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[The Strange Lives of Objects in the Coronavirus Era](#)

The pandemic has inspired a flurry of new and novel items — and given ordinary ones new meanings.

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Plastic bubbles that hover over restaurant tables. Rods for contactless elevator-button-pushing. Portable seats that attach to lampposts, for shoppers waiting outside crowd-controlled stores. Dresses with skirts that have a six-foot radius. Podlike enclosures to keep gym-goers separate. A plastic sleeve that enables hugging at nursing homes. Masks in every imaginable form.

A set of new objects has emerged in the last few months to address the new reality of illness, lockdown, social distancing and social protest. Some of these objects are wacky and unrealized — speculative concepts that may never see the light of day. Others, like cocktails-in-a-bag, thermometers and all manner of partitions, are already circulating widely. And some aren't new at all: familiar household items like bottles of Lysol and rolls of toilet paper, which have taken on new meaning and importance because of scarcity or sudden unusual needs.

“I’m thinking a lot about what these objects are going to say about the pandemic in the future,” said Anna Talley, a master’s student in the history of design at the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Royal College of Art. Talley and a fellow student, Fleur Elkerton, have compiled an expansive online archive called [Design in Quarantine](#). Some of these objects are whimsical, or a little ridiculous, like an ultra-large “distancing” crown distributed by a German Burger King in May. Others are the heartbreaking artifacts of illness and mass death, economic collapse and crisis.

“Objects can give us an insight into a time period that documents cannot,” said Alexandra Lord, chair of the medicine and science division at the Smithsonian’s [National Museum of American History](#), who is helping to lead the museum’s Covid-19 collecting task force. As at many museums, curators there are engaging in what’s called [rapid response collecting](#), trying to gather material and objects even as the crisis unfolds. The nature of the pandemic has made it difficult to gather physical objects, but Lord and her colleagues have solicited ideas and offers from the public. They are trying to determine what will be crucial to future historians and viewers, even as the crisis continues to unfold.

“We as historians like to have hindsight, but we already know certain objects like ventilators will be a crucial part of the story,” Lord said. Masks, too, have become [symbols of the crisis](#) in their myriad and already-evolving forms: hand-sewn, N95, high-fashion, reusable, disposable.

At the [New-York Historical Society](#), historians have been collecting since mid-March, trying to gather things that tell a specific story about the city’s experience. They began making a collecting wish list that included signs about store closures in different languages, bottles from distilleries that were converted into bottles for hand sanitizers, and the blanket of a baby born amid the pandemic.

“There’s a white polo shirt that the governor tends to wear when he’s been doing his daily press briefings,” Louise Mirrer, president and chief executive of the New-York Historical Society, said in May, when Gov. Andrew Cuomo was doing daily briefings. “We’d like to have that, and we will ask him for that.” (As of publication time, it remains on the wish list).

The New-York Historical Society is also seeking objects that illustrate the personal toll of the pandemic — some of which would be difficult to collect now. “There are some more sensitive objects that we’ll ask for later, like artifacts from people who have lost friends and relatives,” Mirrer said.

Some ordinary objects have transformed into artifacts, either because of the shadow of loss, or simply because of their newfound importance as the crisis continues to shift. Some of the early fads of the pandemic may already feel like relics of the past. “Things from April seem old already,” said Donna Braden, senior curator at the [Henry Ford Museum](#). “It was almost easier to identify those iconic objects early on, and now the crisis has become so fragmented and so pervasive.”

The protests in June also marked a significant change, and a major collecting event for history museums. The New-York Historical Society, for instance, has collected a mural depicting George Floyd by the artists Matt Adamson and Joaquin G that covered a boarded-up shoe store in Soho. They’ve also collected protest signs and posters.

Some objects exist at a kind overlap between the protests and the pandemic, records that tell two narratives at once. “At the Black Lives Matter protests, many people are carrying signs that reference the fact that Covid-19 is impacting communities of color disproportionately, and that this is all part of this bigger story about systemic racism in the U.S.,” Lord said.

Some of the objects with which we’ve become familiar throughout the pandemic have undergone changes or will have renewed meaning during reopenings. “Now there are also masks for kids who are going back to school, these Crayola masks that are one for every day, then you put them in a sealable package and wash them,” Braden said.

A number of the new designs and proposals might fall into the category of what the architecture critic Kate Wagner describes as “[coronagrifting](#)”: a trend defined by the

emergence of “cheap mockups of Covid-related design ‘solutions’” that are substanceless but garner attention on Instagram. Talley and Elkerton, of Design in Quarantine, are conscious that some of the more outlandish designs in their archive might fall into that category. “We’ve been asked a bit about including quite speculative and conceptual designs from design practices or designers that can’t be actualized and maybe are just responding to the pandemic to get the publicity,” Elkerton said. “For a while we were wondering, Are we actively promoting that by including these things? But we’re just trying to document what is happening in the design world, and the ‘coronagrifting’ projects are interesting in themselves.”

They’ve also become interested, Elkerton said, in “failed designs.” “As a historian, it’s often more interesting to find out why something doesn’t work or take hold than what does,” she said.

There is something both poignant and hopeful in these acts of documentation and collection, in trying to look back at our current crisis through the imagined lens of history. In collecting present objects as artifacts of the future, we’re imagining that future as a kind of afterward — a time and place where this is no longer ongoing, and we can look back.

As historians and curators begin to collect and document, many of us have become engaged in a kind of self-archiving: documenting lockdowns and sicknesses, saving newspaper articles and children’s art projects, building what amounts to pandemic collections. “I find it really interesting that people are becoming almost historians of their own lives,” Lord said.

We are by definition always living through history, but a crisis like this brings it into relief: We sense the significance of this time for future observers, and have the urge to preserve it.