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## Viewpoint

# Towards resilient cities that care: imagining more equitable and sustainable urban futures after the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended the basic premises of the economic system as we know it. If this pandemic successfully disrupted our ordinary days under capitalism, it should also upend how we imagine the role of our cities. As cities around the world plan to recover from this pandemic, there will be a rise in value-laden questions around what kind of collective values communities intend to pursue. A post-disaster context often presents an occasion to ask ourselves what we truly value, what we are willing to preserve and what we are willing to forgo. In Christchurch, in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake in 2011, citizens were given a chance to discuss what buildings and city infrastructure they considered to be essential and valuable enough to be rebuilt and restored (Gjerde, 2017). The post-COVID-19 condition may offer a similar moment of reflection. Here are a few embryonic ideas on how cities may harness this moment to instil their visions towards more equitable, sustainable and resilient urban futures.

### **Cities should commit themselves to addressing homelessness**

The sheer scope of this global pandemic's impacts on our livelihoods made it clear that economic freedom alone 'would not know how to find its human balance without public action which controls financial feudalism and serves as a democratic guide and protection for all' (Joffrin, 2020). In short, this crisis has reminded us that the role of government matters. From the images of homeless people sleeping sparsely in the parking lots of Las Vegas (to abide by social distancing) (Levin, 2020) to the stories of Detroit's African American communities disproportionately affected by the virus (Wallace-Wells, 2020), media coverage of the current crisis is definitely conjuring 'the mood' in our society to think more progressively about social welfare systems and safety nets.

As 'quarantining' or 'staying home' becomes the social norm or even a moral obligation to protect oneself and others, what becomes clear is the brutality of today's unequal world that closes its eyes to those who sleep in open air. Recently, in attempts to slow the spread of COVID-19, cities in Australia (Perth, Adelaide) and around

the world (New Orleans, San Antonio and Philadelphia in the US; Paris and Lille in France) have embarked on providing emergency accommodation to homeless peoples by utilising existing vacancies in hotels. With universal income now becoming more widely accepted as a viable policy agenda – as compared to mainstream politics’ dismissal of it as a ‘socialist’ turn – can cities also harness the momentum of this new condition to validate and proclaim the importance of creating more inclusive urban futures? That can begin with assuring the existence of safe shelter for all, which can also be pragmatically beneficial in preparation for future pandemics.

To that end, cities should actively articulate how addressing homelessness is not just a charity act (e.g. ‘social services’), but a *necessary collective goal* to assure the long-term resilience and sustainability of the urban society we jointly inhabit. We are ultimately all connected through the air we breathe, the water we flush, the surfaces we touch. No one can escape these material webs of human existence, which manifest more vividly in urban contexts. Ending chronic homelessness is the very first step for cities to link the everyday needs of people with the long-term stability of urban systems. Cities can achieve this by reorganising the allocation of public funds and highlighting the economic importance of public services. First, they can redirect the budgets assigned to ‘public health/safety/well-being’ towards ramping up quality public-housing units. Cities often use these ‘public-health’ funds for the ‘economic revitalisation’ of certain areas, but they should make sure that such ‘revitalisation’ prioritises people’s right to housing *over* short-term investment windfalls. Second, cities can actively leverage the taxation policy and regulation on new developments to ensure that a good portion of their capital gains is directed to the betterment of city society. These capital gains are simply not possible without the general health and safety of people at a city scale and beyond – rendered possible by the existence of public services such as housing assistance. Cities should tally up these often uncalculated values of government services, and demand that developers pay for building more a stable and equitable society – which they will economically benefit from. In doing so, cities should also act in solidarity with nearby suburbs and localities to make regionally consistent interventions on market-driven urbanisation.

## **Cities should care for those who are neglected by the higher levels of government**

The COVID-19 pandemic tangibly reminds us of the fact that our own well-being can never be independent from that of others; your privileged position may grant your own healthcare coverage, but unless everyone has equal access to healthcare, you will never be free from the risk of contracting the virus. This circular aspect of the virus has been particularly well exhibited in Singapore, where a lack of care for migrant workers (living in cramped dormitories) has begun to directly affect the lives

of the most affluent. In the midst of this pandemic, most now agree more unequivocally than at other times, how much society relies on the services of people working in grocery and food provision, the delivery and transport sectors and waste-management operations. This certainly points to a shared responsibility to care for essential workers to whom we owe our health and our access to the conveniences of modern life that we take for granted.

To take on such a responsibility, cities should actively look out for the needs of community members who are falling through the cracks of the existing system. In fact, this is profoundly intertwined with assuring the continuity of city functions. The poor and vulnerable are more likely to be at the front line of city operations; in today's era of a globalised economy and workforce, the very metabolism of cities is often powered by immigrant and other minority workers (Del Real, 2020). In this context, a 'caring' city would mobilise its political power and resources to especially assist those whose rights and interests have been neglected by the higher levels of government.

In Chicago, where immigrants make up more than one-fifth of the population, Mayor Lori Lightfoot signed an executive order to ensure that refugee and immigrant communities have equal access to city benefits and services, including COVID-19 special housing grants and economic assistance programmes (City of Chicago, 2020). In Melbourne, which is home to 200,000 overseas students, city councillors put together a city-wide motion to provide financial and career support to international students who have been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Acknowledging the fact that the city relies upon the labour and economic vibrancy injected into it by the students, on 8 April 2020 the Melbourne City Council became the first local government in Australia to pledge financial support for international students (Topsfield, 2020). If this health crisis can remind people about how humans are all, in fact, 'in the same boat', perhaps it also suggests an opportunity for cities and neighbourhoods to further care for and support their community members who exist as actual faces and persons in each of our local grids, rather than allow them to blend into dismissible statistical numbers and dots.

## **Cities should respond to feedback from nature via their physical forms**

In addition to extreme climate events – such as the severe bushfire season in Australia this year – the coronavirus helps us formulate a collective dialogue around the fragility of human survival, as well as our utter dependency on non-human surroundings. These moments testify to how our neglect of the long-term environmental consequences of extractive logics *will* eventually come back to us as a boomerang that directly affects our socio-economic lives in the 'here and now'. This realisation has the capacity to bring forward the pro-environmental initiatives that are not just for

the sake of ‘nature’, but also for the sake of our own survival; since, ‘After all, the life that is worth preserving, even when considered exclusively human, is connected to nonhuman life in essential ways’ (Butler, 2011).

While there have been encouraging debates on considering this global health crisis as a springboard to garner wider attention to the global climate crisis (Latour, 2020a; 2020b), there have also been reactions where environmental issues are further shrugged off in the name of ‘economic development’. In the US, the Environment Protection Agency (EPA) has recently rolled back clean-car regulations (e.g. fuel-efficiency rules) that aimed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In Europe, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a resurgence of economy-first arguments that attempt to postpone the implementation of environmental regulations (Erlanger, 2020, 8). In the world of post-COVID-19, would cities need to choose between ‘sustainability’ and ‘economic development’?

John Dewey, in *Experience and Nature* (1925), suggested that we should consider nature as a continuously evolving, breathing body-entity that is always in conversation with humans’ efforts to generate intellectual knowledge. Darkness calls for light, and deficiency breeds the desire for invention. According to Dewey, any kind of human intervention is never a finite solution that dissolves our relationship with nature once and for all (as in, we ‘conquered’ nature); rather, it is always engaged in a constant cycle of giving and receiving feedback to/from nature. In other words, we might study nature and implement interventions according to our needs, but we are ultimately a part of nature, with whom we are constantly in the mode of interacting (aren’t we breathing air in and out at this very moment?). If we did something wrong, and nature sent us signals that there was something wrong, it is only natural that we respond to that feedback: we do not defend nature; we are nature that protects itself.

Planning, in the end, is the ultimate crystallisation of physical human intervention that directly converses with the natural world. Cities can capitalise on this aspect of their agency to radically reshape and restructure their form in a way that takes account of the feedback from nature. In Amsterdam, in response to the COVID-19 crisis, the city is expediting new plans to halve material use by 2030 and achieve a full circular economy by 2050. Amsterdam’s initiative professes how it can be a logical or ‘life-saving’ choice that we produce food and energy closer to the places we inhabit, lowering our energy consumption and predation on ecosystem resources – which will eventually render them more resilient in the face of catastrophic events. Milan, as the city reopens after a vigorous attack from the virus, has announced a set of city-wide actions that can radically curb air pollution and congestion – via introducing new cycle lanes, speed limits on private vehicles and pedestrian- and cyclist-priority streets. Other European cities (Paris, Brussels, London) followed suit, seeing this as a unique opportunity to advance green policy goals (McAuley and Spolar, 2020).

The post-COVID-19 condition may grant new impetus for cities to concoct more sustainable and resilient urban landscapes. That can include enhanced appreciation of our access to urban oases or public green spaces, or developing neighbourhood-driven economies (via supporting local groceries or eateries) that reduce the need for unnecessary travel. Cities can more systematically orchestrate such initiatives at a scale that oversees different compartments in place. First, they should apply flexible land use on on-street parking sites, which can be redesigned and reinvented as green space or pedestrian-friendly areas. Second, they should reserve sufficient road space for micro-mobility devices (e.g. bikes and scooters); further, they should also make sure that these spaces are well connected throughout the city. Third, they should support community development organisations and neighbourhood-serving local businesses, creating little pockets of compact areas that cultivate place-based cohesion. Ensuring the socio-economic health of these neighbourhood subsystems can render the city-wide system more resilient in times of crisis, not only in terms of social support but also in terms of reducing car dependency.

### **Cities should use a network approach to managing and scaling up urban greening**

Simply planting more trees is not enough; cities should track and trace green spaces, their maintenance and their connectivity across different locations to make sure that they are evenly distributed. Connected *and* evenly distributed green areas not only help a larger-scale urban form to be resilient in times of natural hazards (e.g. turning flood-prone areas into parks), but also ensure equal public access to open green spaces. Finally, cities should actively intertwine their ‘pro-environment projects’ with utility infrastructure, such as energy, waste, water and sewage (EWWS) systems. Using green infrastructure networks to manage stormwater run-off is one example (e.g. Philadelphia’s Green City, Clean Waters programme), where what we do ‘for the environment’ is directly connected to our everyday life. Green stormwater infrastructure not only provides more green space that people can enjoy, but also mitigates flood hazards that can threaten our homes. Establishing a metropolitan-wide waste management plan (e.g. Wellington’s Waste Minimisation Plan) is another good example, where localities and non-profit organisations work together not only to minimise the environmental impacts of landfill, but also to deliver cost-effective ways of collecting and treating solid waste. Planners can pay more attention to the network design and deployment of everyday infrastructure, to effectively place human settlements in concert with the functioning of environmental systems at a city-wide scale.

## Concluding thoughts

History has shown that, in the aftermath of a disaster, there is a window of opportunity through which planning interventions can shape the long-term future of our cities. This was true for rebuilding Constitución, Chile, where the earthquake in 2010 became not only an occasion to value citizen input in housing plans (Comerio, 2014), but also an opportunity to rethink its relationship with the surrounding natural world (Long, 2015). This pandemic crisis will be no exception; in the months to come, it will urge cities around the world to pause and re-examine their core community values, as well as to reflect on how to advance them with changing public sentiments around what truly matters. During this critical momentary juncture, it is my hope that city governments will develop key frameworks and visions that propose a better ‘new normal’ after the crisis. A truly resilient city is a city that takes care of its people and its natural surroundings – because it engraves the circular aspects of urban governance on its heart.

## Author’s note

This manuscript was a seed project written in May 2020, and I have ended up developing more theoretical arguments using this writing. A longer version of this manuscript was published in *Planning Theory* as a personal essay, entitled as ‘A manifesto for planning after the coronavirus: towards planning of care’ (Jon, 2020).

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