurant scene yet. Instead, he and co-workers grab lunch at a Whataburger drive-thru then eat in a nearby park where they can social distance. He says: “Overall, I’m optimistic. That’s the only way I know how to be. We have to be resilient as a profession. We’ll have to get creative. I don’t know how the profession will change, but I’d love to do a follow-up in 2030 to see what we learned.”

Ron Stelmarski, AIA

Dallas County began closing businesses and limiting gatherings in March and ultimately issued a shelter-in-place order on March 22. By this date, Ron Stelmarski, AIA, design director at Perkins and Will in Dallas, was working from home per a company-wide mandate. The firm received early information from their China offices, though it was still unclear how the virus would impact the U.S.

PHOTOS BY LEONID FURMANSKY

TOP PHOTO BY ANGELA LANCASTER; BOTTOM PHOTO BY LEONID FURMANSKY

Jenny Thomason, AIA, found herself working evenings and weekends to squeeze in her 40 hours while working from home with her three-year-old son.

He already had a study at home, a “retreat,” that he outfitted with model-building supplies and technology to recreate his office. He recognizes that not everyone is so lucky. He has the social support of his wife and two sons, separate workspaces for everyone, and access to the outdoors. He admits that now he’s even home for dinner, a rarity in the past.

The firm has seen some layoffs and salary reductions, but in mid-May, Stelmarski reported: “I’ve personally been busy. It feels busier than it was. Communication has been expanded and accelerated. I haven’t had a chance to come up for air.” He transitioned easily to his new work mode and spent time reflecting on the opportunities for the practice. With the WFH model not impairing project delivery for the team, he wondered whether the office could be redesigned for a charrette environment instead of one focused on individual workspace.

Younger staff seem more willing to speak up in videoconference meetings, clients are embracing the technology, and while he misses the wine and socialization, he loves being able to attend Yale lectures sans the travel. He recognizes that not everyone might agree. “We are all at different stages of our career. I’ve worked nonstop, been on the frontline, traveled, so I’m not missing that stuff.”

By end of May, Dallas had entered the reopening phase, and Perkins and Will was instituting their return-to-work plan. The firm developed an internal dashboard with data from each office and city, a self-reporting app, an internal blog, and floor plans to determine their maximum headcount with social distancing measures. For now, the direction is not to rethink the office infrastructure, but to focus on their space as a living laboratory for the future. There are physical health concerns at the office and mental health concerns with WFH to consider. With so few employees able to return in the first phase, Stelmarski questions the value for himself. He’s happy for the willing and the curious to be part of Phase I. He’s still content at home, surrounded by his book collection, contemplating how this time will refocus the design practice.

He says of his current outlook: “I still feel good, if not better. Everyone realizes we have to deal with this. You can’t see around the corner as far anymore.



We try to keep a six-month gauge on the health of the practice, and right now, we feel good about the next.”

Jenny Thomason, AIA

On March 11, Jenny Thomason, AIA, a senior associate at Omniplan in Dallas, was preparing for a business trip to California the following day. The trip was cancelled abruptly due to concerns over COVID-19, and an office-wide travel ban was implemented. Two days later, she was working from home in what started as a trial run but ultimately turned into a semi-permanent situation. When their daycare closed mid-March, both she and her husband, Adam, also an architect, found themselves working from home with a three-year-old. Despite parenting and working in shifts, both were struggling to get their 40 hours in. They made the decision to hire a part-time nanny even though both had been hit with salary reductions. That lasted for a few weeks before they signed an essential worker application to get their son back in daycare on May 4.

Thomason worries about the impact this time will have on her son. “It’s hard to explain to a three-year-old why he can’t hug his friends and instead has to give them a foot tap.” While she’s

relieved to have him out of the house, she can’t imagine him loving his new daycare environment with masked teachers and a designated square he’s supposed to stay in.

By mid-May, Thomason’s projects had gone on hold, and she was moved to a clinic project, a new project typology for her. “All of this has been a good way to think about what I want from my career, and I’m not finding answers. I need to get back to the office, so I don’t lose my mind.” She decided to move to their guest house instead to get a change of scenery. The next week, Omniplan issued a voluntary, phased return-to-work plan. With her son supervised, she was finally feeling productive and felt all of the advantages of the office environment would be gone under the new guidelines. She has trepidation about the negative consequences for her career if she’s not physically present. “I don’t find myself to be inherently optimistic, though I know this will pass. I made it out the other end of 2008. That was the hardest thing in the world.”

Audrey Maxwell, AIA, is a partner at Malone Maxwell Borson Architects in Dallas and TxA’s 2020 president-elect.

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