**Urban Evolution Podcast – Tom Fisher**

Bill Von Bank:

This podcast is brought to you by Destination Medical Center, creating a global destination for health and wellness in Rochester, Minnesota. More at dmc.mn.

Tom Fisher:

One of the things we've learned with this pandemic is that once you recognize that you can work remotely, it means that you can essentially live and work anywhere. And so the opportunity here is for people to make decisions about where they live and work based on quality of life. Or for example, if you can live and work anywhere, why not live next to the world's best hospital?

Bill Von Bank:

Welcome to Urban Evolution, a podcast about harnessing creativity and innovation to transform communities. I'm your host Bill Von Bank. The Coronavirus pandemic has accelerated changes in many industries and in our daily lives. My guest today is Tom Fisher, Director of the Minnesota Design Center at the University of Minnesota. He's a professor and former Dean at the university. His research has focused on sustainable architecture, design ethics, and community-based service design. Today, he shares some insights on what a post pandemic city might look like and how lessons from past pandemics and health events can help shape our future. Tom Fisher, welcome to the Urban Evolution podcast.

Tom Fisher:

Happy to be here.

Bill Von Bank:

Tom, walk us through your career and your current role with the Minnesota Design Center at the University of Minnesota.

Tom Fisher:

I came to Minnesota 24 years ago to be the Dean of what's now the college of design at the University of Minnesota. And I'm trained as an architect, although I did also graduate work in urban design and studied cities. So that's really been a lot of the focus of my research. I was the Dean of the college of design for 15 years, stepped down about six years ago now, and took over the directorship of the Minnesota Design Center, which is a endowed chair and a research center that focuses on urban design and strategic and service design mainly focused on Minnesota.

Bill Von Bank:

So I'm excited about our discussion today on what a post pandemic city might look like. You certainly have a lot of research, data and insights on this topic. As we delve into this topic, I'm curious what history teaches us from other past health events.

Tom Fisher:

Pandemics always have an effect on the physical environment and have always affected how we live and work and move around from back in the middle ages with the Black Death, where we realized that we had to clean our streets. So the idea street sweeping emerged with that. We realized we couldn't bury people just randomly. So the idea of cemeteries emerged in the wake of the Black Death. So in more recent times, the cholera epidemics of the 19th century really made us realize that we needed to put in sanitary sewers, that we needed to deal with our sewage, other than allowing it to just sit in our streets. The idea of indoor plumbing, we had cities that were emerging in the 19th century that still had outhouses in the back. And so the idea of indoor plumbing came as a result of those cholera epidemics.

Tom Fisher:

And we saw that even in the early 20th century with the 1918 influenza pandemic, a recognition that social distancing mattered, that wearing masks mattered. And as a result of that, we saw a widespread embrace of the private automobile as people increasingly moved away from taking trolleys and wanted their own cars. We also saw a desire to have single family housing. And so a lot of the suburban growth that occurred in the 20th century were also triggered by that pandemic. And so the history of pandemics really lead to these changes in how we live and work. And I think we're seeing the same coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bill Von Bank:

So it seems like some of the things we take for granted today are a result from a major health episode, such as prior pandemics.

Tom Fisher:

That's right. And public health and the built environment are really intertwined in really interesting ways historically. And I think they continue to be something that we should all be thinking about today.

Bill Von Bank:

As you think about the last nine months and the Coronavirus pandemic, how will it affect our cities moving forward?

Tom Fisher:

Well, one of the things that I think we're all experiencing is a rebalancing of the physical and the digital. I mean, we are, for example, recording this podcast remotely, we are increasingly finding that we can do quite a lot remotely. Many people, as much as over 40% of the workforce right now is working full time from home. And we're learning that children can continue to go to school remotely, that we can get most goods and many services delivered to us with online shopping and online means of communication. And so the technology to do this existed before the pandemic, but what pandemics do is they accelerate us rapidly into the future. And so things that did exist before we had telecommuting and telehealth and online shopping and distance learning before the pandemic, but they were still relatively marginal activities. And now with the pandemic, and I think after the pandemic, we will see these ways of living and working, becoming dominant modes for many, many people.

Tom Fisher:

So we've been accelerated and really part of that acceleration is getting us past the old habit that we had from the 20th century that led us to think that if I go to work, I have to go to an office. If I have to take a class, I have to go to a lecture hall. If I want to buy something, I have to go to a store. Those were all 20th century habits that we had, that the technology that we have has made somewhat obsolete. So it's not as if we won't go to stores again, or we won't go to offices, but those activities will change as a result of this pandemic.

Bill Von Bank:

The 40% working from home, that's a pretty big number.

Tom Fisher:

Well, in addition to that, surveys have shown that people who are working at home as many as 75% want to continue to do so after the pandemic, at least two or three days a week. There was a survey that was done of employers and 91% of the employers who responded said that they think their people are more productive working at home. And so that's why I think this change that we're going through because of the pandemic is going to last afterward, that we've recognized that there is some advantage to being able to have the kind of flexibility to work some of the time at home. And some of the time at an office.

Bill Von Bank:

That leads into the next question, what opportunities might emerge from this crisis?

Tom Fisher:

Well, I think there are many, and that's the other thing that is true about pandemics is that while they bring an end to certain kinds of activities, they also open up all sorts of other opportunities. So we're going to see, for example, a blurring of home and work life. We're already seeing that as we work remotely, but we will, I think see offices in the future become more home-like with more comfortable furniture. We will go to an office to work collaboratively with others, to have meetings that really require in-person conversations, or maybe have access to equipment. But the office is probably going to be much more home-like in the sense of comfortable furniture, good coffee, what have you. Meanwhile, the home is going to also have some of the qualities of the office. In other words, I think the in-home office is going to become a common feature in many, many houses as a result of that. So there's opportunities to reimagine how we use space.

Tom Fisher:

Retail is going to change. We'll still have stores, but those stores are going to have to focus on creating experiences that you can't get online. I think a lot of the day-to-day shopping is going to move online and will continue to do so. And so the experience of going to a store is going to be the reason why you will go to someplace physically, so an opportunity for retailers to re-imagine what that experience might be. For example, I think we're going to see that we have a lot of excess space, we're going to find that we have more office space than we may need. Meanwhile, we have a need for affordable housing. So some buildings may change in function. We are probably going to see the end of rush hour.

Tom Fisher:

There was a recent study done at Vanderbilt that showed that with just a 10 to 15% change in people's commuting patterns is enough to basically end rush hour as we know it. So we're probably overbuilt with our highways. We'll probably have more parking than we need. Surprisingly, I think we will find a pretty dramatic shift in parking demand as a result of this pandemic. So those are all opportunities to reimagine space, re-imagine what we invest in and how we spend our days.

Bill Von Bank:

As we think about re-imagining space and in recognizing that there is going to be a lot of vacant space or newly vacant space, at the same time, housing is an issue. Affordable housing is an issue, unique opportunity there?

Tom Fisher:

Yes, absolutely. I think though, that it's going to require that we think about zoning differently. We have zoning habits from the 20th century where we have said, "Okay, this land use has to be commercial and that has to be residential. And these are where offices go. And these are where factories go." That's not how the world works anymore. Over half of all of the businesses in America are now coming out of people's homes. And so the residential neighborhood is actually as much a workplace as it is a place for housing. And so I think that we need to recognize that, for example, we are way overbuilt on retail. We have five times the amount of square footage devoted to retail in the United States than Europe does.

Bill Von Bank:

Wow.

Tom Fisher:

We are way overbuilt. And this pandemic is going to shift the demand for that retail space. So what do we do with all that empty retail space? Well, how might it get converted to housing? How might we take empty big box stores and convert them to townhouse developments or other courtyard housing or what have you? So there are a lot of those kinds of opportunities.

Bill Von Bank:

As we then shift to challenges, what are some of the most pressing or immediate challenges as a result of the pandemic?

Tom Fisher:

To my mind, the biggest challenge is equity. We've seen the inequitable access to healthcare, we've seen the inequitable effects of the pandemic. I mean, certain populations are more heavily affected, have higher death rates than others, but I also am concerned on the economic side in terms of us not ending up with a kind of two class economy where there are those who can work remotely and then the essential workers who are basically serving them, delivering goods, delivering services to them. And I think we have to make sure that we treat our essential workers as they really are. They're essential to our economy and make sure that they are well compensated, that they have health benefits, that they are not vulnerable as a workforce, because right now we have this two class economy going where those of us who are fortunate enough to be able to work remotely, really depend on everything getting delivered to us.

Tom Fisher:

So equity is a big issue, I think as well, making sure that there is widespread digital access for everybody. I think we've come to realize that the internet and high bandwidth access to it is really essential to participate in the 21st century economy. So we have to make sure that every home has that kind of access and that everybody has the devices they need to participate in the economy. So I think-

Bill Von Bank:

How easy of a task is that for that type of access?

Tom Fisher:

Well, it's interesting. After the 1918 pandemic, and as we began to suburbanized and spread out, there was a recognition that electrification was essential to participate in the 20th century economy. So in the great depression, we had this whole effort to basically electrify America. We made sure that people in remote areas could have electricity. Well, the access to the internet is the 21st century version of that, I think. We have to make sure that underserved communities or communities that are remotely located have access to the internet in the same way that people do in the same major urban areas.

Bill Von Bank:

And you're seeing large-scale companies such as Land O'Lakes making that a priority for rural America.

Tom Fisher:

Yeah, absolutely. And this is going to have to be a national effort. We're going to have to involve the government because we're finding that for the private sector, when you get very low densities, their business model doesn't work. For example, at Uber and Lyft, there's only so far out from a major city where Uber and Lyft go. They won't go or serve very remote locations. And so sometimes it's going to take the government to incentivize the extension of our infrastructure to everybody.

Bill Von Bank:

I want to talk a little bit more about the equity piece of this, because everybody is probably experiencing the increase in delivery service.

Tom Fisher:

Right.

Bill Von Bank:

Whether it's packages, whether it's retail, whether it's food. And it seems like that is one issue that would need to be addressed right off the bat.

Tom Fisher:

Absolutely. In fact, a delivery person is the fastest growing job in America right now. And many people who've been laid off from the restaurant hospitality industries for example, have become the delivery people. But again, we have to make sure that they're not all gig workers. I mentioned Uber and Lyft. I think we have to make sure that those who are working in this new economy have at least a basic income in benefits so that they're not so vulnerable.

Bill Von Bank:

How might a city like Rochester, Minnesota, home to the global leader in healthcare, Mayo Clinic evolve from the Coronavirus pandemic?

Tom Fisher:

I didn't mention that I'm also on the EDA board of the-

Bill Von Bank:

For the destination medical center?

Tom Fisher:

Absolutely. And happy to be on that and have enjoyed watching Rochester and the DMC really thrive. And I think there are tremendous opportunities for Rochester and the destination medical center. One of the things we've learned with this pandemic is that once you recognize that you can work remotely, it means that you can essentially live and work anywhere. And so the opportunity here is for people to make decisions about where they live and work based on quality of life, or for example, if you can live and work anywhere, why not live next to the world's best hospital. And so to me, the opportunity for Rochester as America city for health as its brand is to really market that globally, not just to startup companies who want to be near the Mayo Clinic for business reasons, but also for people who are looking for a very healthy city to live in, a high quality of life.

Tom Fisher:

And so I think Rochester has a great opportunity to be a global magnet for people who may have no business connections to Rochester, but simply want to live there because of the assets that it has. I think that every city needs to cultivate what is unique about this place? We actually just finished a pilot project for the department of employment and economic development in the state of Minnesota, working in smaller communities in Southeast Minnesota around branding themselves in terms of how do they cultivate a unique identity as a way to attract future residents. So we worked with one owner for example of Minnesota in Wabasha. And Wabasha its case for example is about birding, biking and boating. And so they have kind of begun to cultivate a brand around a healthy lifestyle for an older population.

Bill Von Bank:

Nature and the home to the National Eagle Center?

Tom Fisher:

Exactly. All of those issues. I think that, again, this is why Rochester is so well-suited to compete in this global economy and this competition for talent, which is that not only does it have a really clear brand, with America city for health, but it has the asset, the Mayo Clinic to back that up. It's not just saying that it's obviously true. That's why I think really sticking to brand in almost everything we do in Rochester is going to be so important. How does every decision we make, build the brand, accentuate the brand, and we will succeed as a result of that.

Bill Von Bank:

[inaudible 00:18:17] attract new business opportunities that also align with the brand.

Tom Fisher:

Absolutely. I mean, it might be for example, how can we demonstrate in Rochester what it means to be the world's healthiest city? What would that mean? And ideally if we do that right, we will have people wanting to come to Rochester simply to see what that looks like and wanting to be a part of that. And so to me, health has to be the underlying assumption on everything that we do. And of course the other advantage of coming out of a pandemic is pandemics also help people realize the importance of health. It brings public health back to the fore. And so the brand of Rochester is well-suited coming out of this pandemic.

Bill Von Bank:

As we strive for greater connectivity, mobility and to live in more sustainable cities, what are some of the lessons we have learned and are continuing to learn about how cities will need to evolve?

Tom Fisher:

I think one of the other things that's interesting is the environmental impact of the pandemic. There was a study done out of Stanford University that showed that they estimate that 20 times the number of lives have been saved in Chinese cities because of reduced air pollution than the number of people killed by COVID-19. And so simply by fewer people driving, the pollution has gone down so much that it's really been saving lots of lives. And so I think one of the opportunities coming out of the pandemic is how do we capture those benefits? How do we continue to ensure that we have clean air, clean water, open space that people can be physically active in and basically lead healthier, more sustainable lives? So I think mobility will change too. I mentioned the disappearance of rush hour, but I also think we're going to see an embrace of multiple modes of transportation.

Tom Fisher:

If you're no longer needing to get to an office by nine to five. And you say, you need to get to your office by an 11 o'clock meeting, maybe you'll take your bike on a beautiful day, rather than drive. In other words, once work becomes more flexible, I think we'll also see a greater flexibility in how people want to move around. And so mobility will change as well. And I think mobile digital devices will simply become the dominant way in which we will, as we already are staying in touch, doing work and what have you. So we're going to be moving more bits than bodies and belongings around the world.

Tom Fisher:

I think we will be flying less. One of the things we don't talk much about, but this is how pandemics really take off globally is through intercontinental rapid air transportation. And so if we want to prevent future pandemics, I think we have to question this idea of just getting in planes and flying all over the place all the time, particularly when we can connect remotely even more effectively than getting in a plane. And so I think we're going to see that we will be more globally connected digitally and more locally connected physically.

Bill Von Bank:

There's been so much advancement around autonomous vehicles. How does this pandemic affect that whole industry?

Tom Fisher:

That's a great question. We're just finishing a three-year National Science Foundation grant, looking at the impact of autonomous vehicles at the University of Minnesota here. And for example, one of the things that I find fascinating about that as a technology is enabling us, for example, to have healthier vehicles, for example, a UV blast is the quickest and best way to eradicate all viruses and bacteria in a space. You can't do that with a person in the vehicle, but you can do that in an autonomous vehicle. In other words, when somebody gets out of the AV and before the next person gets in, we could have a UV blast that completely cleans that interior.

Bill Von Bank:

Just that quickly?

Tom Fisher:

It's an instantaneous flash. So we may see that autonomous vehicles actually are healthier and safer for us. They're certainly safer in terms of accidents. Humans are the cause for over 90% of the car crashes. And so autonomous vehicles will greatly reduce the injury and deaths related to vehicular accidents, but the interiors of these vehicles will also be cleaner and safer for us than what we're driving right now. I think we'll also see as the car companies move to a mobility services model is that we will not be owning cars, but we will buy mobility from Ford or GM or Toyota, and they will offer whatever vehicle we need.

Tom Fisher:

If we need a pickup truck to pull a boat to our cabin, they'll have a pickup truck delivered. If we just need a one person vehicle to take us to the office, they will deliver one person vehicles. And so we're going to see a greater range of vehicles and access to a full range of those vehicles on the part of everybody who's part of their mobility service network. And this also greatly reduces the cost of transportation. In fact, Waymo, the Google company is thinking their business model would be advertising based so that if we're willing to be in an autonomous vehicle and have a little advertising screen in front of us, the ride itself is free. And so we're going from having to buy an all-in and maintain and insure vehicles to basically having free rides. So that's a dramatic drop in the cost of our transportation.

Bill Von Bank:

I'm guessing in your role over the years, you've attended a lot of conventions. And I just wonder about the convention industry moving forward, because that industry hospitality, tourism, the convention industry has taken such a hit from this pandemic. And I'd love your insight into what the future holds for convention centers and how we might look at conventions differently.

Tom Fisher:

I've been on a few conventions and conferences during the pandemic where the physical convention was canceled, but they moved it remotely. And a couple things were surprising to me. I was going to give a talk down in Houston to the annual American planning association. And I think they had 50 people or so signed up for my talk, of course, that was canceled. I ended up giving my presentation remotely and there were, I don't know, 500 people in the talk. And the access was much lower, of course, they didn't have to pay to fly to Houston and go to a hotel.

Tom Fisher:

And organizations like the American Planning Association are thinking, "Well, why go back to in-person conventions when our members can have more access for much less money and it's much less costly for us?" Right. So I think there'll still be a role for conventions because I think what's important about them is the interactions that happen in the lobby during coffee hour, right?

Bill Von Bank:

The social connections.

Tom Fisher:

It's the social connection. So I think convention centers may change in that we may have less need for big windowless rooms where everyone's sitting and listening to a speaker, give a presentation because that can be done more effectively, remotely. And they may be again more about social interaction where comfortable seating, good food, good coffee, and maybe curated conversations might be more of why we go to convention centers. And for example, I've wondered, and I've thought about this with Rochester's convention center that one of the other opportunities would be for a convention center to be a place where you could go to get access to all kinds of remotely remote conventions going on, where it could be a kind of access to a whole range of conventions, where you're watching with other people locally and then having curated conversations around those conventions. And so it's less about flying to a place as it is going to your local convention center to get access to conventions going on around the world.

Bill Von Bank:

All around the world.

Tom Fisher:

Yeah.

Bill Von Bank:

Interesting idea. You're preparing the urban designers and architects of tomorrow, the past nine months have undoubtedly made for rather thought provoking virtual classroom discussions. Take us inside the classroom and some of those discussions with your students.

Tom Fisher:

Well, one of the great things about being a professor is you learn so much from your students, probably more than they'll ever learn from me. And several things that I've learned from the current generation of students is that there are certain assumptions that they just make about the world. They just assume that everything we do is going to be environmentally sustainable. I mean, there's just no question in their mind that everything that we do has to be based on renewable resources, has to be healthy, creating healthy interiors for people. So health is another key assumption that they make environmental, as well as human health, equity is a strong driver in this generation. They're very interested in issues like affordable housing and homelessness, very concerned about segregation of populations in cities and how can we overcome that, concerned about gentrification, all of those issues.

Tom Fisher:

They also operate almost intuitively around the idea of the sharing economy, around the idea that we have just too much stuff and that we don't share enough things. So a lot of the work that I get from my students is around the idea of how can we network what we already have and use it more effectively. How can a school that might be sitting empty every evening and all summer long, be used for something else when it's not being used for classes? How can we utilize shopping malls that are sitting on empty all evening or all night? I mean, there are all these ideas about how we repurpose space, how we use what we have more effectively. And this is translated also into the research we're doing.

Tom Fisher:

For example, we're just about to start a research project for the Minnesota Department of Transportation around a sharing economy model around world transit, which is that it's really hard to have transit systems in small towns. However, there's lots of vehicles sitting around parked underutilized like 90% of the time. Well, maybe that's their transit system. So how do we build a sharing economy network locally that enable communities to more fully utilize the assets they already have? So those are some themes that are reoccurring in the work coming out of the current student generation.

Bill Von Bank:

Have you had any in class with the students or has it from the start of the school year been all virtual?

Tom Fisher:

Since the pandemic began, it's been all remote. We had started the semester before the pandemic arrived. So I started the spring semester in person. And in fact, I remember telling my students, they were all leaving for spring break, I said, "Have a safe spring break. I'll see you the following week." We never came back.

Bill Von Bank:

You never came back?

Tom Fisher:

They went on spring break and we've been remote since. And I haven't been back in a classroom sense, although I've continued to teach a full load.

Bill Von Bank:

Do you miss it?

Tom Fisher:

I miss the students and the more informal conversations. I've learned to keep my zoom link open because some students like to hang around afterwards and we chat. So I've been trying to create that same experience. But on the other hand, I actually find there's some advantages to teaching remotely. For example, there's the kind of equity when we're all equal on the screen here. So I'm not in the front of the room and they're not this anonymous mass of students out in the auditorium, we're all the same size and we're all equal. And we're-

Bill Von Bank:

[inaudible 00:31:18] perspective.

Tom Fisher:

Yeah, exactly. And we're also in kind of unique environment's, everyone's in their own place. And so I actually remember the students' names better. I get to know them. They have more personality when they're not all sitting in a classroom, but each in their own personal space.

Bill Von Bank:

You host a podcast called the Post-Pandemic World and appropriately titled given our discussion today. Tell us more about your podcast, Tom.

Tom Fisher:

Well, the podcast is part of a year-long effort we've had at my center where we're looking at the impact of the pandemic on the built environment. And so I've been blogging about this. In fact, I'm right in the process of turning that blog into a book and we started a podcast based on the blog. And so the podcast really involves taking an issue and bringing in people to talk about that issue, be it transportation, housing, future of retail, future of the office. So we tend to focus on land use, transportation, zoning, building types, things like that. That's our area of expertise. And we've also been doing a webinar out of the college of design around the post pandemic world, where we've also been looking at the impact of the pandemic on apparel. The people seem to want different kinds of clothing than what we wanted before.

Tom Fisher:

There's much more interest in comfortable clothing and a much less of a focus on dressing up. And so we've been looking at all facets of the pandemic, and then we're just finishing a series of workshops that the McKnight Foundation funded, which is looking at how residential neighborhoods are going to change, how downtowns are going to change. We're doing a workshop on how transportation is going to change. And so these will all be put together in a publication that we'll be finishing and in a couple of months.

Bill Von Bank:

Great. And any title yet for the book or is that still to be determined?

Tom Fisher:

To be determined.

Bill Von Bank:

Okay. We'll check back. One final question for you, Tom, as you reflect on 2020, and look ahead to the new year, what inspires you as we work toward rebuilding our cities?

Tom Fisher:

Well, I think one of the interesting psychological impacts of the pandemic is it helped us realize how rapidly we can change. For example, I had colleagues who said, "Oh, universities, they'll never go to online learning." We'll always be face-to-face. And literally over spring break, the University of Minnesota went almost a hundred percent remote, right? And we've seen this in one industry after another, look at the healthcare industry. I mean, telehealth, which did exist just almost overnight, became a dominant mode of delivering health services. And it's gone on in one industry after another. And so I think that realization that we don't have to wait decades for slow, incremental change that we can decide to change and we can change quickly if we have the will to do so or the need to do so. And so as a result of that, I think that that has affected the way we see a lot of things.

Tom Fisher:

For example, let's take institutional racism, right? A problem that's been endemic in this country since its beginning, an issue that seemed to be chronic and slowly changing if changing at all. And all of a sudden triggered by things like the killing of George Floyd. We started to say, we can change this. We do not have to put up with this any longer. We're seeing that in all areas. I think the same thing is true with climate change as we're realizing, wait a minute, we can have dramatic effects on climate change simply by rethinking how much we drive around and other kinds of things that we're doing that pollute the atmosphere. And so to me, I'm optimistic around the idea that we're at a tipping point in the world right now where a lot of the things that we've talked about, but have had a hard time bringing into reality are all of a sudden seeming possible now.

Tom Fisher:

And of course, we're also seeing a lot of reaction against that, right? There are a lot of people who want to hold onto the past, who are afraid of this future. And we need leadership to help people not be so afraid because this is where we're going. I mean, we're not going backwards. The digital revolution is here and it's causing us to rethink almost everything that we do. We're not changing that. And so I'm excited about the future. I think that we're finally at a point where we can achieve rather quickly, a lot of the changes that have been discussed for decades.

Bill Von Bank:

Tom Fisher, some wonderful insights. Thank you for being our guest on Urban Evolution.

Tom Fisher:

Thank you Bill, this was fun.

Bill Von Bank:

More about the podcast and our guests can be found at urbanevolutionpodcast.com. Urban Evolution is a production of Destination Medical Center, economic development agency. Learn more at dmc.mn. Stay safe and be well.