Liveable Spaces for All: Covid-19 in the City

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For people living in cities during the lockdown, space was a major concern, both in and outside the home. The pandemic has reconfigured the way we use and think about urban space. Will it be sufficient for a fairer, healthier city to emerge? Paola Hernández spoke to urbanist Helen Cole about inequalities in the city in times of Covid-19, and prospects for change.

Paola Hernández: **How has the pandemic affected quality of life in urban areas?**

Helen Cole: The pandemic has changed the way we think about cities, including the advantages and disadvantages of living in them. Early in the crisis, cities seemed like bad places to live as their dense populations were associated with a higher risk of contagion. Over time, however, it has become clear that the real problem is the overcrowded, unsafe housing in which some people are forced to live. These conditions are not randomly distributed: the possibility of contagion thus depends on diverse and interconnected dimensions of our society such as racism, sexism, and income inequality.

In my home city of Barcelona there are immigrant communities from North Africa, Pakistan, Morocco, and West Africa who, due to structural racism and bureaucratic obstacles, hold low-paid jobs and often live in neighbourhoods with relatively poor-quality housing. All these aspects compound to put certain populations at greater risk. In Europe we do not talk much about race, but systematic and interpersonal racism is certainly present and affects the quality of life of these populations and our whole society. In terms of gender, although there's currently a lack of studies on domestic violence during coronavirus lockdowns, historically during recessions, incidents of domestic violence increase. With families cooped up inside, these risks will be even higher, especially for women, who are much more likely than men to be victims of domestic violence.

Many cities are experiencing severe housing shortages. What has the Covid-19 crisis exposed about the state of safe and affordable housing in European cities?

As with many things, the pandemic has made the issue of housing both more severe and more visible. More severe because the same people who were already unable to afford adequate, secure, and accessible housing have been more affected by the pandemic and lockdown. And more visible because the crisis has prompted us to think differently about our own homes and their real value. It has become apparent that a home that is safe, comfortable, and that has enough space for privacy is the best frontline defence against pandemics and a guarantee against the aggravation of health and economic inequalities. In the past, research has linked inadequate housing quality to poor health when it fails to protect residents from excessive heat or cold, or when it exposes residents to toxic mould or lead paint. Home is not always the healthiest place to be.

In view of the length and acuteness of the current health and economic crisis, housing should be decommodified. Some cities or countries have already attempted this. In Vienna, housing is treated as a basic human right. Here in Barcelona, a new rent regulation law was passed in September 2020 to set maximum rental prices for any apartment or home. On the national scale, governments could reverse decade-long cuts to housing infrastructure – especially public housing – such as those seen in the United Kingdom.

Another sector impacted by the pandemic is public transport. What are the main issues facing public transport systems?

Keeping public transport clean and safe is a real challenge. It is essential to maintain a core service, particularly for those without private motor vehicles or low-income workers who depend on public transport to reach their jobs. Concern about the risks of contracting Covid-19 on public transport puts greater pressure on the already contentious debate about the right to precious public space in cities. This should be considered a political opportunity for investing in, maintaining, and providing safer public transport systems – many of which are already suffering from aged and crumbling infrastructure.

While this could ultimately lead to greater social equality, reduced usage due to the pandemic places greater political and funding strain on transit systems. As city planners and public health experts assess how to increase active transit like cycling or walking by reducing motorised transport space on roads, another essential equity question arises: who will be able to commute short distances by foot or bike? Active commuters tend to be those living close to their workplaces because they have the financial means to afford living in the city, and thus can benefit more from the new bike lanes that cities like Barcelona or Milan are building in their centres. However, those who live in or beyond the periphery do not have the luxury of commuting by bike or on foot. Active transit is often not feasible for them, so other affordable and low-risk solutions need to be put in place.

You are currently researching the importance of access to green spaces. What is the value of public green spaces in cities, especially in times of Covid-19?

Green spaces in cities are very important for public health. During the pandemic, people really started to notice the disparity in greenery, particularly in Spanish cities where there was such a strict lockdown. At the Barcelona Laboratory for Urban Environmental Justice and Sustainability, we conducted a survey in collaboration with researchers from Portugal. The results showed that during the lockdown in Portugal, where short visits to public green spaces were allowed, maintaining or increasing the use of public natural spaces or viewing nature from home were associated with lower levels of stress. In Spain, where visits to public green space were not permitted, maintaining or increasing contact with private green spaces like gardens and greenery like indoor plants was linked with lower stress levels.

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In sum, these findings support the idea that unequal access to green spaces is directly related to health inequalities in cities, particularly in terms of mental health. Spanish residents with access to private green space (generally located in wealthier neighbourhoods) could probably cope better with the lockdown. Similar evidence in Berlin, Leipzig, and Halle in Germany as well as in Oslo and Stockholm indicates that this unequal distribution of urban green space – which translates into differences in the quality, quantity, and size of green spaces – is also related to existing inequalities in the housing market and mobility. Hopefully, the preservation, restoration, and understanding of the importance of green space for future urban resilience will continue with renewed force.

Can the Covid-19 crisis accelerate action on the climate and biodiversity emergencies in cities?

During lockdown, levels of air pollution fell in many cities, including Barcelona and Madrid. In November 2018, the Madrid Central scheme was launched to improve air quality by reducing traffic and banning the biggest polluters from Madrid city centre, with great initial results. During the pandemic, this type of intervention has happened naturally all over the world. There is a lot of hope and speculation about what might happen as we

recover from the crisis.

At the moment, there are so many health priorities for policymakers and politicians that acting slowly and carefully is complicated. People are desperate to restart the economy and return to "normality" as soon as possible. But it is really worth pausing to think because there are many fantastic opportunities to consider, like investment in localised nature-based solutions. Re-imagining rooftops for public use – both for gardening and recreation – or creating "pocket parks" are two possibilities that would get around spatial challenges and increase access to green spaces in dense cities.

This access needs to be guaranteed for all. Many cities are witnessing a trend towards the privatisation of small, local green spaces paid for by developers. In some cases, these spaces exclude residents who don't live in that specific private development. This creates the illusion of an equitable distribution of green space when it is not necessarily the case. Now is the perfect time to think carefully about these issues.

For decades, large parts of cities have been dedicated to brick-and-mortar commercial and office spaces. Do increased distance working and online shopping offer opportunities to repurpose urban space?

That is a good question, and one we won't know the answer to for a while. Although it would be nice to think that the use of urban spaces could easily be traded when circumstances change, that is not always the case. With refurbished brownfields, for example, unused space has been reclaimed for public good. At the same time, so much of the decision-making about urban space depends on economics and power; forces that are incredibly and increasingly uneven. This pattern is unlikely to change despite trends in distance working and shopping behaviour.

I can think of two relevant trends that demonstrate the difficulties with repurposing space in cities. First is the plethora of luxury housing that has been constructed in recent years, sometimes under the guise of creating necessary new housing. Yet many of these homes sit empty despite worsening housing crises. This clearly shows that decisions are not based on need and do not prioritise the interests of the less privileged residents who are impacted by the lack of affordable housing. Secondly, previous patterns indicate that processes such as gentrification are largely dependent on uneven urban development. The trend initially observed in the Covid-19 crisis of wealthier residents – who are better placed to take advantage of shopping and working from home – being interested in moving out of urban centres has implications for city urban development finances, which are partly dependent on tax revenue. In brief, even if the physical space to do so is available, we can't assume that cities will easily be able to reinvent themselves.

What do you make of the concept of a 15-minute city, popularised by the mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo; the idea that public services like green spaces, healthcare facilities, workplaces, cultural spaces, and all the other necessary urban amenities should be within 15 minutes of where someone lives?

The 15-minute city concept sounds great in theory but it will face a few challenges in practice. If we were building Lego cities from scratch, it would be quite easy to implement. But in reality, existing cities face the dual challenge of being both dense – lacking available land for new resources – and unequal. A couple of examples of how competition for space and resources plays out in cities come to mind.

The first is the US city of Atlanta, which is constructing a greenway called the BeltLine by repurposing disused railway lines that circuit the city centre. Theoretically, this project should neighbourhoods it intersects. But even before construction began, the price of land along the BeltLine's path increased dramatically, meaning that the city could no longer afford to purchase the land needed to finish the project. The effect of speculation and investment was just too strong. This project also faces challenges related to its failure to factor in the varying needs and desires of the communities it impacts. While the assumption was that the BeltLine would bring a wanted resource to all adjacent neighbourhoods, in reality, many residents had reservations or felt it did not address their needs at all.

The second example is from the Raval district of Barcelona, one of the densest neighbourhoods in Europe. Raval is currently served by just one overcrowded health clinic. For years, its healthcare workers have fought for a second clinic, but space is hard to come by. These workers identified a municipally owned building that could be converted into a clinic, but the city had previously leased that building to an art museum looking to expand there. The city offered the nearby plaza as an alternative site for the clinic, but this would have meant trading precious open space for the essential health resource. In the end, the workers were granted the right to use the building. The future of the plaza, on the other hand, remains uncertain.

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The reality that needs and desires vary for different communities is a challenge for the 15-minute city concept. Not only that, but as cities and neighbourhoods change, so do the needs of residents. My research shows that gentrification places additional burdens on healthcare providers and facilities: as gentrifying areas become more socially complex, so do the social determinants of health. The displacement of long-term residents also means disruption to the continuity of their healthcare. I suppose proponents of the 15-minute city concept would tout that it would prevent gentrification by equally distributing resources throughout the city, but so far efforts have shown that preventing gentrification is hard, and even attempts to create mixed-income communities have faced challenges. At the end of the day, cities are dynamic, and I do not know how well the 15-minute city concept accounts for that.

How do you envisage future cities that are better equipped to deal with challenges linked to health and climate?

For those working to improve cities, it is really important to think of climate-related interventions, like green spaces, and other essential amenities for healthy cities like transport, housing, and public spaces, as part of a system rather than standing alone. This means understanding that physical changes to cities have impacts on their social and political environments, and vice versa. Historically, urban areas that have been disinvested in, that are often physically and socially separated from important resources and have experienced worse environmental conditions, also have fewer green spaces and other amenities. These inequities need to be rectified. It is essential to consider the social and political impacts of new amenities, and what policies or planning tools might be used to prevent consequences like green gentrification, rising costs of living, and displacement.

Moving forward, I hope to see cities and decision-makers being thoughtful about the pandemic recovery and re-invention process, and taking steps to protect marginalised urban residents. Related to the physical or built environment of cities, I would like to see efforts to maintain some of the pedestrian space that cities have at least temporarily installed, and to continue reducing air and water pollution. Moreover, a closer focus on social issues that cities have failed to address – like homelessness, energy poverty, the housing crisis, and unequal access to healthcare and education – is very much needed. This is, of course, made more challenging by the still unknown economic impacts of the pandemic for city budgets and resources.

How can we stop cities becoming spaces of competition and exclusion?

This is essentially the question that is already in the minds of activists in many cities working to address housing injustices and prevent the negative effects of gentrification. Time and time again, activists and city representatives emphasise how policies are often introduced too late. In cities like Seattle in the US, policies call for the principles of equity and inclusion to be included in all decision-making, but house prices have already displaced many of the

city's most marginalised residents, despite these good intentions. In cities of all sizes, house prices have risen far more rapidly than wages, particularly as income inequality increases. Cities struggle to balance the desire to promote innovation and modernisation with the need for inclusion, affordability, and access to essential resources for all. There is no easy answer, but we can start by thinking first, in each decision or policy, about those with the least privilege, and about the potential short, medium, and long-term implications of those decisions on different populations. Cities are constantly evolving, and we often fail to think about this when creating policies.

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