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 2008-2009, 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 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.”

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?”

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Photos by Greg Folkins Photography

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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 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 SFHV 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, and 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 SFHV 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. Everyone realizes we have to deal with this. You can’t wait around the corner as if nothing has changed.

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 laid off 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 Manasse, AIA, is a partner at Mack-Mansfield Architects in Dallas and 2020 president-elect.