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How the post-pandemic city should look like

Too tight, too dense, too focused on consumerism. Cities need to change – not just because of Covid-19 and the climate crisis

The coronavirus pandemic has suddenly put into question otherwise unshakeable truths about how we view cities and how we live together. As such, the crisis could also be seen as a magnifying glass, under which existing problems and smouldering conflicts come fully out into the open: the competition for space on the streets that still belong, above all, to cars, empty inner cities, environmentally damaging aviation, the separation between living and working that is set in stone in the design of our apartments.

Restrictions on leaving home, bans on contact, home office – the pandemic has demanded comprehensive restrictions in private life. But it also has a powerful influence on our cities and the spatial configuration of society as a whole. From one day to another additional cycle paths can be laid, trips to lakes in the urban hinterland are an attractive alternative and a well-structured flat, which makes home office work and home schooling possible, becomes a major privilege. All these aspects must be discussed, from the layout of the home through crisis-resilient infrastructure to our single-purpose city centres – and even modern architecture and city planning.

The design and arrangement of our cities was and is much more closely bound up with diseases and combatting them than we generally think. For hundreds of years, one aspect of life in cities was high mortality because diseases and plagues spread more quickly in tight spaces and large sections of the city's population were regularly killed by it. Plague and cholera epidemics, tuberculosis and typhus bedevilled the continually growing cities. Above all, they afflicted those who lived in catastrophic hygiene conditions and who had wretched living arrangements.

The consequences were city hygiene measures and housing reforms from the second half of the 19th century. These measures went a long way to

shaping what we recognise as a modern city nowadays: with a sewer system and paved roads, a water and electricity supply, limited density and spacing. Parks, play areas and allotments appeared at a certain time as socially hygienic measures that are good for people's health.

And it was not just the city. Modern architecture would have been unthinkable without medical advances. Numerous achievements of modernity – such as new builds with requirements for light, air and sun – were driven by efforts to improve health and city hygiene. The pandemic is now bringing this context clearly to the fore again.

A city for the common good

Tight, dense, full – even today the virus is spreading more rapidly in big cities than anywhere else. From Wuhan via the metropolitan region of Lombardy, Paris, Madrid right through to New York, Moscow and Rio de Janeiro. Less surprisingly, the greater density is, as it did before, enabling the disease to spread more quickly. The virus is also arriving first of all at intersections where there is a lot of movement of people and goods. As a result, high densities in cities received a bad image, while housing in the countryside became something like a paradise. However, the city has key advantages: Limited resources can be used more efficiently, unnecessary movement avoided and, hence, the environmental impact improved. Moreover, the capacity for innovation is high thanks to lots of close interaction.

Communities in the countryside are now drawing lots of people, but we are unlikely to see massively revitalised village centres. There is still hope that the renewed attention to life in the countryside is sustainable and leads to a better relationship between the city and the countryside. And to more awareness about nature and resources. The trend towards urbanisation will probably not be interrupted– cities continue to be the way of life in the future.

The city as a model of the future – that's a strange thought, at times, given the empty inner cities and closed shops. A surreal emptiness: The centre, as we know it, had lost its purpose from one day to the next during the lockdown. Offices left empty, shops totally closed down. Without the lure of consumerism, there were only deserted spaces that nothing much could be done with. In the meantime, life in the city centres has returned. But how many shops will get through this crisis? Even beforehand, the ground floors of many places were like disputed 'dead zones' and survival in the face of horrendous rents could only be achieved with a high number of passers-by who were eager to make purchases.

The coronavirus pandemic will not be the last crisis that our cities have to face.

The crisis has put the model of the city centre based on the shopping mall under considerable pressure. Now would be the right time to test out new ideas. And to find an answer to the question: How do we release the city centre from the grip of economic exploitation? Less consumption, more mixed use. Less profit maximisation, more common good. It would probably be too optimistic to hope that now construction groups and housing associations create self-determined forms of housing in the city centre. But urban policy decisions, which are not steered by the logic of the market but geared to the collective delivery of city infrastructure and have the common good in mind, should be possible.

Streets give cities their structure and it has never been so visible and tangible how much space is available there when there was no traffic from one day to the next after the promulgation of restrictions on leaving home. This public space reflects society's priorities. How much space do we give to which form of transport? The transition to bicycles that has been stimulated again by the pandemic is not just bringing bicycle shops and bicycle repair shops a lot of business but also answers the question of the urban allocation of space again – by bicycle. It is easier to keep distance from each other on a bicycle than on a bus, train or taxi.

The future-proof city

But there is a lot more that can be done. Some certainly remember the car-free Sunday. Why not use the current situation, which is turning normality on its head and at least temporarily set up completely car-free streets? Shared space or meeting areas, which treat all means of transport and pedestrians alike. Thus, while keeping all the necessary distance, the street can, above all in dense inner cities, become a new space for mobility. The lack of alternatives to the car has been proven to be outdated.

This trend can be observed across Europe. In Paris, the mayor, Anne Hidalgo, a woman in power, has considerably pushed ahead in creating a bicycle city. Parts of the inner city are being rebuilt in the smog-ridden Spanish capital too. Less cars, more room for public transport, bicycles, pedestrians. Brussels has used the crisis to introduce shared space and to convert large areas into car-free areas. And even in an notorious car city like Rome, more and more people are switching to bicycles.

The pandemic has in many respects revealed the shortcomings of modern cities. There were families, overwhelmed with home office work and home schooling because their homes were not set up for that. There were empty city centres because they served purely for shopping. There were closed theatres, cinemas, schools and parks because public spaces are only perceived as hazardous areas. In times of crisis boundaries that up until then seemed unmoveable can be shifted. In a positive as well as a negative sense.

This is the time – and here Covid-19 has also brought momentum into the debate in favour of combatting the climate crisis – not only to rethink how living and working is separated and to test out new living and working models, but also to throw traditional role models overboard, which have shown themselves unfortunately to be incredibly persistent in the crisis. To move away from thinking of social units only as the core family – and to translate that into new designs, home types, new forms of living together in the family, at home and finally also in the city. Together and process-focussed.

The coronavirus pandemic will not be the last crisis that our cities have to face. That is precisely why it is important not to think in terms of short-term measures, which will revert back as quickly as possible to the old system. Instead, we need to build up structures in the long term that are more resilient against crises. Also in order not to leave millions of people again and again facing existential problems.



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