
LEADING TRENDS

Does This Change Everything?



Maybe it has always been thus: when big, cataclysmic events happen seemingly from out of the blue it seems as if nothing will ever be the same again. Not that the coronavirus pandemic is entirely unexpected—we have long known that a global pandemic of some sort is possible, even likely—but, this one seems to have moved so rapidly and widely as to catch everyone unprepared (or maybe ill-prepared is a better phrase). The emotions are reminiscent of 9/11 in the United States, the global economic crisis in 2008, the 2004 tsunami in Thailand and the Indian Ocean, and Hurricane Katrina in

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New Orleans, but somehow this time feels different in that it affects the whole world at the same time, for the same reason, and with similar impacts.

After 9/11 and the 2004 tsunami, circumstances normalized fairly quickly for those whose lives were not upended directly by the events. One could argue that things have never been better, at least on an economic front, since 2008, as almost every stock exchange in the world has posted record highs. Even post-Katrina, New Orleans saw an influx of young adults from elsewhere in the world that has remade the complexion of the city

It is way too soon to judge the long-term impact of the novel coronavirus and COVID-19, the disease syndrome it causes, but it would be tempting to say that things will never be the same after this epic scale of social and economic disruption. Or will they? By mid-2021, will we be back in the air traveling between continents as before? Will restaurants and bars be as lively and busy as before, to say nothing of schools and playgrounds? Will sporting events resume their normal tempo, and will the interruption of 2020 seem like a blip rather than the chasm it seems at present?

Again, it is far too soon to say, but the Katrina sequelae may offer a better case example than either 9/11 or the 2008 economic meltdown. While extremely localized, Katrina's impact on New Orleans could be a better harbinger of the coronavirus impact on 21st Century life as we know it. On one level, life in New Orleans goes on much as it always has—bars and restaurants in the French

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Quarter are as busy as ever. But, on another level, a difference that will have a long-lasting impact is obvious: more than 175,000 black native New Orleanians left never to return post-hurricane. Much of the migration into the city after the storm has come from younger, white migrants from the northeastern U.S., making the city vibrate with new restaurants and gentrified neighborhoods, but forever changing its character and demographics. And, notably for private, independent schools, having very few children to enroll.

So, New Orleans survives—maybe even thrives—but is irrevocably changed. This is not to attach a valence of positive or negative to any of the changes in New Orleans, only to say

that on one level the city is thriving while on another it is certainly not the same. Maybe this is our future writ large once we all get done hunkering down.

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