

COVID-19: An update since our last note

This note considers the impact of the pandemic on our cities, and how they might change in response.

Should we rethink cities?

By concentrating resources in one place, cities become hubs of efficiency, innovation and economic growth. Urbanisation has been one of the defining trends of our era: the percentage of the world's population living in cities is expected to increase from the current 55% to 68% by 2050. Pandemics have, however, shaped our cities for centuries, and it is likely that Covid-19 will also impact on urban designs into the future. While it seems unlikely that cities will lose their appeal anytime soon, experts believe the cities of the future will need to be more resilient and engineered with future pandemics in mind.

Getting to grips with the essence of city living

Densification might be a fundamental driver of urban growth and success, but it's not inherently easily compatible with the need to socially distance. When lockdowns were introduced around the globe in response to the pandemic to contain its spread, millions of urban individuals found their individual freedom suddenly restricted. Many aspects of city living were thrown into sharp relief and people suddenly had cause to re-evaluate decisions, and trade-offs, they had largely taken for granted:

- Early lockdowns saw reduced car use, which helped to curb air pollution, making our impact on the environment clear.
- Commuters sought alternatives to crowded public transport, leading to a boom in alternative transportation methods.
- Lockdowns nullified many of the drawbacks of city living, with restaurants, theatres and other sources of urban entertainment closing.
- Work from home suddenly became acceptable for many skilled/office workers, but many workers realised their cramped urban confines aren't optimal for this.
- Lockdowns highlighted unequal access to green and shared spaces, and other flaws in urban design.

The pandemic has shown it may be time to rethink how we design our cities. This is especially the case since climate change may not only lead to more frequent natural disasters, but also lead to more frequent pandemics due to habitat destruction, for example.

It's not about urban vs. rural

Urbanisation has been with us for many years, and it seems unlikely that the pandemic will lead to its reversal. While it is true that many people no longer need to live in urban centres (as they can work from home), most people are swapping larger urban centres for smaller ones, rather than for truly rural settings. Thus, the pandemic may actually cause some smaller urban centres to become bigger, while the growth of those that have been historically large may slow down. There are clear benefits to city living, and we expect people will continue to opt for the benefits cities have to offer. The challenge is rather to make cities better: more resilient, flexible and sustainable.

The death of the commute?

We previously highlighted that [the impact of the pandemic has not been evenly distributed](#), and that better educated, better paid workers are more likely to be able to work remotely. For those who can work remotely, however, the pandemic quickly underscored the inadequacy of their current housing. Due to the premium on space in especially city centres, city apartments are often designed for compact living. Being forced to spend considerable amounts of time in tiny spaces, and the prospect of having to be in the office less often, has prompted many to consider living further from the city centre. Many of those who are not considering moving, are exploring solutions to optimise the available spaces, or those in settings with space to expand are opting for home renovations if they can afford it.

Mixing it up

At the same time, fewer people in the office has meant that companies can reconsider how much space they need. On the one hand, the spectre of large tracts of urban office space standing empty prompts several other considerations. The space could arguably be used differently: converting it into mixed-use spaces by including housing and/or retail. Paris has made headlines with the concept of the '15-minute city' and the idea that everything you need should be accessible within a 15-minute walking or cycling distance. On the other hand, as Growthpoint CEO Estienne de Klerk recently highlighted during the [Think Big webinar series](#), social distancing may mean that companies take additional office space, in some instances. The Covid-19 pandemic has also prompted an online shopping boom, so the demand for warehousing space is growing. Previously, warehouses were often relegated to the outskirts of town where land is cheaper, but converting urban locations for warehousing use might well become feasible in the future – especially where warehouses are designed with efficient use of space in mind (or for less heavy/bulky items).

The death of the urban automobile?

Many people remain fearful of crowded areas, and commuters have looked for alternatives to the public transport system. While early lockdowns saw air pollution levels plummet, eased restrictions soon saw a rapid rise as commuters increasingly opted for their own cars over crowded transport systems. However, many cities banned cars from city streets during early parts of the pandemic, or created temporary cycle lanes and walkways to accommodate increased non-motorised transport. It is reported that 1 800 cities worldwide took steps to bolster non-motorised transport during the pandemic. Having seen the benefits of curbing urban traffic, many cities are implementing plans to make these changes permanent. Paris has already added 650 km of cycle lanes, Lima 300 km and New York 64 km. Research conducted in the Northern hemisphere has shown that cyclists and pedestrians are not necessarily deterred by the cold (and even snow), but rather by concerns around safety. Dedicated bike and pedestrian lanes thus have enormous potential benefits, especially in Africa, where cyclists and pedestrians represent 44% of road fatalities. In addition, the exercise provided by non-motorised transport also offers health benefits to boot, further enhancing their appeal to governments around the globe.

Greener, fairer and self-sustaining cities?

The pandemic highlighted that access to green space is not evenly distributed. Although London has 800 km² of green space, only 26% of this is accessible to the public, and 36% is found in the private gardens of wealthier households. Often, road traffic has been prioritised in urban design. In the UK, it is estimated that 65% of public space is earmarked for vehicles, while cars can be static up to 80% of the time. By reclaiming streets (e.g. by reducing urban parking), the opportunity arises to create shared communal spaces for relaxation and exercise. Considering rooftop gardens that can also be used for food production, can also help cities to become more self-sustaining in the event of future pandemics. Baltimore launched a design competition aimed at helping cities design public spaces with social distancing in mind – and many of the designs not only included introducing more plants into urban spaces, but also how to include pop-up trading, social and exercise elements. The [Design for distancing ideas guidebook](#) has been made available for free.

Get smart!

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted that data is central to tracking its spread. Increasingly, smart cities will incorporate data-driven solutions and artificial intelligence along with crowd analytics in the infrastructure of healthcare, public security and other services. This will help to enable governments to better respond to and manage future outbreaks.

Cities can thrive into the future – provided they're designed to do so

Pandemics have been a feature of our urban lives for centuries, and there can be little doubt that the latest pandemic will also leave lasting impacts on how we design cities into the future. Cities can continue to thrive – provided we adapt our urban centres in response to new challenges as they arise.

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