

The Future of the Architectural Practice

The pandemic significantly altered how we work at MADe. Overnight, for safety reasons, we had to close our doors, disperse our collaborators, and work remotely from home instead of meeting face-to-face in the studio. No one knows whether the situation will ever return to 'normal' pre-pandemic conditions. It probably won't.

The enormous uncertainty about the future, driven by the rapid evolution of digital tools, forces us to rethink how we work and consider future possibilities. Will we continue to work online for the foreseeable future? Or will we commit to a hybrid or multi-modal model of working, combining physical and digital modes? Should we bring all our collaborators to the studio? Each model has its pros and cons.

Because our collaborators live in several countries, we have operated a hybrid practice model since 2013. However, forced isolation and the rapid evolution of digital tools during the pandemic are likely to change how we work in the foreseeable future. Undoubtedly, we will adapt to these alternative methods and tools, but they may severely affect the work we usually undertake.

Our practice primarily focuses on public projects, competitions and self-initiated work and is not limited to built work. Face-to-face conversations and scaled models are critical to our way of working; relying solely on remote work deprives us of these tools and affects the quality of our work. Another notable limitation is that younger team members are unable to contribute meaningfully to the process. There are further issues with productivity, access to digital tools and connectivity. These concerns raise the fundamental question of whether current remote work methods will be sustainable for small practices like MADe.

Every extreme disruption provides a significant impetus for rethinking how we work. If one phenomenon has been observed throughout history in the wake of great upheavals — pandemics, wars, and earthquakes — it is that such moments have often marked significant progress, whether in modes of work or in productivity.

Collaboration and Interaction

Our model of practice, with its reliance on small groups and slow, iterative ways of working, is vulnerable to

the complexities of a rapid shift to online work. Since we are a conversation-driven practice, face-to-face meetings are central to our collaboration.

The studio, as a physical space, provided enormous opportunities for collective learning, offering equal access to resources regardless of an individual's role and abilities. An online mode of collaboration will exacerbate inequities among interns, senior staff and even principals. The realities of where collaborators come from — including a lack of space at home or access to resources such as libraries and model-making facilities — are all issues brought into focus by the move to a virtual work model. How will these forced changes affect our current and future projects?

One potential benefit of the forced changes in our working methods is the ease with which the barrier of geographic distance collapsed, allowing us to engage with collaborators from multiple locations and fostering a cross-fertilisation of ideas.

Drawing and Making

One of the more immediate consequences of the shift to a virtual model of work has been the difficulty of producing physical models, whether for design development or for presentation. Without access to workshops and fabrication facilities, architects could rely neither on handmade models nor on digital devices such as 3D printers and CNC routers. What are the consequences of this shift towards virtual models as a means of representation for how we imagine future buildings and environments?

We recently worked on a couple of competitions in which model-making could not form part of the design development. The absence of a tactile experience of the physical model, its materials and its scale adversely affected our senses and perception. Though we used a virtual model, as a two-dimensional image of a three-dimensional construct, it could never achieve the same tactile qualities as the physical model. A digital model can be viewed as a series of fragments from various perspectives, as if photographing a building. The difference between the physical and the virtual model lies in the difference between the experience of an artefact and that of an image.

What will be the consequences of an increasing reliance on images at the expense of physical models as analogical artefacts? And how will these images influence the project's eventual realisation? We are building a project in Korea using digitally communicated drawings and images; owing to travel restrictions, we have been unable to visit the site to oversee its realisation. What does this imply? Do the realities and needs of digital communication imply a greater need for clarity in communication between the architect and the institutions responsible for executing the project?

Diversity and Difference

With work spanning diverse cultural contexts, we have long collaborated with remote partners worldwide. The practice aims to serve as a collective for exploration and speculation, drawing on the knowledge and know-how of both established and emerging ways of thinking. The future of our collaborative practice could benefit from greater emphasis on virtual collaboration with technical experts from a project's inception, allowing materials and construction methods to play a larger role in design and the thinking behind projects within the practice.

Beyond addressing the immediate challenges the pandemic produced, what lessons can we learn? In this new situation, the relationships among collaborators have changed. Constructing new dialogues and opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration — understanding and engaging with those different from ourselves — is among the essential responsibilities and benefits of collaborative practice.

Addressing contemporary cultural, economic and political issues requires recognising their relationship to society. That is why we must promote aligning disciplinary knowledge with transdisciplinary collaboration. Such an approach not only fosters cooperation among the design disciplines — planning, landscape architecture and urban design — but also draws on many other fields of knowledge.

Only by understanding the societies in which we work and their needs will we find a more effective voice for change. We must recognise that architecture is political. We provide a service, but we need to be involved in exploring how buildings and cities can

contribute to citizens' well-being. From considerations of climate change and sustainability to social justice and equity, we should be able to demonstrate the importance and contribution of design and the built environment. Situating our work within this broader social and political context is one of the primary responsibilities of our practice.

Sharing and Learning

Responding to current environmental, social, and political realities requires us to rethink the relevance of our work within a broader social context. With the possibility of working from virtually anywhere, how can we anchor our work in a culture to which we can make a material contribution? How can we learn from the radical and visionary experiences of the Bauhaus, Metabolism, and other experimental and extreme forms of reflective collaboration?

Other possibilities include alternative forms of collaboration with architects outside our team, from different geographies and backgrounds. In this context, collaboration and interaction could produce a diverse body of work. Beyond benefiting from the cross-fertilisation of ideas, such partnerships could pave the way for the development of a new language, offering a relevant point of reference for discussing the future of cross-cultural collaboration.

The pandemic has taught us that architecture cannot save the world — at least not on its own. We must consider the social consequences of our work. What will happen to human interaction if we spend more time at home and remain socially distanced in public? What will it mean if we no longer encounter and engage with people who differ from us when we shop, attend a concert or go to a park?

MADe (studiomade.org)

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