One Year After the Covid-19 Pandemic

Reframing Future Cities in the Awaking of Crises

Ersoy, Aksel

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Aksel Ersoy

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It has been more than a year since the first reports of a 'mystery pneumonia' outbreak. Soon after, more than half of the world's population went into lockdown, creating dramatic changes in everyday life. While some of these changes were transitory, some have resulted in significant alterations that one would have never imagined otherwise (perhaps an obvious example is working from home while homeschooling at the same time). While the vaccine developments and their roll-out schemes continue to evolve, we have gone back to some of the earlier conversations and discussions about what we expect from future cities and how we could respond to societal challenges such as climate change, globalisation or the ageing population. However, this time there is something different. What we have experienced globally over the last year has pushed us to look at the future city from a different perspective. The pandemic has put a completely different twist on some of the pressing issues that lie at the heart of a sustainable city.

One argument has emerged in relation to how the pandemic could end the urbanisation trend. Figures from various real estate agencies across the world have shown an increased interest in rural living since the beginning of 2020, which partly coincides with increasing interest in housing with enough space and with an attached open space. The pandemic has brought back the importance of having access to green space, which is a topic that has always been of interest to many of us due to its physical, social and mental stimulus. During the lockdown periods, having a tiny breathing space or a balcony was a lifesaver for many people, to avoid the feeling of 'being trapped' inside their homes. People who do not have access to such spaces end up using their roofs or any open space they can access outside the curfew times. Both for individuals who prefer the city and those who prefer the countryside, green infrastructure and its increasing role in our everyday life have once again become a fundamental topic in our conversations yet again.

Another argument has been on the changing role of cities. While the new developments that used to pop up constantly had to come to a halt, the central role of cities in solving the economic crashes of the capitalist economy had to be abandoned. A new set of networks and arrangements have been formulated to respond to the needs of people in a very short period of time. Interest in local food production and consumption has surged, as witnessed by the increasing enthusiasm for local farm shops, which have thrived during the national lockdown, as they provide access to fresh, seasonal produce from local farms. The scale of production and the role of geography have been revisited while we consider how we should design and live in cities. As cities increase their density and hence their exposure to viral transmission, it has become crucial to think about how they can be (re)structured/produced to avoid any pandemic or anthropogenic impact in the coming century. This has been especially visible during the pandemic as the development models promoting sustainability, density and the use of public transport have revealed their limitations.

These two arguments have made me reflect on Jane Jacobs' ideas about how cities function, evolve and fail, which have become common-sense rules for to-

day's architects and planners. She saw cities as dynamic, complex ecosystems with their own logic and order. Going beyond simplification, hacking into the old city, demolishing and renewing, Jacobs marvelled at the "organised complexity" of disorder in which people who come to the cities linger. She offered a vision of the city that let common citizens recognise themselves as city makers, not simply city users, and see their real place in urban life. However, given the circumstances of the pandemic and all the limitations in place, I cannot help but wonder how we can still be city makers and take part in this complex ecosystem. One might argue that the answer would depend on using big data, given that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a massive acceleration of digitalisation in all aspects of society and the economy. This is a valid argument, of course, as such a 'digital boost' has created opportunities for people to connect virtually while seeking to optimise their quality of life using big data or artificial intelligence algorithms, in some cases tethered to a vast array of sensors that effectively listen to cities going about their daily routines. For any local authorities, it is an amazing opportunity, as these systems contribute to better handling of public resources and management. But there remains a worry associated with the ways such modes of behaviour surveillance have been used as "instruments of technology", especially in relation to the idea of deploying subtle technologies of persuasion and governance and whether that can nudge people to act in particular ways.

This issue can be very sensitive in the 'post-truth' era, in which there is a lot of uncertainty and confusion. During the pandemic, we have witnessed that while, on the one hand, scientists and experts have played a key role in disseminating information in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, there have also been some significant controversies surrounding the use of correct information and even, in some cases, behavioural evidence or 'behavioural fatigue'. Writing in the late-1980s, Nikolas Rose articulated how the route to controlling the behaviour of citizens is felt to lie in reaching down into the very souls of individuals. What we are edging towards is a suggestion that today, the obsession with governing the soul is increasingly being forsaken as unnecessarily difficult and intensive. In its place, forms of technology that are integrated into other modalities of governance have been emerging. In the reading of Roberto Esposito, this is examined via the relationship between the community and mechanisms of immunisation in modern biopolitics: medicine has become politicised while politics has become medicalised.

The task I have been challenged with most is that we, as urban planners and geographers, are trying to understand the Covid-19 pandemic from a point within the crisis. That said, what has also been interesting over the last year has been to witness the growing emphasis on open processes and how cities allow for continuous adaptation, feedback and motivation, which is something that also comes from the readings of Sendra and Sennett (2020)'s Designing Disorder: Experiments and Disruptions in the City. The pandemic has highlighted the increasing emphasis on ongoing and rapid improvisation, while looking beyond traditional professional boundaries, and working at a speed that would have previously been unthinkable. In that sense, it has opened up new materialist imaginaries of collaboration, analysing impact and its enabling conditions as well as preparedness. Going back to Jacobs again, it has increased the visibility and importance of local citizens' everyday lives that entail causality, public trust and contact in the contemporary and future city.

Aksel Ersoy

Dr Aksel Ersoy is is an Assistant Professor of Urban Development Management at the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment, Delft University of Technology. His research focuses on the governance of 'the future city', urban resilience, urban infrastructure and the circular economy. He is also a member of the disP editorial board.

Contact:
Dr Aksel Ersoy
Assistant Professor
Delft University of Technology
Department of Management
in the Built Environment
P.O. Box 5043
2600 AA Delft
The Netherlands
a.ersoy@tudelft.nl
Twitter: @AkselErsoy