

The Home Hub

The pandemic has brought the world into our homes which are now being converted into a unique economic, professional, emotional and familial space with different consequences. Is this forever?

BY SMITHA VERMA

Sometime in April, during the first phase of lockdown, fitness-obsessed Sandeep Mall asked his friend, a gym owner, to lend him some exercise equipment. Stuck at home with no gyms or trainers to go to, Mall thought of working out at home. Soon other family members joined him. By June, he had converted a large storage room in his two-storied house in Faridabad, Haryana, into a home gym. It was neatly stocked with cardio, strength and flexibility tools. Over a period of six months, he painstakingly put together a collection that included a rowing machine, spinning machine, dumbbells and plates, barbells, kettlebells, squat rack, pullup bar, and more. Though he spent ₹3.75 lakh on the entire shebang, in his words, he made an investment that can't be "quantified". "My parents are doing strength training to which they had no access before. When I coach them we also get to spend an hour together," says the 55-year-old entrepreneur.



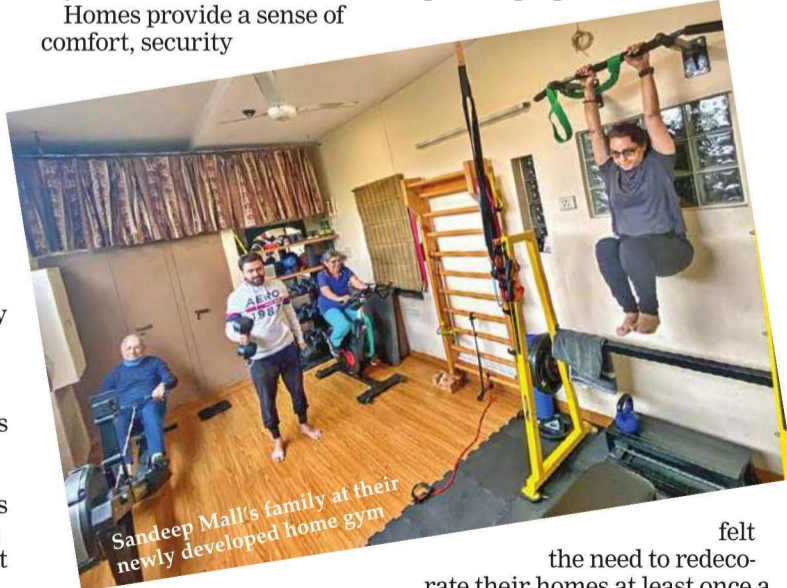
A rooftop in Begumpur neighbourhood in Hyderabad



While Mall was busy inside his home, Hyderabad-based photographer Madhu Gopal Rao felt the pandemic had "trapped" him inside his house. As the days of the lockdown turned into weeks, Rao ventured out to his terrace, perhaps for the first time in his life. What he saw from there led to a large-scale photographic exhibition for the award-winning photographer. He was taken aback by the sight of all the rooftops of his neighbourhood occupied by people engaged in various activities, from children playing to couples taking leisurely stroll. "These rooftops had become an extension of our homes. Our terrace offers us the familiarity of our homes as against the chaos of outside world," says Rao, whose project 'Rooftop' is being exhibited at the Indian Photo Festival, an ongoing photography event showcasing works from around the world. Seven months and 5,000 photographs later, the photographer believes rooftops are being reclaimed like never before. He noticed that people claimed their terraces every

evening with clockwork religiosity. "The space is a stress buster for them," Rao says.

Homes provide a sense of comfort, security



Sandeep Mall's family at their newly developed home gym

and ownership. Not just for Mall or Rao but for everyone. In the pre-Covid world, home was a place of leisure where spending quality time with loved ones wasn't a forced choice. However, this has changed now. A country-wide survey in November by

Bengaluru-based home solutions start-up Wakefit 'Dream Home' showed that 38 percent people

felt the need to redecorate their homes at least once a year, an indication of how focus on homes are expanding in the coronavirus-invaded world. Not surprising that post the first lockdown, sporting goods retailer Decathlon noted a 220 percent growth of fitness products. Amazon India recorded a 2.2X increase in the

fitness category with home gym sets, yoga mats and bands seeing maximum uptake.

As the era of sweatpants and work from home (WFH) stretches on, homes have transformed into a multifaceted hub.

RECLAIMING SPACES

Covid-19 cases are soaring, and a third wave is being talked about. "As we isolate at home, we become increasingly aware of how our interior spaces affect our moods, ability to work, and physical comfort. Covid-19 will definitely have a lasting impact on future design trends, which will continue beyond this crisis, permanently changing what we value, how and where we shop, live and work," predicts Kashyap Vadapalli, chief marketing officer and business head, Pepperfry, a home products marketplace.

Change is sweeping home settings, be it small apartments or palatial bungalows. Parul Mittal, director, Greenlam Industries, terms this "a disruptive moment" in the design space. "The lockdown phase paved the way for space allocation to gyms, office areas, online classes set-ups, kitchen gardens and hobby corners," she says. Mittal has a point.

In the last six months, Bengaluru-based food consultant Monika Manchanda has made several additions to her house. The sofa to relax has given way to work desks, ergonomic chairs and a bookshelf. "As we started spending more hours indoors, creating personal spaces in an existing home, became extremely important," says the popular food blogger. She and her 12-year-old son—who attends online classes—share their new workspace.

Today, everyone is around every hour of the day. Unquestionably, the worth attached to personal space has gone up. Designer and co-founder of Casa Padox, an upmarket interiors outlet in Delhi, Raseel Gujral puts the trend in



perspective. "People have realised the value of being at home more than ever before. Unfortunately, it took a pandemic to recognise it," says Gujral.

DIY HEADQUARTERS

Post the lockdown in March, the 'WFH' and 'online classes' phrase started catching up. Suddenly, the living room has become more action-oriented. "Small studio apartments and large houses alike have had to adapt to incorporate new functions. The way we look at these spaces is changing," says Subodh Mehta, senior vice-president, home furniture business, Godrej Interio. In March, the company released 'Work From Home' guide, that revealed the challenges and solutions for the modern day home-office setups.

Tinu Cheria, a Bengaluru-based communications professional, realised in the beginning of the lockdown that some amount of shopping was required if home was going to be an office, school as well as a recreation centre for the next few months. Soon a height-adjustable office table, few ergonomic chairs and plants were brought. "I also purchased a foot massager for comfort during prolonged work cycles," he says.

The market is booming with products for the WFH and 'school from home' category. "The sales for this range have jumped 15X (1,500 percent) compared to last year," says Mehta. Godrej Interio's new range includes couches and beds with platforms that would enable people to place their



Meet Me on Zoom

Before the virus hit, time spent with Instagram was projected to grow only at 1.5 percent in 2020. Now, Instagram has seen the strongest growth among all social networks, according to eMarketer—a 14 percent growth—amounting to three minutes of additional time spent by each user each day. Even if one isn't stepping out that hasn't stopped people from partying or getting 'Zoom-ready'. Birthday parties, festival dinners, pre-wedding parties have moved on to Zoom. Post-Diwali, Instagram and Facebook were filled with pictures of family reunions over Zoom—winning and dining together across time zones.



"People have settled into the rhythm of a new life. We are all on a survival mode."

—Seema Hingorany, clinical psychologist, Mumbai



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—Raseel Gujral, founder, Casa Padox, Delhi

laptops. Their Bay Work desk has hutch and a swivel arm for integrating with the bed or chair.

It was necessity that made Dr Parthasarathi, associate professor of Physics at the Maharaja Agrasen College, Delhi University, go shopping online. He utilised the first few weeks of the lockdown in setting up his virtual classroom at home. Besides multi-utility and easy-to-move-around furniture for his two kids, he picked up a tripod stand to fix his smartphone (camera) and a whiteboard.

Wakefit's survey noted that 39 percent of people spend most of their time at work-spaces at home. Around 32 percent have installed a workstation for themselves. "Given that the line between personal and professional lives have blurred, it is important to segment your living quarters in such a way that you have a space to unwind while creating sections for working productively during office hours at home," says Ankit Garg, CEO and co-founder, Wakefit.co. The company, which until now dealt with sleep solutions, forayed into the furniture segment in July.

Unmistakably, furniture stores are busy with new categories of products, to suit multifunctional homes. At Pepperfry, the sale of study tables and ergonomic chairs grew by 250 percent and 400 percent, respectively in August 2020, in comparison to pre-lockdown levels. "Currently, this category contrib-



Tinu Cherian standing and working at his height-adjustable table

Hydroponic farming has picked up. Earlier this month, Barton Breeze, a Gurgaon-based Hydroponic farming enterprise, unveiled indoor hydroponic kits that produce leafy vegetables, vine and fruiting plants, exotic herbs and medicinal plants in homes. With the surge in demand for their kits, they have introduced Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning-based methods on their web channel to help customers choose suitable kits. "Our business has increased by 4X. Customer queries are up by 200 percent," says Shivendra Singh, CEO and founder, Barton Breeze. Hydroponics use different material to nourish the roots of plants, and grow crops directly in nutrient-rich water.

FUNCTIONALITY AND AESTHETICS

Comfort and functionality are the key words now. As per a recent report by Anarock Property Consultants, people prefer larger and more functional homes. "With a new socially distant lifestyle

Functionality in clothing has also taken a preference with workers. Being inside meant more people spending on versatile comfort-wears and loungewear. "We witnessed a rise of 50 percent since the last year in the sale of comfort-wears and loungewear. People are increasingly choosing comfort in their stay at home routine," says Yogesh Kabra, founder of YXXX Apparels.

SURVIVE AND THRIVE

In many households, perhaps for the first time in a long time, many generations are under the same roof, round-the-clock. Hence it is not surprising that any uptick in family time will lead to both physical and mental alterations. "The isolation imposed by Covid-19 is unbearable for many. Much counselling went into keeping professional and personal lives together in people's homes during the initial phases of the lockdown," says Seema Hingorany, Mumbai-based clinical psychologist and trauma researcher. It wasn't easy for

people to manage online demands as well as the offline expectations.

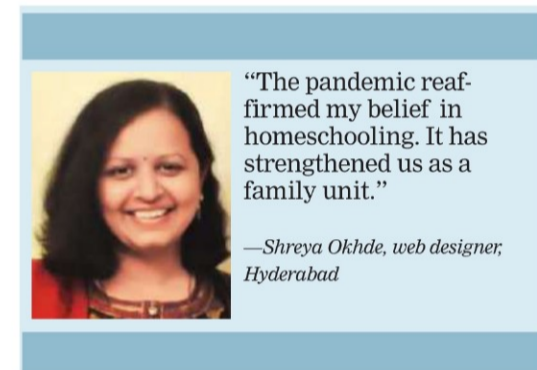
Shreya Okhde, a 33-year-old web designer from Hyderabad, would know. At the start of the lockdown, she found herself at an unprepared threshold of change. The pandemic imposed new



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—Parul Mittal, Director, Greenlam Industries

LEAD



"The pandemic reaffirmed my belief in homeschooling. It has strengthened us as a family unit."

—Shreya Okhde, web designer, Hyderabad

cleaner), an instapot (smart electric pressure cooker) and a few additional appliances to make life easier during the lockdown," she says. She has spent

over a lakh on her home since March. "We have optimised our home network with two broadband, better modems and wireless repeaters. We got Safe Kids software for my son," she adds.

It is a parental-control software that monitors computers, tablets and smartphones to keep a watch on the child's online habits. Home theatres are another big addition. "If you calculate the cost associated with going to the movies for a large family like ours, in these last eight months we have recovered the investment," admits Mall, who installed a home theatre earlier this year. Bishalakh Ghosh, a homemaker from Delhi, can't stop raving about her newly converted 'recreational room'. The family has installed a 55-inch smart-TV in the room. "It's our escape room, where we bond as a family," she says. It is used for teleconsultation by her husband—a doctor, while her son, who is a design student, uses it for his daylong

seminars. In the evenings, the family gets together to catch up on a web series or two. To cater to more such families, there are service providers who offer pandemic-specific tech solutions for homes. Coworking space provider Awfis is one such company. In May, it launched a comprehensive 'Awfis@Home' solution to replicate the office work environment at home. "According to our recent survey, 71 percent of employees would feel successful if they had a dedicated work area at home. We are addressing this need," says

with disposable income are using the money to make their homes 'Zoom ready'. The pandemic has brought into focus areas that weren't paid enough attention earlier—large windows, balconies, rooftops, foyer space and so on. "Balconies and decks have re-emerged as popular family spaces," says Mehta of Godrej Interio. Social media is replete with posts of balconies-turned-kitchen gardens. "My wife expanded her kitchen garden dur-

emerging, open spaces and utility zones embracing the current WFH scenario are emerging as strong factors influencing the homebuyer's decision. We have witnessed an upsurge in such queries in the past few months," says KT Jithendran, CEO, Birla Estates. The company's inaugural project in Gurgaon, is low-density development with independent floors, separate back lawns for every plot, and more distance than usual between two floor developments, perhaps symbolic of social distancing. A recent KPMG report concludes that fluid design principles in the structural framework of houses will be the norm in future residential projects. "The design has to allow easy transformation of spaces for varied needs," says Jithendran.

As people spend long hours at home, they start noticing things.

Two months ago when Welspun Flooring launched a first-of-its-kind anti-viral flooring range, the company was looking to address the overlooked but high interaction areas in a house like floors and tiles. "While people are coping with the new normal, they will also invest a significant amount in renovating their houses to enhance safety and hygiene," says Mahesh Shah, CEO, domestic business, Welspun Flooring. Welspun claims that their flooring eradicates viruses by 99.68 percent.

Laminates from Greenlam Industries is another case in point. The company, which has antibacterial, anti-fungal laminates, recently added anti-virus to the list. It claims to kill up to 99.99 percent viruses on the surface. "A major consumer trend we observed is a growing demand for a dedicated home workstation or study desk set-up made with anti-bacterial and anti-virus laminates and compacts," Mittal claims.

demands on her after starting to homeschool her two children (seven and four years of age) about a year back. Her best laid plans for travel and home schedules for kids went awry. "Our major drawback is that we are highly dependent on learning from society and during travel. We had planned four trips within India and one trip abroad this year; all of which had to be cancelled," she says. But, slowly, Okhde learnt to work around the situation. Her first move was to convert the guest bedroom into a home office. The family of four divided household chores between them. Okhde tried to infuse a fun element in every activity from dusting to gardening, peeling vegetables to folding clothes. She has not just survived but thrived to tell the tale. "The pandemic strengthened us as a family unit," she says.

But not all families were as lucky. Several media reports indicate that divorce rates, domestic violence, anxiety-induced disorders and teen trauma have increased during this period. But as workplaces and public places started opening up, things started settling down. "We are all in survival mode," Hingorany says.

From the survival of the fittest, it is now the survival of the calmest.

As for the Mall household, pandemic was the first time in many years, when the entire family of four generations was under one roof for so many months at a stretch. They set up everything, that they possibly looked for outside, inside their home. "Apart from travelling and meeting friends, I am not missing anything. Our home is now equipped with everything we love," Mall explains with a tinge of pride.

While it's too early to predict to the extent to which Covid-19 will permanently alter homes, for now, people have moved from 'at home' to being 'at peace with home'. All roads, lead to home.

utes about 25 percent to the overall sales volume, up from about 10 percent prior to the lockdown," says Vadapalli.

TECH AT TASK

According to a report by Deloitte-Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), the lockdown period accelerated India's rapid pace of broadband penetration and data consumption. As per the report, the July-September 2020 quarterly results of a leading telco indicated 15 times increase in broadband connections as compared to the same quarter last year. Prof Parthasarathi, who has started building an in-house library, with over 800 books, says, "I have also put together a WhatsApp group where I share links and articles with my colleagues and students. I use my e-book membership with the University Grants Commission to download books and share in my peer group." Also, the family picked up several gadgets such as noise cancelling headphones.

Convenience-led purchases dominated sales of goods at home. So front-load washing machines, food processors, microwaves, and laptops saw high sales. According to a report by techARC, a research and consultancy outfit, the shipments of smart speakers with display rose by 87 percent in the quarter ending September as compared to the previous quarter. Many like Manchanda picked up smart gadgets when the lockdown was extended. "We bought a Roomba (smart vacuum

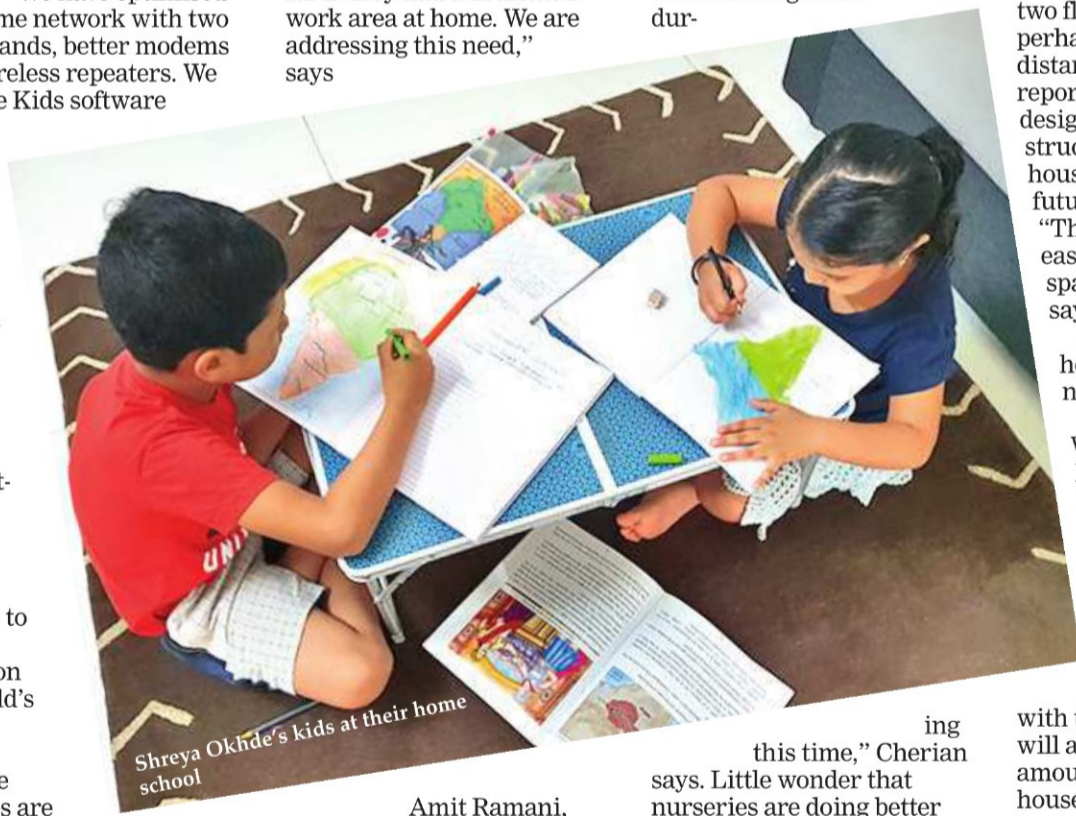
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THE CHILL CORNER

As most frequent travellers and luxury lovers spend countless hours inside their homes, some are recreating mini luxuries at home. Ghosh has added a Jacuzzi and a fish pond in her home. "With so much happening around outside, sometimes all you want to do is, put your toes in a hot tub or indulge in aquascaping," Ghosh says. With limited outings, zero travel options and no reason to splurge on clothes, people

ing this time," Cherian says. Little wonder that nurseries are doing better business under the pandemic. People are ready to spend anywhere between ₹10,000 and ₹50,000 a month on plants. Shaan Lalwani, horticulturist and director of the Mumbai-based Vriksha Nursery, admits that the number of customers buying exotic plants during this time is high. His business is up by 40 percent, especially the online consultations and orders. "Even students have become collectors by saving up their pocket money to buy exotic plants, some even as expensive as ₹6,000," he says. Bonsais are much in demand, costing anywhere between ₹250 and a few lakhs.



Shreya Okhde's kids at their home school



Font-load washing machines grew 5.6% in volume over the year-ago period



Microwave ovens reported a 21.4% growth



Food processors grew 8.6%



Volume growth for mobile computing or laptops stood at 22%

