Rethinking Urban Planning in a Post COVID World

Is COVID-19 pushing urban planners to think aloud about redesigning more resilient cities?
Each city is trying hard and its best to cope with COVID-19 implications. The urban buzz is paused, reducing economic productivity, sociability, and mobility. The pandemic has exposed the vulnerability of the cities—the readiness and preparedness of each city in dealing with pressures of healthcare, economy, and climate is loud and clear in everyday headlines.

It has been understood from history (epidemics striking before including SARS, MERS, Ebola, bird flu, swine flu) that over crowdedness and globalization have strong influences on the spread of infectious diseases. In 2018, the United Nations projected that by 2050, 68% of the population will live in urban areas. However, with the pandemic, there have been significant new patterns in urban life. With remote working becoming a new normal, how the cities will shape up in near future is something we are waiting to understand. But these changes are calling in urban planners to bring a new perspective on features that promote a healthy and safer neighborhood.

COVID-19 has shown that today’s cities weren’t designed to cope up with infectious diseases. As each crisis brings unprecedentedness along with it, how do we design the future cities to adapt to them?

There were already discussions on building sustainable and resilient cities. But post-COVID-19, it is likely that the lens of health will probably have to be zoomed a bit more. The partnership of public health and design needs to get stronger. The question is: how can we build an environment that can be used to control epi/pandemic spread?

Let’s see some interesting examples from the history:

1. In the 19th century, the cholera outbreak in London was found to be caused by drinking contaminated water. Because of this finding, a sanitary reform movement happened that led to wider and smoother streets to install underground pipe systems.

2. During the civil war in the 19th century, a sanitary officer in New York City fought for the creation of open spaces (build Central Park) and advocated the importance of good sanitation for the benefit of the citizens.

What we also need today is to listen to our cities. What do they really need? We cannot fully control the population/urbanization, but we can control the provision of a better infrastructure. COVID-19 has certainly triggered new patterns in urban life.

Remote working — With the majority of the world in some form of lockdown, many organizations could operate efficiently after embracing a work from home culture—this trend is likely to impact office design, office space demand, transport, and further city design. Many organizations are now beginning to think if and how this concept can become some form of strategy.

Suburban revival — We have seen how flexible working, virtual connection, and less travel proved to benefit. If this trend stays for long, the suburbs could no longer be just residential places and there could be potential to have more mixed-use development with home offices. If most people will work from home, questions about why we live in the city might come up soon.
• **Social behavior** — With new trends emerging in how we work and live, social behaviors are taking a change. We do see mental health and loneliness increasing. While at the same time, we are also connecting with each other more personally. The meetings are being done in home environments. We are aware that built infrastructure can have an impact on social behaviors, and hence all these signs are crucial in designing new spaces.

• **Active transport** — If the spotlight on bikes and walkability continues, the cities would need a proper infrastructure. Currently, many cities have engaged in redesigning for aligning themselves with this trend.

• **E-commerce** — Online retail has not just saved a part of the sector, but also shaped consumer habits that have a higher potential of long-lasting effect. In line with this, more logistics hubs and stores can potentially arise.

• **Virtual mobility** — This has gone beyond the office meetings. Big international events/political meetings/online initiatives by museums and art galleries—it is all happening virtually. The thought that the purpose of the meeting can be solved using technology is going to impact many related sectors.
Whether these patterns will stay short term or for long, the urban planners will start rethinking about designing more safe, sustainable, and resilient spaces. An awareness on planning for crisis is something that will take a lot of attention now.
The pandemic sharply disrupted our everyday lives—how we work, study, shop, hang out, and play. As we emerge from the shutdown and move into recovery, we are questioning which changes will “snap back” to how they were before, and which trends will linger and shape a different future for our built environment.

In Australia and New Zealand, we have long derided our suburban sprawl and sought a more compact, higher density, urban form. But just as previous health events contributed to the rise of the Garden Suburb movement over a century ago, this pandemic has left many of us cherishing our suburban space—back gardens with veggie patches and trampolines, the new status symbols of envy. Coffee from the rediscovered neighborhood milk bar and cycle ride around the local park are strangely satisfying experiences.

The 30-minute city policies are starting to make sense. We had spoken in theory of retiming, remoding, rerouting, or reconsidering our peak hour journeys—but it all seemed too difficult in practice. Now, the realized flexibility of skipping the daily commute or spending more time with family/friends/flatmates is hard to let go of.

The yearning desire for air, fresh air, free from bushfire smoke or unseen pollutants, reinvigorates our commitment to living in a cleaner environment.

As planning professionals, we will support measures that reactivate our public places and local economies. Whilst we hope social isolation practises can quickly fade, we expect design resilience to future events will be highly valued. And we anticipate the desire for polycentric transit-orientated city forms that feel spacious but are also sustainable and locally vibrant, with healthy streets and travel choices for all, will remain central to our urban vision.

**Mary Haverland**
TECHNICAL EXECUTIVE, PLANNING AND MOBILITY, WSP IN AUSTRALIA
Map Sources

SUBURBAN REVIVAL
JUNE 3, 2020
Revival of US suburbs during the lockdown (Press Reader)

REDESIGNING STREETS
US
MAY 7, 2020
Need more outdoor public space? Maybe cities already have it (City Lab)

ACCELERATED TECHNOLOGY
SOUTH KOREA
APRIL 23, 2020
Test, trace, contain: how South Korea flattened its coronavirus curve (The Guardian)

ADAPTIVE REUSE
US AND UK
APRIL 22, 2020
Past pandemics changed the design of cities. Six ways COVID-19 could do the same (Los Angeles Times)

NEW ZEALAND
APRIL 13, 2020
New Zealand first country to fund pop-up bike lanes, widened sidewalks during lockdown (Forbes)

AMSTERDAM
APRIL 8, 2020
Amsterdam to embrace ‘doughnut’ model to mend post-coronavirus economy (The Guardian)

CANADA
APRIL 1, 2020
Ontario, B.C., Quebec begin building makeshift hospitals in preparation for rise in COVID-19 patients (The Globe and Mail)

SWEDEN
MARCH 22, 2020
The external hospital at the Stockholm Fair is being closed down (Stockholmsmassan)

AUSTRIA
MARCH 14, 2020
Large exhibition hall transformed into temporary hospital for coronavirus patients in Austria (Xinhua News)

REBUILDING PLANS
PARIS
FEBRUARY 18, 2020
Paris Mayor: It’s time for a ’15-Minute City’ (City Lab)
Other Sources

JUNE 8, 2020
OPENBOX offers five innovative design solutions for the City of the Future Introducing an urban development concept for the "Next Normal" (PR Newswire)

JUNE 8, 2020
Density can work post COVID-19 with good urban planning (Policy Option)

JUNE 7, 2020
After Covid we're going to need a serious urban regeneration plan (The Guardian)

MAY 28, 2020
Planners look at ways to use city parks safely in pandemic; Possible solutions include putting outlines on grass, converting parking lots (Press Reader)

MAY 24, 2020
Will Covid-19 show us how to design better cities? (The Guardian)

MAY 20, 2020
The implications of COVID-19 for vulnerable populations (McKinsey)

APRIL 10, 2020
How will COVID-19 affect urban planning? (The City Fix)
WSP is one of the world's leading professional services consulting firms. We are dedicated to our local communities and propelled by international brainpower. We are technical experts and strategic advisors including engineers, technicians, scientists, architects, planners, surveyors and environmental specialists, as well as other design, program and construction management professionals. We design lasting solutions in the Transportation & Infrastructure, Property & Buildings, Environment, Power & Energy, Resources and Industry sectors, as well as offering strategic advisory services. Our talented people around the globe engineer projects that will help societies grow for lifetimes to come.