

Episode One (part 2): The transformation of 'Place' during COVID-19...

Hannah (00:29): This two on our episode about how we experience place and how we plan for and create places. I'm Hannah Bleyerveen and this week our guests explore the boundaries between the physical and digital, protecting people in online spaces and what physical places will look like, post COVID-19. I'm joined once again by Evan Brumley, digital solution architect, Evelyn Sung graduate civil engineer, Michael Tyrpenou, our human centered design lead and Peter Aspinall principal occupational hygienist. Okay, so I want to ask you all if you had a crystal ball that you could look into at the end of all this, do you see any changes in generational divides around the use of digital spaces? Evan, what about you?

Evan (01:14): I think it'll be really interesting to see how things develop in terms of a generational gap. Certain generations will be becoming a lot more comfortable with certain technologies like video chat, ordering things online and these sorts of things where people are basically being forced to pick up new technologies and depending on how long all this continues, people will start to form habits. In terms of other internet communities, I don't particularly see it making huge inroads on uptake of social media for instance. I mean there may be maybe small changes there.

Michael (01:44): I hope my mum stops using house party. That'd be great.

Peter (01:49): Yeah. Random numbers that come up on that one. Wow.

Hannah (01:53): Michael, what are your thoughts on that?

Michael (01:54): I've got a question for the digital natives out there cause I don't consider myself to day one. So I think about these online communities, right? And then I think about the old dude who used to go to big day out when he was too old to go.

Peter (02:07): Stop it!

Michael (02:07): I'm talking about me.

Peter (02:10): You're killing me. I went to splendor in the grass last year. I'm like,

Michael (02:14):

You're a legend. That's what I'm saying.

Peter (02:17): But I felt a little bit removed from the whole situation. But I grew up with the big day out. I grew out stuff. And you get to a point where you almost go, you know what? I just got to leave it for someone else. Now.

Michael (02:30): That's how I feel sometimes. And for me it's like I know not to go to a physical place because I know that place. Cause I can see it and I can see who's there. And I know that's not that place for me and I don't relate to that and they probably won't relate to me. So I guess my question,

when we don't have that visibility of people physically and people who don't have that literacy can just stumble into places and a whole heap of issues can arise. And I guess when you're in that public realm, it's so obvious, right? Like you won't walk down that street or you won't go to that club when you're online. The whole kind of thing changes. And I think if I think about that generational thing as Hannah asked before, I think there's some people who will know those boundaries. And some people won't and I'm interested to see what will happen with the people who have already existed in those communities for a long period of time. Do they then find another place to go and does that push people further out of the edges of, of where they currently exist?

Evan (03:20): To a certain extent. That's kind of the social network circle of life is that the kids get there first and then the adults arrive and then the kids leave. Then that's one of the nice things about online networks is that they have that ability to evolve and the ability to be able to move without barriers in terms of all the people are using online tools. There's a difference between using an online tool and trying to sort of join in on our community because a lot of these tools, they're not one community. There are a lot of different communities, so if you take Instagram for instance, your Instagram is seen as not necessarily the youngest trendiest tool, but as a fairly young user base, but there are a heap of very, very different communities there. It's not about saying all of that particular online tool isn't right for me. I'm too old for it. It's really just about having a little bit of empathy and sense about who am I trying to engage with? Who are my posting for, you know, am I posting for my friends and my posting for members of this community? Who are they? And really not trying to post in the style of a particular tool or a particular community and just trying to be yourself and not try and force yourself into communities where you might not be welcome or you might not fit in.

Hannah (04:29): It's interesting. As you were talking about this, I started thinking about issues of online bullying and trolling and all of that, which we know is such an issue and how do you kind of mitigate and manage those risks right now?

Evan (04:46): That's a fascinating discussion. In terms of public spaces, you have concepts like sort of adversarial architecture where you're building for particular outcomes of behavior. The classic example is building park benches that you can't lie down on. And in terms of taking that into the digital world, the classic digital approaches, your information wants to be free, all speeches free, no moderation, et cetera. And if you've taken this public space online and you want a forum in which everyone can participate, you need

to have some elements of those sorts of policies in place to make sure that moderation is still possible and that those sorts of bad behaviors can be prevented and reported and so on. It's really, really difficult to do that at scale. That's the problem that companies like Twitter and Facebook face is when you have billions of posts going up moderating that content, you can't do it easily with the team of people in which you guys should get to sort of algorithmic checks.

Evan (05:39): And then there's a whole other problem with that where you'll miss things and you'll over moderate and et cetera. It's probably the, the biggest challenge online currently is, is how do you

build communities, uh, Kate behave very control. There's actually a great analogy that if you think back to your high school class, so I say five people, was there someone in that class who you thought was a bit strange and that you wouldn't invite to a party, expand that out to your grade level. You've got maybe a hundred or 150 people and how many people in that group do you think were kind of dodgy or you might be scared to meet at night and then take your whole school. You're now at a thousand people when you have an online community with 10 million people, how many people in that community would skate here? So your designs need to take that into consideration that there will always be a percentage of people out there who are problematic and where moderation that is required and protections that are required.

Hannah (06:34): I want to ask each of you, what do you personally miss about being physical in a place that you just can't get from this digital online environment? I'll start with, I'll start with with Michael.

Michael (06:47): I think I mentioned it before. Again, I use London as that example. I used to live in a place called Hackney and it was that buzz of the papal and the ambulance is the place cause the shouting, the different languages, the smells of food, like that's the kind of thing in cities that gets, may have kind of fired up and I don't live in that environment. I kind of live in a regional town on the beach and I can still hear the ocean, I can still see the Scarman and I can kind of interact with that. So I feel pretty bloody lucky to still have that connection to that environment.

Hannah (07:19): And I allowed to answer my own question. For me personally, one thing that I'm is, is these public places are real melting pots of all different backgrounds and people and cultures. And one of the things that I love about going out is saying what's trendy? What are people wearing? What games are people playing? Like what are they doing that I have in otherwise been exposed to? And the limitation with online environment is it's everything that I've signed up to or subscribed to or that my cookies are telling me that I should be directed to. I'm not getting these outside influences from things that otherwise haven't expressed an interest in Googling, so that's something that I missed. That exposure to that real diversity of different things that can inspire me and on that note I'm going to ask Evelyn.

Evelyn (08:07): One of the things that I've really loved to do and is a big part of my identity and social life is going to live music events and sometimes I do it around the world. This is sort of places where you can see really interesting outfits. You don't know who you're going to meet. Seeing performances live and the sort of audio visual arts that have been existing that really fill out a space. Those are some of my most profound experiences and can't wait to get back into that.

Hannah (08:34): Evan, anything you'd like to add to that?

Evan (08:37): For me, the one thing that then I'm going to miss weight is just the ability to wonder around in public spaces and feel lost in a crowd. I tend to sit more on the introverted side of the spectrum. Some of my favorite kind of thing is to just go for a walk. I go on a Friday night after work and walk through the city and just enjoy feeling alone, thousands of others

Michael (08:56): and that's something that's really not possible anymore.

Hannah (08:58): What about you Peter? What do you personally miss about being physical in a place?

Peter (09:04): What I'm anticipating is that I'm going to have issues with understanding work places, if I have to work remotely as an occupational hygienist for me, I can review someone else's report from when I went to a saw and did a risk assessment. We do lots of risk assessments. We'd go around and we look at things where you take measurements, we get the vibe. Even when I'm doing reports now I'm looking at someone else's photo, someone else's thought, someone else's processes on the page, and it's not the same as when all I go to site. When I see the issues, when I talk to the workers, when I actually get the vibe. That vibe you get from the workers, they can all tell you one thing, but their body language is telling you something else. You don't get that body language, that personal interaction. It's getting better with video, but it's not the same as being there. Sensing it, saying the conditions, the dust build up this time. Any things that you pick up intrinsically as you're moving through a place that there's just not available to us at the moment and that's what I'm going to struggle with. I think

Michael (10:01): The work that we do, it's about understanding people's behaviors to change the way that we design places to improve people's experiences and I think you just nailed it on the head because we're putting forward methodologies that rely on that remoteness and we don't have that. You can't observe people without bias. You know? It's really difficult to have conversations and watch people move through spaces in a way that they actually would have were retrofitting our approach internally to try and solve those problems around bias to still pick up those behavioral insights. We're lucky here at WSP that we've got behavioral scientists that can keep us on the right track, but I think for us moving forward, that becomes a real challenge when we're looking at designing better places for people, whether they be online or physical. This environment that we're currently in makes it really difficult to understand natural behavior and then what's an opportunity we have to solve those problems. That's a really good point and I think that's going to be a continual push and pull with clients and people in this kind of space around how we can continually observe and use different tools and use people like Evan and Evelyn who have that ability to kind of put us in touch with immersive technology, like do the best we can to bring these experiences as real as possible.

Hannah (11:17):

Thanks everyone for listening into our podcast episode on place in the midst of this global pandemic. Thanks especially to our guest speakers for sharing your insights. We'd love to hear from our audience. So I'd like to close with the takeaway question. What do you think the biggest change will be in how we connect with each other online? During the lockdown, I invite everybody to email responses to FutureReady.Australia@wsp.com.