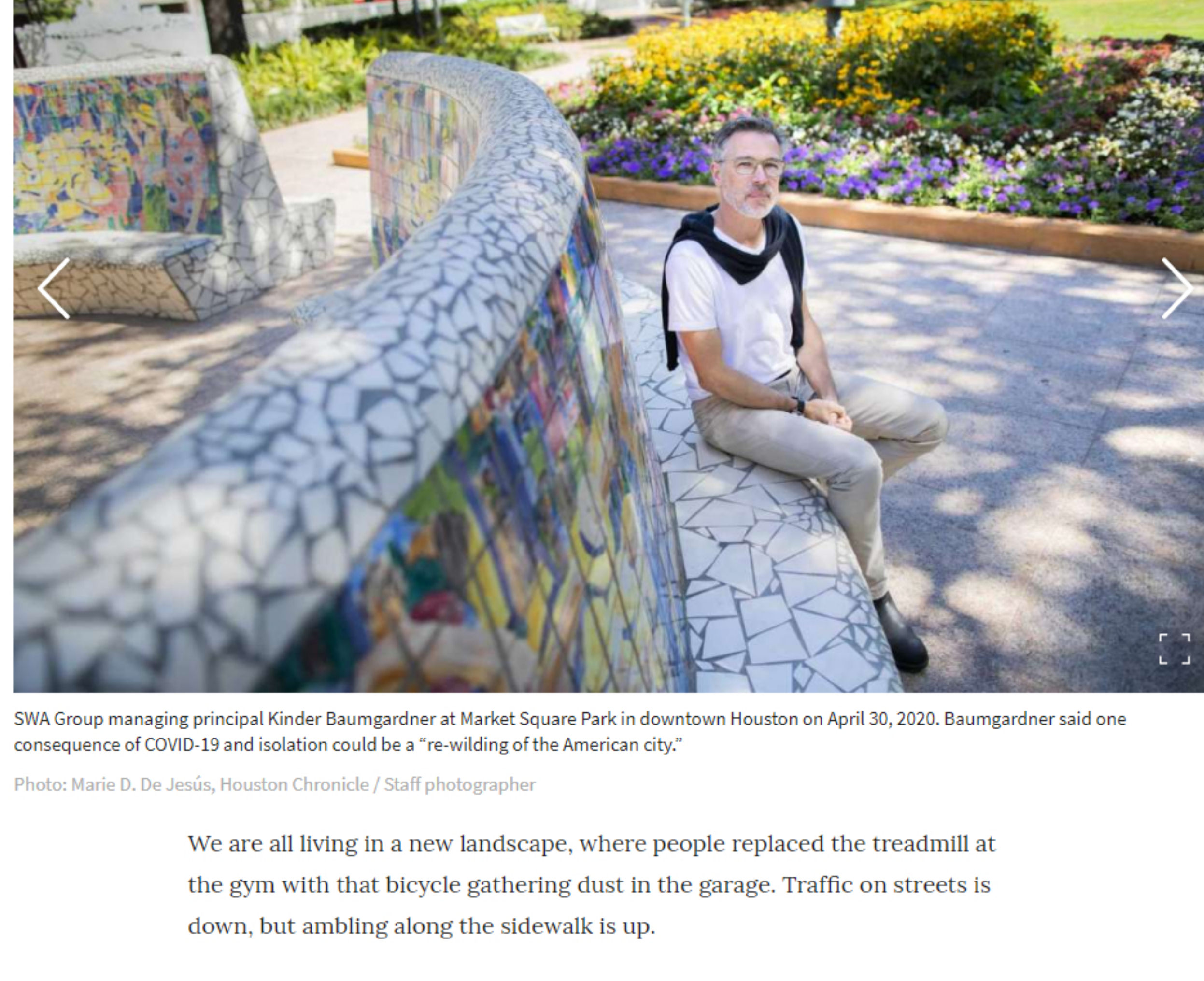


LOCAL // HOUSTON

Landscape planner: Post-pandemic world could be 'a little bit slower and a whole lot greener'

 **Dug Begley** | April 30, 2020 | Updated: April 30, 2020 1:52 p.m.



SWA Group managing principal Kinder Baumgardner at Market Square Park in downtown Houston on April 30, 2020. Baumgardner said one consequence of COVID-19 and isolation could be a "re-wilding of the American city."

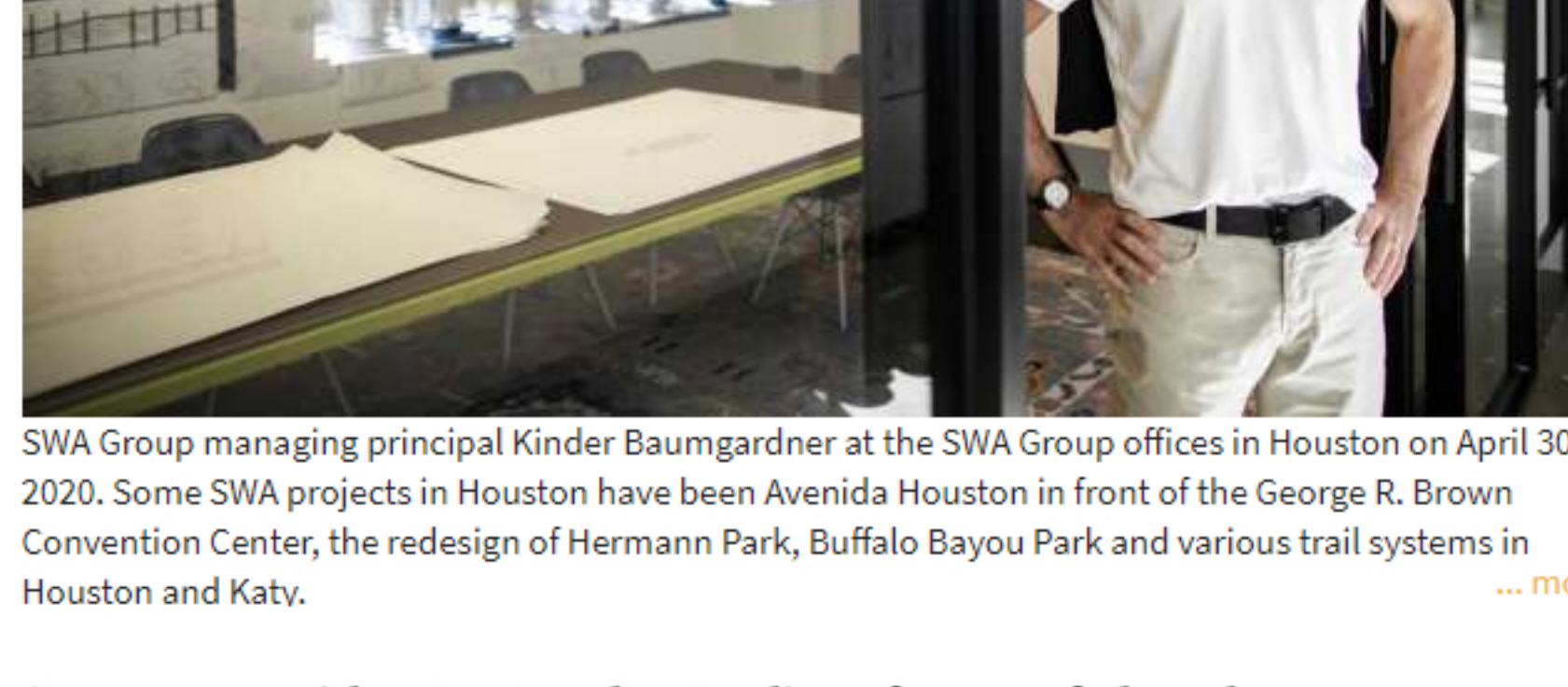
Photo: Marie D. De Jesús, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

We are all living in a new landscape, where people replaced the treadmill at the gym with that bicycle gathering dust in the garage. Traffic on streets is down, but ambling along the sidewalk is up.

Kinder Baumgardner is especially attuned to space, how people use it and what public places can do to unite even in isolation. He is managing principal for the Houston office of SWA, an international design firm with seven offices in the U.S. and others in China and the United Arab Emirates.

You probably have seen the firm's work along Avenida Houston in front of the George R. Brown Convention Center, the redesign of Hermann Park, [Buffalo Bayou Park](#) and various [trail systems in Houston](#) and Katy. Those [funky art panels you see driving along Interstate 69](#) along Houston's east side are their doing, also.

COVID-19 has made many rethink their environment and look a little differently at how cities might come out the other side of the pandemic. In an email exchange, Baumgardner goes over how Houston just might look — and feel — differently and offer residents respite from the sense that we're all farther apart.



SWA Group managing principal Kinder Baumgardner at the SWA Group offices in Houston on April 30, 2020. Some SWA projects in Houston have been Avenida Houston in front of the George R. Brown Convention Center, the redesign of Hermann Park, Buffalo Bayou Park and various trail systems in Houston and Katy. ... more

As someone with a great understanding of sense of place, how are you seeing you own surroundings differently now that we're all spending so much time at home? Any epiphanies?

First of all, everyone in Houston should consider themselves lucky that this is playing out during April when the air is cool and humidity is low. It seems like the entire city is outside on bayou trails or on their streets. I can't image what this would be like in August. Hopefully, we won't have to find out.

I have gained a new appreciation for my front porch where I can wave at the endless parade of neighbors ambling by — mornings appear to be about getting in shape, evenings for cocktails on the move. There is nothing better than watching "work from home" business people wobbling along on an ill-fitting broken-down old bike that hasn't been pulled out of the garage in years. I am experiencing firsthand how architecture and planning can come together to make a pandemic much more palatable. Everyone is starved for some personal interaction: narrow streets, shade trees, small front yards, and porches are clearly providing some of that interaction. Houston's neighborhoods that lack this intimate scale are not providing the interaction that we crave right now. As a result, people are driving across town to neighborhoods like the Heights to take a stroll and wave at strangers.

What is the first piece of advice you would give someone who came to you and wanted to make their backyard better for enduring this pandemic? Are there any obvious things every self-respecting stay-at-homer needs? A good deck chair? Shade? Slip-N-Slide?

If you live in a house with a yard, I think it's time to turn the front yard into the backyard. The best way to interact with strangers today is from our outdoor spaces, and the front yard gives you access to socially-distanced neighbors and strangers alike.

Start by setting up distance-visiting tables, chairs or blankets in your front yard so that you can comfortably visit with friends on your lawn. Just make sure your setup keeps everyone 10 feet or so apart. The Slip-N-Slide is a great idea, but a variety of lawn games typically relegated to the backyard are also a fun way to see people while giving them something to smile about. You can play bocce with some old softball; croquet works with wire coat hangers and anything round; and you can play badminton with tennis rackets and a few teabags tied together. Quick, cheap, and temporary is the way to go. You can also drag your barbecue around to the front yard and show off your grilling prowess while striking up conversations with those out for a walk or bike ride — but keep the tasting to yourself.

For the backyard, it's all about wilderness and agrarian escapes. Vegetable gardens are popular right now, but you don't need a yard to grow a "garden" — just some pots and basil seeds will put a smile on your face when little green sprouts show in a few days' time. Radishes are easy to grow, as well, and are great with a cold lager. If you have a tent, set it up and be amazed at the weird urban wildlife noises that keep you up all night.

It feels like we've written off the automobile and oil during every crisis and every time they rebound. Why is this one different?

The automobile became the preferred mode of transportation in the United States for the same reasons that restaurants and retail are quickly plugging it into the point-of-sale process — it's comfortable. And today it is more comfortable than ever to hang out in your coronavirus-free vehicles rather than engaging with the uncertainty and ambiguity that surrounds every public interaction. We don't have to share our personal space with strangers and we don't have to wear those annoying face masks.

Because of the automobile, development in Houston is not shackled to transit lines, and that creates more opportunity for small business to find cheap land and create the funky places that define our culture. Long-term, we need to build more transit so we can harness specific types of development while also serving people that don't drive; but right now, the emphasis on the car seems like a reasonable response.

The biggest questions about the future of the automobile seems to be centered around electrification. Electric cars were getting very inexpensive to operate just when oil prices came crashing down, lowering the cost of driving an old fashioned gas guzzler. The whole economic ecology behind these two systems is being reconsidered. The looming recession will put a dent in the venture capitalist funding needed for electric vehicle manufacturers to innovate, while the cost of fuel becomes closer to that of electricity. This is a very long game and neither "big oil" nor "electric start up culture" is going to come out of this unscathed.



Eric Orzelak works from his porch in the Northhill neighborhood of Houston on April 7, 2020. Photo: Yi-Chin Lee, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

During the stay-home order drive-thru has become a standard practice. Drive-thru meal pickup. Drive-thru grocery pickup. Drive-thru pet adoption. Drive-thru confessionals. This seems like the lifestyle Houston was built for. Does it surprise you that both customers and businesses adapted fast to Houstonians testing in their cars?

If I needed to get a coronavirus test, I can't think of a better way to do it than from the comfort of my own car: Radio tuned to my favorite channel, talking on the phone with friends, laughing loudly with family, and surrounded by cup holders full of my favorite fever-beating electrolytes and chicken broth.

Any restaurant or retail business with a big parking lot and great street visibility is going to quickly re-tool for take-out. But what makes for a nice walkable neighborhood does not make for an easy take-out conversion. Our sprawling suburban developments full of oversized parking lots, will help significant numbers of retailers to reopen while catering to comfortably car-bound customers. But those innovative new shops in our walkable neighborhoods will have a harder time making the switch. They do not have the queuing space needed for long lines of automobiles, and in many cases they are as much about the experience as they are about the food. The unfortunate result may be that the suburban chains hang on while our inventive urban businesses struggle.

If you step back and look at Houston, our city works from an "everything is everywhere" type of planning. You have your favorite grocery, dry cleaner, pharmacy, and restaurants mapped out across the county. You even drive to your favorite place to go out for a walk. Clearly, we need to give people choices, and help them understand the tradeoffs between an automobile versus transit-oriented lifestyle, but right now the automobile focused city is working as advertised and business that adapt to that reality are going to be much better off.

You create open spaces for a living, but in a pandemic they seem to be a mixed bag. Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner encouraged people to get out and stay healthy, but also closed the parking lots at major parks. Are we going to need to redefine in Houston not just how we build public spaces, but where we put public spaces so everyone just has access?

As Americans quickly adapt to the "coronavirus reality," I am seeing a pent-up demand to use public spaces in new ways. Maybe the pandemic will be the catalyst for nature-rich public spaces that provide the healing and wellness that a well-designed park can bring.

For the past 20 years, American park designers have created hyper-programmed parks like Bryant Park in New York, or Discovery Green here in Houston. These parks are well-organized commercial affairs with a rich variety of spaces designed to accommodate an assortment of very specific uses and users. A market here, a concert there, ice skating on the toy boat pond, and bespoke Instagram moments brought in on weekends for a fee. These parks require a frenzy of activity for users to feel at home — right now they feel empty and ill-advised.

Meanwhile, the "old school" strolling, viewing, picnicking, nature parks are full of life. This style of park was established back in the 1860s as a response to cholera and other urban plagues and they changed the look of our cities. People are flocking to Buffalo Bayou Park and the Bayou Greenways trail network, where most are well behaved and maintaining a safe distance from one another. These unique Houston amenities are more important now than ever and demand for these types of spaces will surely grow. When these "romantic" parks are elevated to high performance standards that guide the cleansing of water, sequestration of carbon, reduction in heat island effect, creation of habitat corridors, and provide health and wellness offerings, they become an integral part of the infrastructure of our cities. They are needed now more than ever.



People use the Willow Oak Trail at the Houston Arboretum and Nature Preserve on March 25, 2020, in Houston. Photo: Godofredo A. Vásquez, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

What do you think the lasting change in our urban form, whether in Houston or across the world, will come from this pandemic?

Engaging with nature and green space is instinctual for city dwellers during times of illness. In the 1800s people who had contracted "consumption" would travel to the seashore to convalesce. Those occupying our parks and streets today are also looking for comfort in these spaces. This will not be a short-lived phenomenon — acute awareness of how pathogens are transmitted will linger for many years and lead to new habits and new expectations for city life. A resurgence and interest in parks and gardens may be one unexpected outcome of this pandemic.

Meanwhile, city and state budgets are being ravaged by the COVID 19 imposed economic shutdowns. Among the first government departments to have their funding cut is typically those associated with parks and recreation. At a time when the public will be demanding the creation of more open spaces, our parks departments will be unable to marshal the funds to maintain existing open spaces, much less deliver new parks.

I believe that this will result in the re-wilding of the American city. A lack of public dollars for parks will result in an unkempt, rambling and wild style of park "design" created in an organic, do-it-yourself character. This new aesthetic will provide more comfort and delight than current design trends offer. Residents will benefit from their habitat patches, stormwater storage, carbon sequestration, and makeshift community gathering areas. Crumbling parking lots and parks released from maintenance will take time to rewild, but once that transformation is complete, our green cities full of respite will finally feel complete.

Are you incorporating pandemic life into your current projects? I'd assume it's hard to put the idea out of your mind, so does it creep into design? How?

The idea of redefining what comprises a comfortable outdoor space is on my mind. A few months ago, it was all about big groups of people coming together in our cities to share an experience — now it's about quiet contemplation, health and wellness. Every project suddenly feels like it should be designed like a spa or a countryside resort. Wide curving paths made of crunchy gravel, with billowy plants that blow in the wind while a water feature bubbles in the distance seems to be the answer. Does everything need to be a Shinto-inspired garden in the future? Probably not, but I do think that we can take cues from these types of places.

It's not just the coronavirus that has us craving nature and wellness. For a number of years, the idea of unplugging and slowing down has been a topic of discussion across the country. Silicon Valley families send their kids to the Waldorf school to raise chickens rather than stare at Ipad screens. We are, of course, more connected than ever with constant Zoom meetings and pandemic updates via Facebook. But we are also taking the Zoom meeting on our porches or while walking down a nature trail. So, I'm thinking how all of this technology is somehow paired with nature. Is this the great simplification that so many have been craving? If we design for it, it could be a very interesting new world that is just a little bit slower and a whole lot greener.