



By [Kelly Franznick](#)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been fascinating to see the ways this crisis has given people permission to innovate and experiment. Despite the hardships and tragic human loss, society has pushed forward. One opportunity the pandemic has offered us as user experience and service designers has been a better understanding of how people in the 21st Century get fast-food meals. Today, there are few restaurant dining options besides take-out meals. So we've begun to examine the processes and mechanisms behind that American icon, the drive-thru.

This article expands on a recent online discussion with two of my colleagues: *The Future Meets the Drive-Thru*. It is about the past, present, and future of the drive-thru, including service design and how the fast-food industry will prepare and deliver food in a post-COVID world.

My collaborators

Flavia Bisi

[Flavia Bisi](#) is a designer and innovator—an architect who views sustainability as the underlying premise of what she does. She founded [Life Positive Design](#) and uses her expertise to work across multiple entities and players worldwide. Bisi works with clients' specified brand expectations to create beneficial and profitable outcomes.

Chuck Pelly

[Chuck Pelly](#) has spent 45 years in the design industry and is a well-regarded expert on product, seating, transportation, and automotive design. He launched and is the former President of Designworks/USA. Pelly is currently Chief Creative Officer of [Intersection-Inc](#), a human-centered design consultancy, and The Design Academy, its educational partner.

The drive-thru past

In 1948, an enterprising California Hamburger joint called In-N-Out Burger became the first drive-thru hamburger stand in California. And, unlike the several drive-in or drive-up restaurants around the country at the time, In-N-Out Burger was just that: stop, order your food, pick it up at the window, and be on your way. American restaurant design would never be the same. It did not take long for the fast-food industry to emerge, with a sequence of new restaurants led by McDonald's. They would build their outlets using what eventually became fast-food design—marked by unprecedented levels of efficiency. These new eating establishments had indoor seating and counter service, but their mainstays gradually became their drive-thru operations. McDonald's had its ubiquitous drive-thru windows in place by the mid-1970s. However, Wendy's and Jack-in-the-Box had already started the practice several years earlier. Today, of course, drive-thrus are in virtually every community in North America.

The drive-thru today

The routines of daily life continued apace—including regular trips to a fast-food drive-thru. Then, in early 2020, everything changed. Nobody expected a pandemic—that, we know. But, as people's modern-day survival instincts kick in, we see new behaviors and practices. These show human resourcefulness and adaptability in a time of upheaval. If that means fast-food in a bag and delivered awkwardly through a car window, at least that's something familiar. During the pandemic, some people have been motivated to eat a nearly constant drive-thru diet.

They do this because of factors such as:

- Speed and convenience
- Safe, no-contact dining (without needing to cook at home)
- The desire for food that's both tasty and trustworthy (and occasionally healthy)
- The comfort and security of the routine

Remember, many fast-food patrons are working adults. Several are on the front lines of the health crisis, and several more (sometimes the same people) have children to teach and care for at home. So, the sense of overwhelm is the momentum driving our society into the future. When it comes to restaurant design, like everything else, no one is sure whether "future" means minutes or decades from the present instant. We believe this momentum results partly from people like us who see a global crisis as a call for sorely needed business innovations.

The drive-thru future

Those of us on the panel believe fast-food service designers are only beginning to tap the numerous new technologies and innovations we seem to have at our fingertips today.

They include:

- Artificial intelligence
- Robots
- Digital signage
- Airport technology
- Delivery drones
- Predictive time and motion data

It isn't just restaurants where receiving products or services in our vehicles has become an expectation. The only way people have been able to go out to a movie during the pandemic has been by going to one of the few remaining drive-in movie theaters. Perhaps this longstanding phenomenon will be updated to replace today's germ-soaked mall multiplexes. Some wedding and graduation ceremonies have been conducted with "drive-thru" receiving lines. Food pantries are also acting as drive-thrus, as their clients move through lines of cars to pick up donated groceries. And even much COVID-19 testing is happening on a drive-thru basis. It seems that, in the future, many types of businesses will need to move to drive-thru (or drive-up or drive-in) service to flourish.

Tomorrow's sustainable, equitable, and convenient drive-thru

We must pause for a moment here at the end to think about how smog started to clear, and wildlife began to appear in human spaces in the early months of the current crisis. How will we be able to manage a culture with even more car usage, though? As well, there is the issue of fair access for those who, for whatever reason, do not own or drive cars.

As our work continues, we grapple with concerns like these in the context of new and improving smart technologies. These include drones and other ways of getting fast-food orders to people who want them. Meanwhile, auto manufacturers are replacing fossil fuels with clean energy sources like electricity. So the future drive-thru might be something quite different from what it is today. Those of us who work in service design are proud to be future planners with world-transforming ideas and projects.

Stay tuned

I'd like to thank my collaborators [Flavia Bisi](#) and [Chuck Pelly](#). I look forward to what our collaboration in this space may hold for the future. You can view a recording of our presentation at [San Diego Design Week 2020](#) below: