

Need to Know

7 Productive Ways to Spend All the Downtime You May Have Right Now

Coronavirus may have sidelined our industry, but there's still plenty you can do to make the most of these strange days

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Illustration by Federico Ga

You don't need to turn on the news to see how the [coronavirus pandemic](#) has overturned our world. But if you're fortunate enough to be healthy during these crazy times, there's a silver lining: the virus has also forced us to slow down and reassess our habits, our lifestyles, and, perhaps most helpfully, our business practices. Designers, in particular, operate in a world so collaborative and intrinsically social that it's almost impossible to imagine how the show can go on in the throes of mandated distancing. But go on it must.

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We talked to designers and industry insiders to learn how they're using this forced time off to their benefit. Inspired by their stories, here are seven tips for maximizing your productivity, reacquainting yourself with your goals, and getting the most out of life in isolation so you can hit the ground running on the other side of this.

Get Back to Business

With virtual conferencing options, it's now easier than ever to keep [workflows running smoothly](#). “Thanks to the beauty of technology, our team is able to stay nearly as connected as we do in the office,” says Houston designer Marie Flanigan. “We can share our screens with clients, builders, architects, and one another in order to get approvals and keep things moving forward.”

But while designers are spending much of their time streamlining processes and finding ways to make their work more efficient—for example, material samples and swatches are being sent directly to clients instead of offices—many are getting back to the basics of good, old-fashioned one-on-one interactions. “With no time spent commuting to meetings, we have the ability to give even more to our clients,” says New Jersey designer Alma Russo. “Our mission has always been customer service, and the current climate calls for this more than ever. We check in on families, provide updates for deliveries, and figure out ways to fine-tune designs even further.”

Chad Stark, senior vice president of Stark, agrees. “We are using this time more to strengthen our existing business relationships by checking in on the health of those we care about more than seeking new business opportunities. This is a time where people need a friend, not a salesperson.”

Adds Andrew Sheinman, founder and president of [Pembroke & Ives](#) in New York City, “It has been heartwarming to hear from clients who are finally spending significant amounts of time in the home we have created for them, letting us know how much they are enjoying being there and their appreciation for all our work.”

Naturally, the inverse is also true. Designers can reach out to clients to explore the kinds of virtual services that might help families make the most of their homes given these unprecedented circumstances. “I’ve taken to reaching out to past clients and checking in with them, just letting people know we are here for whatever their needs are,” says Jessica Shaw, interior design director at the Turett Collaborative in New York. Yuna Megre, founder and lead designer of Moscow- and Los Angeles-based Megre Interiors, has taken the idea one step further. “Understanding how the pandemic and the following economic crisis will affect our clients, we have already worked out ‘lean’ packages in addition to our already flexible pricing policies.”

Forge Real Connections Virtually

So many people talk about “community” within the context of neighborhoods and personal lives, but for most people who spend more than 40 hours a week in an office, colleagues and work families *are* their communities. While employers are certainly taking advantage of technology like Zoom, Google Hangouts, and Trello to stay connected to workflows and schedules on a logistical level, smart leaders are using these platforms to create meaningful support systems between team members—the goofier the better.

“Our team uses an internal messaging system on our cell phones,” says Randy Fiser, CEO of the American Society of Interior Designers (ASID). “Almost all content posted there is watercooler conversation: photos of children, animated gifs to make people laugh, and the odd competition to invite staff to share their opinions.”

ASID board member Elizabeth Von Lehe is taking a more centered approach. “She is starting every morning leading a stretching exercise with her team, as well as hosting virtual happy hours on occasion in the evenings,” says Fiser. “These acts—starting and ending the day together as a team—help add structure and support when everyone is remote.”

If you want to take that idea one step further, why not use your newfound free time to mentor an up-and-coming designer, or reach out to someone you’ve admired? “Bringing people together through our resources page is our way of creating and building a support network to help us navigate these challenging times,” says Fiser. “Many other organizations are getting creative with ‘digital networking,’ such as the AD PRO Facebook group, where you can connect with other designers and grow a support system from there.”

Look Under the Rug

It’s easy to put off less glamorous housekeeping projects when you’ve got showroom appointments and industry events to contend with. But now that your social calendar has been wiped clean, consider tackling projects that you’ve been purposely sweeping under the rug. Like Boston-based designer Kelly McGill, New Orleans artist and lighting designer Julie Neill is using the downtime to redesign and relaunch her website. And designer Penny Drue Baird of Dessins is “taking time to pursue websites of new and in-place vendors, which is something I rarely have time to explore.”

“There are always those projects that you know you should do, but they’re lower priority than more pressing client needs,” says Chicago designer Summer Thornton. “We’re cleaning up our bookkeeping in Studio Designer, working on some marketing projects, and ordering more business cards—plus lots of other things that have been on the back burner.”

Now is also the perfect time to organize all of those inspiration images you’ve been saving on your phone and Pinterest boards. “When I visit any trade shows, I usually take too many pictures of what I find inspiring or new,” says New York designer Tyson Ness. “This morning I went through my pictures from the last *AD* show, rediscovered a couple of ‘new’ resources, and was able to follow up on an inquiry from a great vendor.”

Go Back to School

“With more flexibility in your schedule, it’s a fantastic time to get ahead on personal and professional development,” says Fiser. If you’re looking to lean into business strategy or learn about best practices, ASID’s Academy of CEUs and webinars are currently available free of charge to both members and nonmembers until April 8, though you can also look into digital offerings from private universities and other professional associations for additional specializations. “Health and wellness is top of mind for everyone, too,” says Fiser. “Our partner in the WELL Conference, IWBI, has set up a series of webinars and will be offering a WELL Exam Prep course in the near future.”

You might even consider deepening your expertise in specific [software](#) proficiencies, whether that means becoming an Excel wiz, finally making the switch from hand-drawing to AutoCAD, or exploring how to incorporate video content creation into your weekly workflow.

The moment is also ripe for diving into any personal interests you have that might help fuel your creativity in unexpected ways. Mia Jung, director of interiors at AD100 firm [Ike Kligerman Barkley](#), is using Duolingo to learn Japanese; Tung Chiang, the San Francisco studio director at Heath Ceramics, is delving into her often-neglected personal library for inspiration; and San Francisco designer Regan Baker is reacquainting herself with historical design elements, styles, and references.

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“The amazing thing about human nature is that people find themselves gravitating toward things that they innately know how to do,” says San Francisco designer Alison Pickart. “For some very lucky ones, they will discover a passion that now has the time to be realized, which may inadvertently become a new life’s work. Great things come out of crisis, often because they have to.”

Turn This Into a Teachable Moment

While most might argue that these are anxiety-ridden days, small businesses have an unprecedented opportunity to seize this moment to examine the efficiency and resourcefulness of their organizations and streamline processes and procedures for the future. So use this time to take a deep dive into your own daily workflow and see where you can cut the fat to improve your bottom line, your mental health, and the morale of your employees and colleagues.

Many designers are realizing, for example, just how important daily check-in meetings are, or how useful virtual conferencing technology can be to cut down on commute times between client meetings. “We’re finding that we have to be overly communicative to make this work,” says New York designer James Huniford of his team’s remote working situation. “We’re using Slack in a way that we never have before, and video calls are something we are going to start using more often. These new processes will continue once we are back in the office.”

But for many, it’s too soon to tell just what lessons are waiting to be learned. The important thing is to keep an open mind and identify places for improvement as they become apparent. “This moment in time is forcing us to look very closely and strategically at our business and its health,” says Alexia Valentina Sheinman, director of branding and communications at Pembroke & Ives. “It’s a great opportunity to evaluate where we can be more nimble and how best to come out even stronger on the other side of this. My goal is to capture this insight to see how we can adjust our methods, structure, and client relationships to be more efficient in the future.”

Think About the Bigger Picture

Life most certainly won’t be the same in a post-coronavirus world, so it’s up to designers to be flexible and learn how to adapt, whether that means a greater shift toward sustainable and wellness-focused initiatives or more people working from home on a regular basis.

“As public-space designers, we are also analyzing how we can address the issues this pandemic has shown us,” says Yuna Megre. “Because we are not praying to return to the way things were but rather that we learn lessons and how to make things better for us, for our communities, for our planet.”

Adds Tung Chiang, “Designers have been known to create in a vacuum—think drawing on a cocktail napkin—so creating at home is natural for designers. The difference in this situation is: Can design solve a bigger problem? How can design be meaningful in the long run? How can we express our care to the world, the environment, and the people in design?”

But that doesn’t mean that the design industry has to break the current system entirely. Says Birmingham, Alabama, architect [Jeffrey Dungan](#), “I think the current craziness will pass over time, but I do think that some of the lessons will stick. I want to learn what I need to from this experience but not become a slave to fear. We can carpet the entire world over, but it’s easier to just wear some house slippers through life.”

Be Kind to Yourself and Temper Your Expectations

Work-from-home success assumes a certain lifestyle and level of comfort—that is to say, a multiroom house with outdoor space for quiet contemplation, no children to homeschool or supervise (or at the very least a partner to pick up the slack when you're on your sixth Zoom meeting of the day), and a dedicated workspace that inspires productivity. If you don't have those sort of resources at your disposal, fear not.

“At first I thought I would be able to use this time to take a break, and in true fashion I made a long list of things I could learn and finally read or practice,” says textile designer Serena Dugan. “That list is there, but I have barely scratched the surface. I'm a big believer that everything comes around, and it's important to not force an agenda when the world is telling us to focus less on our plans and more on our immediate nucleus: our wellbeing and the wellbeing of our families. So I spend my work energy managing all incoming inquiries and preparing my infrastructure for when the world comes back to life, so that I'm ready to hit the ground running.”

The bottom line: Work hard, but give yourself permission to spend more time with family, exercise more, cook more. Look after yourself and reconnect with what's important. As with everything in life, perspective—even if it comes courtesy of a society-disrupting virus—is key.