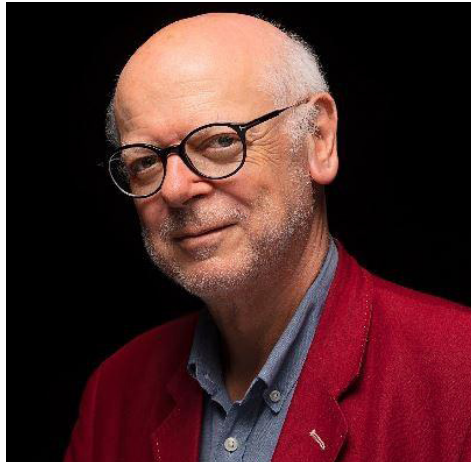


Redefining  
Crowds, Space, Time - and Buildings?



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*Paul Hyett shares musings on life, togetherness and technology in the United Kingdom.*

### **WE ARE INDEED LIVING THROUGH INCREDIBLE TIMES.**

Aside from the seismic socio-political and economic changes that were already rocking the stability of our western boat, we are now in the midst of an unprecedented pandemic: COVID-19 has ripped around the globe in double-quick time, wreaking hitherto unimagined havoc in its wake. Our current reality is akin to a B Grade Sci-Fi movie. You know the plot: alien virus runs amok; world brought to a halt in epic crisis, and then the movie wraps up and we get on with life as normal.

But this movie has no foreseeable end, and the daily horror only worsens. New norms displace other new norms as this hidden, ruthless, and cruel virus impacts evermore severely on our economies,

manufacturing outputs, distribution systems and ways of life.

### **THE SHOCK HAS BEEN PROFOUND. THE CONSEQUENCES INCALCULABLE.**

Here in the UK, Orwell's world has arrived with a bang. The clocks are indeed striking thirteen. Virtually tagged courtesy of our new phone apps, our movements are now monitored and recorded; those we meet, identifiable and traceable. Such policing will hereafter remain routine within our land until either the virus has been destroyed, or more likely, a cure can be found. This is all for the common good, of course, but the less authoritarian our society, and the more we prize freedom, the harder it is to submit to such controls.

## AND WHEN IT IS OVER AT LAST — WHAT KIND OF FUTURE AWAITS US?

The next step will surely be viral-intelligent and responsive buildings. At points of entry, shopping centre security systems will automatically measure our temperature and bio-recognise our profiles; pathogen monitoring systems will detect any offending micro-organism emissions and, when appropriate, alert the authorities. Likewise, for theatres, cinemas, pubs, and clubs. In Benthamite fashion, those whose condition threatens the good of the majority will have been spotted even before they reach the top of the escalator. Whether you freely turn right or find yourself 'firmly guided' left into the restraining arms of authority will be a consequence of the surveillance and analysis systems incorporated into the very architecture that surrounds us.

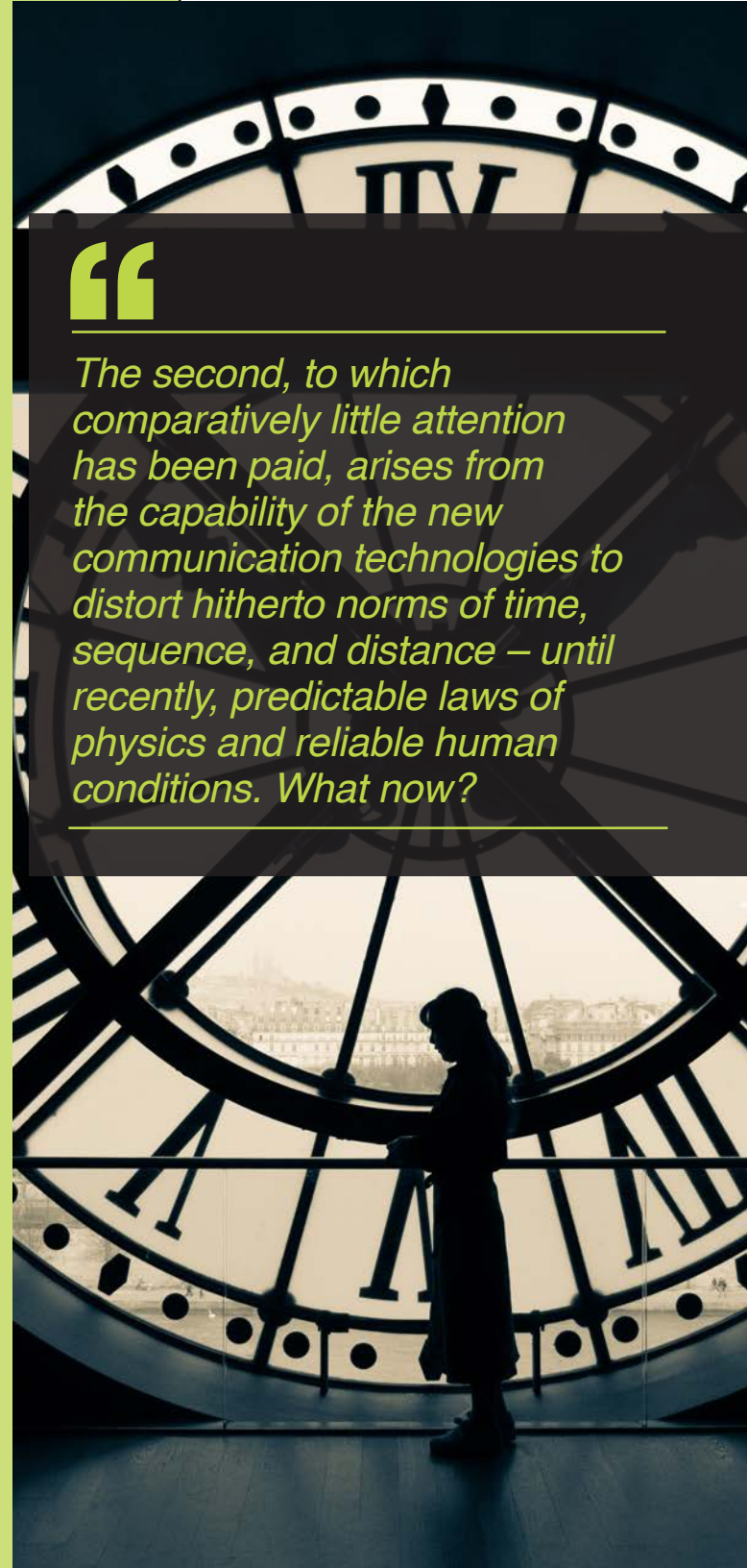
Courtesy of ever more efficient technologies that observe, manage and alert, while we will once more soon be free to enjoy our buildings with a sense of normalcy, 'Big Brother' will be ever-present in the metaphorical rafters, watching over you and yours.

As we tiptoe back to some kind of normality to a world in which we can once again gather within our buildings for work, trade, worship, learning, pleasure and fun; where we can sit at the same tables and drink at the same bar; where we can queue and jostle, cheer and clap, huddle and all the rest, we should think carefully about the broader directions architecture will take beyond the immediate imperative of viral protection.

Pre-Covid, two big agendas were already well underway. Much has been written about the first: ecologically responsible design. It is gratifying to see so many responsible corporations, professional institutes, and practitioners view this as critically important. The second, to which comparatively little attention has been paid, arises from the capability of the new communication technologies to distort hitherto norms of time, sequence, and distance – until recently, predictable laws of physics and reliable human conditions. What now? We are figuratively at a nano-second to midnight on the environmental clock.

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Since the human species gained any self-awareness—since any kind of social order first prevailed—our experience of events was only sequential. Since mechanical became prevalent, time has ticked in regular fashion, and we experienced the beginning before the end. Above all, time and distance were intrinsically related: information travelled at the same speed as humans.

In his great essay “The Monastery and the Clock,” Lewis Mumford noted that the clock was introduced as both a means of tracking time and a method of “synchronising the actions of men.” Think where we are now: for many, the rhythms of the working day and week have been

all but destroyed by the fax machine and by email. Gone are the office rituals of opening the morning post, ‘getting letters out by last collection that day’, and all the rest. Others benefit from these new, asynchronous “structures”

By the 1970’s, the ability to watch that far away motor racing Grand Prix ‘live’ in your own home was taken for granted. Today, we expect to see the race from the vantage points of the competing car; to watch a recording at a time to suit ourselves; and even to fast-forward to see the end, then rewind to see the pit stops or a crash. In sports, maybe it’s an earlier set or those three match points at Wimbledon. Certainly, for media, and

much “work”, chronology can now be abandoned at will. Buildings are still responding to these changes.

But home viewing is not enough. We crave the same-time, same-place experience of watching with friends. The play and players can be somewhere else, but we must get to where the atmosphere is. That is why in January 2020, some 62,000 people packed into the Millennium Stadium in Wales to watch, courtesy of the big video screens, their national rugby team play New Zealand in Auckland. And that’s why Maverick supporters trek into the American Airlines Centre in Dallas to watch their side play the Lakers in LA. It seems



World Cup Match, Big Screen Viewing, Old Town Square, Prague

togetherness is an essential part of enjoyment, but what are the implications for designers and builders?

One thing is for sure: while new communication technologies continue to shrink the globe and provide us access to ever more remote happenings and events, so much of what we enjoy involves the rituals of sharing experience, and that necessitates same-place engagement with others, be it a pop-concert, sports event, or opera.

That is why the post-COVID world will be so interesting and challenging: we already knew we could enjoy sport

remotely. Courtesy of COVID, we have suddenly come to understand just how much we prefer to be together in that remoteness. Now, as offices go beyond survival and start to flourish with a remote workforce, as universities face that same challenge en masse with distance learning, we will come to realise we are at the dawn of a new norm.

There is no doubt we crave to be together, but when, where, and how? These questions will increasingly redefine tomorrow's architectures as integrated communication technologies become an ever more essential part of the architectural programme and offering. Are you reconfiguring your teams and skills to provide them?

Be ready: DesignIntelligence will be in high demand.

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Paul Hyett, RIBA, and Honorary Fellow of AIA, is an independent consultant practicing out of London. He was formerly President of the Royal Institute of British Architects, and Principal with HKS architects for 20 years. His contemplations from across the pond offers useful comparisons to the North American vantage point. He is a frequent contributor and Senior Fellow with DesignIntelligence.

