

Cities After COVID

Ten philosophers consider how COVID has impacted the life of the city (compiled and edited by Ian Olasov)

Introduction

Ian Olasov

COVID has transformed city life. We see each other differently; many of us, for a while at least, didn't see each other at all. We meet each other in different places. We've discovered or invented whole new classes of heroes and essential workers. Housing prices are up (along with the prices for everything else), access to mortgages has tightened, and we are only just recovering from a steep increase in unemployment. A rise in labour militancy has followed suit, from the Starbucks and Amazon unionization drives to the RMT strike. The general state of agitation kindled the reaction to the murder of George Floyd, the anti-crime backlash, and public protests of lockdowns and vaccination policy. We've taken to the streets in other, less overtly political ways; in New York City, where I live, the Open Streets program and changing regulations have allowed pedestrians and restaurant-goers to seize space previously reserved for cars. And of course, the ongoing public health crisis, which has played out very differently in different economic strata, has brought us nose to nose with the failures of our basic institutions.

What should we do with these changes? Which should we maintain or accelerate, and which should we roll back? If cities have

failed to rise to the challenges of COVID, how can they succeed in the future?

These aren't strictly or entirely philosophical questions, but I wanted to find out what philosophers have to say about them. So I invited philosophers from around the world to share their thoughts about what we can learn from COVID about city life. Their responses run the gamut from the intimate to the political, from bodily comportment and pleasure to housing and crosswalks and deepening democracy. They imagine new possibilities and share new (to me, anyway) conceptual tools, and they get down to brass tacks. I hope you learn as much from them as I have.

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Participatory Budgeting for Remaking Public Spaces

Michael Menser

Our cities are in trouble. We've talked a lot about how COVID has exposed the inadequacy of our health systems, but we also need to address what it reveals about our urban spaces. During myriad lockdowns,



images of empty streets and reports of city dwellers fleeing for the suburbs cynically illustrate the failure of urban spaces to support the social fabric. We split our time increasingly between our homes and congested social spaces; neither is good for public health. Cities desperately need to rethink their public spaces and their relationships to the economy, private households, and the cultural needs and practices of their residents. What's the cure? Participatory democracy.

I propose participatory budgeting (PB) for public spaces and public buildings: from streets and sidewalks, to parks and plazas, libraries, schools and universities. PB has been used by urban residents in more than 7,000 cities across the globe. In these processes, the city turns over part of a public budget and residents come together in an inclusive process to collaboratively create proposals

and choose projects. PB processes have made parks more accessible, revamped libraries, upgraded schools, proliferated public art, started municipal composting projects and made streets safer. I am calling for PB to go into zoning and rethink mixed-use public space. People who got COVID and lived in neighbourhoods with poor air quality were more likely to be hospitalised than those who lived on greener streets. Many cities helped restaurants create outdoor seating. What about outdoor classrooms and libraries? School gardens are often closed when the school day is over. Why not open them up to make them dual-community gardens? Decades of privatisation and over-policing have shrunk and stifled our public spaces. We need to reimagine them – nimbly, manageably, bringing residents into the process. PB has had great success across the globe

on capital projects and service programmes. Let's bring it into planning, zoning, and land use to give us the vibrant public we need for both health and democracy.

The Importance of Building Urban Mutual Aid Networks

Jennifer Gammage

COVID prompted a rapid rise in hyper-localised, grassroots neighbourhood mutual aid (MA) efforts to respond to the crisis in urban areas. The challenge has been in sustaining these projects over time. This is crucial, however, if we want to work toward MA as a way of life rather than a method of crisis response. One potential solution is creating city-wide MA networks and hubs. Networks and hubs that serve as coalitional and collaborative channels for multiple localised efforts can support healthy, thriving MA projects on a long-term basis. They do so by enabling the organisation of large-scale, sustained movements against systemic barriers that create resource gaps in the first place and by encouraging broader practices of mutual care.

These networks are especially important in our most segregated cities, because they allow for redistribution and sharing of resources. Chicago Food Sovereignty Coalition (CFSC) is one such example. This coalition, which now maintains two hub sites for food storage shared between 40 neighbourhood MA efforts, formed out of a collaborative Slack network used to organise neighbourhood efforts and share city-wide needs and resources during the first months of the pandemic.

Because mutual aid promotes direct co-operation, horizontal organising, political solidarity, and relationship-building

within a shared ecosystem, it is necessary that projects remain grounded in highly localised areas where people with shared experiences and needs can support one another directly. Rather than imposing directives from the top down, MA networks allow local efforts to communicate and strategise with one another. This helps ensure that areas targeted by economic or state violence receive goods, resources, and advocacy through expanding practices of reparations and mutual support while strengthening grassroots movements that address the root causes of inequity.

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Space Dreams

Eraldo Souza dos Santos

Drone footage of Wuhan played on Brazilian TV, showing the city's streets completely empty. No people, no cars. No hustle and bustle, no mess. For many, these were images of a utopia: a completely pacified city, despite, or perhaps thanks to, the plague. That dream, however, would not last long. People quickly reclaimed the streets. George Floyd was murdered. "Black lives matter!" you probably heard from your windows. The growing opposition to lockdowns and curfews led many, as a gesture of defiance

or resistance, to regain the hitherto deserted alleys, avenues, boulevards, and squares. Against dictators who sought to take advantage of the virus, from Belarus to Myanmar, the people took to the streets, again and again. Wary of putting my family members at risk, I followed everything from afar, fearful that the virus would radically change our lives for the worse and hopeful that it could motivate radical changes for the better. I replayed fond memories of Paris where I lived before the outbreak – memories of its Place de la République, which received the street carnivals of the nineteenth century and has been the stage for many of the most important protests in recent French history. I felt an impetuous desire to get on the subway to contemplate the São Paulo Museum of Art again: mysteriously suspended in the air, with its apparently fragile lateral beams freeing space for friends and lovers to meet and activists to gather. The need for connection and solidarity that has welled up during the pandemic could, perhaps, be satisfied merely by returning to business as usual. But I hope instead for a more intimate and committed public life. The dream of a world free of the plague is also the dream of a less confined, more spacious world: where our cities open up more to us, to our struggles, to our (re-)encounters.

Convivial Cities

John Rennie Short

For Charles Baudelaire, the first great poet of the modern city, beauty is characterised by the transitory, with a pervasive mood of melancholy. We could say the same about the pandemic city. Cities during COVID have reminded us of the transitory nature of things, reinforced our isolated sense of self,

and added a touch of sadness to modern urban living.

I suggest that we build a more sensual and convivial city, a city constructed on the recognition that human beings have bodies and desires and that we need pleasure – and shared pleasure in particular. By acknowledging the entangled nature of our lives, rather than the enthronement of a narrow individualism, we can set about building a more livable and humane city. Pleasure is best, and perhaps only fully, realised in company. Our most human attribute, language, after all is shared communication. Cities are our most human invention and should embody and enhance our shared lives.

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The pandemic isolated us. Many of us experienced it with a sense of deep loss. We can build on this grief to create spaces where we can revel and enjoy each other's company. Not just the green parks, but also little nooks – sites of quiet contemplation, unconnected to the need for exercise or buying and spending. We can reconstruct our cities along the lines first proposed by William H. Whyte, as a mesh of small, safe, intimate places, rather than a series of grand urban projects.

The sociologist Elijah Anderson coined “the cosmopolitan canopy” to describe spaces where very different types of people can engage one another in a spirit of civility,



community, and goodwill. A big cosmopolitan canopy is vital to diverse cities. Think of what we would lose if we had no street markets, rummage sales, street theatres, bake sales, or welcoming pubs, all places where people who otherwise wouldn't can spend casual and purposeful time together. With a little creativity and determination, we can build a more convivial, sensual city with a flourishing cosmopolitan canopy.

Weak Ties

Kenny Easwaran

In 1973, the sociologist Mark Granovetter published an influential paper called "The Strength of Weak Ties". He measures the strength of a social tie by how much time two people spend together, ranging from a roommate or partner that one spends hours with every day, through the neighbour or co-worker that you talk to every couple days, to an acquaintance from school that

you see once every few years. Strong ties are what form tight-knit communities, but the "bridges" between communities tend to be weak ties. Usually, when someone gets a new job opportunity, or a new cultural perspective, or a new romantic opportunity, the crucial link is one of these weak ties, because their strong ties often have most of the same connections they already do. Part of what has made cities attractive as destinations in recent centuries has been the variety of weak ties one can build there.

But just as these weak ties enable the spread of ideas and opportunities, they also enable the spread of viruses. During the pandemic, we were encouraged to maintain a "pandemic bubble" with our strongest ties and minimise our physical encounters with these weak ties. In his 1995 essay "Bowling Alone", the political scientist Robert Putnam noted that in recent decades, Americans seemed to have fewer and fewer strong ties,

relying instead on new media (in this period, mostly television, but now also the internet) for their social needs. Single people living alone, and parents living far from relatives, who had relied most on weak ties for their social life, found these periods of pandemic isolation particularly mentally taxing.

As we move forward, we can hope that we restore the strength of weak ties that made cities such potent locations of opportunity and exchange, while preserving a small network of strong ties to help us through difficult periods.

Build More Housing

Ronald R. Sundstrom

Low and mid-rise apartment buildings may be dull, may lack a revolutionary or innovative edge, but they are glorious – glorious in the way that clean air and water are glorious. We needed more of them before COVID and need them even more now. Take a stroll through my neighbourhood in Oakland, California, and nearby Bay Area cities to take in the sights. Notice the homeless encampments festering on the margins of every neighbourhood and on the edges of freeways. That is *just one* visible result of not having enough affordable housing for the poor to the working-classes. Witness what happens when neighbourhoods, to maintain their “character” or “culture,” inhibit the addition of more and denser housing. The results are spectacles of misery. Providing housing for citizens and residents is a moral imperative. No NIMBY whine, no aesthetic concern, cultural project, not even most environmental impacts (except those intended to protect residents from natural disasters) trumps this duty. To help meet this obligation, low and mid-rise apartments should

be everywhere, not only in places where affordable housing is already stacked but also, and primarily, in locales that shelter and segregate the well-off. Build more housing, whether publicly or privately funded, including social housing, and get out of the way of its development. Prioritise housing the economically least well-off, expand the provision of housing subsidies, and fully enforce fair housing law. Let’s give material substance – as in homes fit to live in – to the values of moral dignity, liberty, and democratic equality.

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The Pedestrian Death Crisis at the Intersection

Irfan Khawaja

There’s been a much-discussed increase in pedestrian deaths since the beginning of the COVID pandemic. We can begin to address it with a single, simple reform, at first glance so philosophically unprepossessing as to seem trivial.

Normally, for reasons of convenience, we place the crosswalk as close to the intersection as possible. Yet people often feel safer jaywalking than crossing at the intersection, even if doing so seems inefficient. There turns out to be a good reason why.

Consider a typical intersection with vehicles running parallel to pedestrians,

but turning into the crosswalk where pedestrians are crossing. Both parties to this interaction have to multitask in problematic ways. Drivers have to make the turn under time pressure, with impatient traffic behind them, while avoiding people in front of them. Pedestrians have to cross the street, jostled by other pedestrians and uncertain of whether oncoming vehicles will make way. The result is an iterated game of chicken. We put up with it only because the status quo seems more convenient than any change we might make to it.

The solution, however, is simple.

- 1) Move the crosswalk two car lengths *into* the intersection, requiring vehicles to stop for pedestrians.
- 2) Permit pedestrians to cross the street *only* at marked intersections.

Drivers can complete their turns without having to look out for pedestrians. Pedestrians can cross the street without worrying about turning cars.

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Simple as the solution is – it's been adopted in Barcelona – it presents some difficult trade-offs. Adopting the proposal would require a costly re-configuration of urban space, on par with making sidewalks

accessible under the Americans with Disabilities Act. Is it worth it?

The details are tricky, but I think so. Suppose (following the now-common analysis) that each human life has a statistical value of \$10 million. Then, by narrowly consequentialist lights, the crosswalk reform is worth it if it costs less than the VSL of deaths plus injury and damage averted. Bringing peace of mind into the equation would lower the bar further. Some non-consequentialist considerations – pedestrian rights or restorative justice, say – would strengthen the case further still.

The pandemic has brought the apparently unrelated issue of pedestrian deaths into sharp relief. Having seen so much needless loss of life over the past few years, we're perhaps at the right moment to take stock and demand action

Transforming the City Street

Quill R Kukla

As indoor spaces became risky and shut their doors early in the pandemic, many outdoor streetscapes in cities transformed. Seating spilled from restaurants and bars onto the sidewalk and street. Whole blocks were closed to automobile traffic. Street vending expanded. Layers of obstructionist red tape melted away, and cities expedited permitting and policy changes that allowed for these new uses of street space. Though the reasons behind these transformations were grim, city dwellers couldn't help but see how much more vibrant, bustling, and *person-centred* our streetscapes became. As people re-enter indoor spaces, I hope that this transformation of the city streetscape can be maintained and expanded – including, ideally, in some ways that are not capi-

talist monetisations of the streets.

Our enhanced use of outdoor space is healthier, cheerier, and more fun, but the significance of this transformation of our urban landscapes goes deeper. The co-option of the street for the purposes of socialising, shopping, lounging, eating, drinking, and working is changing the *meaning of city streets*. Typically (particularly in the United States) we understand streets as *for* movement from point A to point B, paradigmatically by car. The rest of street life is expected to shape itself around this goal of efficient mobility. The pandemic has seen the emergence of streets that are primarily *for living in and amongst one another*. This transformation of outdoor space turns the

streets into sites with their own place identity - into places to be rather than as conduits for passing through.

City life is characteristically marked by a porousness of the boundaries between private and public space. Balconies, alleys, shared walls, and mixed-use buildings connect indoor spaces to larger shared urban spaces. The spilling of businesses out onto the street intensifies and expands this deeply urban orientation of private spaces out towards the city. The pandemic has in many ways been an assault on the urban: we've seen decentralisation and the hollowing out of city cores as people move to remote work, for instance. But the occupation of the street has been one way in which the intensity of





urbanism has increased. This is good news for those of us who are in love with cities.

Embracing Social Distance

Katherine Melcher

As the pandemic wanes, I hope social distancing continues to be valued, especially in our public spaces. We should keep our distance, not for fear of disease, but because, as Edward Hall suggests, it is the ideal spacing for encountering strangers in social situations. At just beyond arm's length, the social distance of 4-12 feet represents, according to Hall, the "limit of domination," where "Nobody touches or expects to touch another person unless there is some special effort".

The argument that we need to keep one

another at arm's length might seem pessimistic. But, for many people in our cities, especially women, social distance is a real need. In a survey of university students in Stockholm, 61% of female respondents reported experiencing some form of sexual aggression while on public transit, including unwanted sexual looks or gestures, obscene language, stalking, groping, or inappropriate touching. In a survey of approximately 250 women in Turkey, 72.7% said that they felt unsafe when alone in public open spaces. 97.6% agreed that fear of crime restricts women's freedom in urban space.

If we want public spaces to be free and open to everyone, we need social distancing between strangers. Rather than keeping us apart, social distance allows us to relate to

each other and form connections without sacrificing ourselves. It creates a physical form of Hannah Arendt's private realm, "a place of one's own" that is needed in order to participate freely in the public realm, or what Édouard Glissant calls opacity, where the inability to fully grasp another becomes "the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence". Social distancing might seem simply to alienate us from the people around us. But by creating a physically safe and autonomous space from which we can reach out more securely and confidently, it helps us form the connections that make city life valuable.

Credits

Ian Olasov is a commissioning editor for TPM. His most recent book is *A Companion to Public Philosophy* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2022), co-edited with Lee McIntyre and Nancy McHugh.

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Ronald R. Sundstrom is a professor of philosophy at the University of San Francisco, the humanities advisor of the SF Urban Film Fest, and the author of *Just Shelter: Gentrification, Integration, Race, and Reconstruction* (OUP, forthcoming).

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Quill R Kukla is professor of philosophy and disability studies and senior research scholar in the Kennedy Institute at Georgetown University, as well as a Humboldt Scholar at Leibniz Universität Hannover. Their most recent book is *City Living: How Urban Spaces and Urban Dwellers Make One Another* (Oxford University Press 2021).

Katherine Melcher is an associate professor in landscape architecture at the University of Georgia who explores the relationship between aesthetics and ethics through public space design.