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LIFE AFTER LOCKDOWN: WHAT WILL OUR CITIES LOOK LIKE?

The Covid-19 virus which struck the world at the end of 2019 is a rare occurrence. A pandemic so significant that whole countries, economies, and populations have been shut down.

Our offices were deserted, bars and restaurants closed and streets left abandoned as people retreated indoors, hunkering down to ride out the lockdown period. Comparisons have been made to the 20th century World Wars but instead of “Keeping Calm and Carrying On” the slogan of this crisis was echoed across the globe, “Stay Home and Save Lives”.

The world around us has changed but instead of continuing to live our lives normally in defiance of a visible force like a terrorist attack for example, we are combatting this invisible virus with video calls to our colleagues and loved ones, spending more time at home than ever before and finding new novel ways to amuse ourselves.

For many weeks, millions of people around the world had their world reduced to four walls, leaving the outside uninhabited as it was seen instead through a computer or phone screen. Whilst our town centers have been left ghost-like and transportation acts as a lifeline for frontline staff needing to get to work, there is a question lurking in the background; what will our cities look like once this is all over?

Cities have long been the reflection of change

Cities themselves are not immune to great and significant events that have changed their foundations. As a magnet for humans to interact, converge, and live, it is natural that they have experienced pandemics, terrorist attacks, and environmental and social incidents. Whilst these episodes often derail the course a city was taking, it goes without saying that history’s biggest events have changed the very fabric of our urban surroundings. In the early 1850’s, when a global pandemic of cholera reached London, killing more than 10,000 people, the need for a new thought out sewerage system was imagined. In a similar vein, after the 9/11 attacks happened in New York, the United States created the Department of Homeland Security. As negative and shell shocking as such events can be, there is an opportunity for changing what we considered normal before, for patching up what wasn’t quite right and creating a new shinier shield to protect us against whatever life has to throw at us next.

Being at home has given many of us new priorities

As our outside world waits for us, it is opening itself up for new changes and adaptations, ready to meet the new needs of its inhabitants. This pandemic may have distanced humans from one another, but one thing that has certainly come out of it is the similarities in what people are calling for.

Being locked away in homes, particularly for those living in small flats or houses, with little or no outdoor space has prompted many to reflect on the lack of green areas available to them in their cities. Living without the usual background noise of traffic has been one of the positive sides of lockdown, making it unlikely people will want to go back to the vehicle-filled environments they once knew. With the Covid-19 virus forcing us to uphold physical distancing, it is almost inconceivable to imagine being pushed up against one another on tight pavements or on a cramped train. Researchers at University College London have
said there is an “urgent need to reallocate street space in London” after finding that two-thirds of the British capital’s pavements are not wide enough to allow people to follow the Government’s advice and stay two meters apart.

In this way, our cities are likely to change, to become opened up, and driven by environmental concerns. The offering of transportation must then be larger, giving commuters greater options and accessibility, freeing them of traveling by car. Technology will also play its part, perhaps as we are able to monitor in real-time the numbers of people on public transport to avoid certain times or get on a less crowded carriage.

**Maintaining distance vs keeping cities moving**

The challenge cities will have of course will be in the balance between densification and providing space. Before the pandemic, densification was heralded as the way to make cities truly efficient, mixing different services in one building and redefining vacant office and warehouse space. With companies now recognising the untapped potential in remote working, many of us may see this as a reason to live further from cities, perhaps even breaking down commuter belts and our traditional relationship between cities and their suburbs. The difficulty will be if densification, in order to drive efficiency, takes precedent over a new wave of social distancing and space.

All of this is entirely up for grabs, what is sure though is that cities have the potential to evolve, to move into a new decade with a fresh outlook and way of catering for their inhabitants. Indeed, cities across the world have already started to rethink what people will find once they come out of lockdown.

**Brussels**

In our capital, pedestrians are being given greater power within the city. Speed limits are being reduced to 20km/h and cyclists and pedestrians will have the priority on roads.

The measures being taken across the world are the mere tip of the iceberg for what is sure to come as cities begin to instigate long-term changes and plans to create whole new ways of interacting with urban space. Many of these initiatives, like cleaner transportation, digitalised access to cities and more greenery are not new thoughts but instead have been accelerated by the health crisis and our need to have them in place immediately. The way our cities are built will undoubtedly change as this crisis offers up a window of opportunity to prioritize what our growing priorities are, how we as inhabitants of the city react to these changes remains to be seen.

**Rome**

Speaking to the Transport Research Laboratory of the University of Roma Tre, Enrico Stefàno, Chairman of the Transport Committee of the city of Rome set out that, “We will immediately create and strengthen sustainable alternatives such as safe cycling and pedestrian routes, and we will re-launch inter- and multi-modal alternatives that are going well in our city. I am thinking of the experiences with bike or mopeds sharing, but also with the e-scooters that is a service that we are going to launch soon and could partially fill a demand for transport that should be redistributed at different times. (...) As for virtuous and sustainable behaviours for the mobility of people, this crisis gives us the opportunity to accelerate the transition towards sustainable behaviours for the movement of goods, and therefore to accelerate the implementation of that plan.”
Milan

In Milan the city is gearing up to become more bike orientated than ever before, introducing 35kms of extra cycling lanes, bringing the total in the city up to 235kms.

During the lockdown, the need for people to have greater access to services on their doorstep was clearly identified, so the city is planning to rethink its neighbourhoods, meaning people will be no further than 15 minutes away from supermarkets, police stations, post offices and hospitals.

Paris

The city of Paris is set to further advocate the use of bikes, creating 650kms of pop-up “corona cycleways” across the Ile-de-France region. The bike lanes will run parallel to the RER train lines, giving people the option to take their bike instead of public transport to get around. An investment of €300 million will be made to encourage this sustainable new way of travel across the region.

Dublin

Dublin has announced plans to widen the space available to pedestrians by cutting down road space and removing loading bays and parking spaces. The plan is to give people more space to walk, run or cycle and reduce the number of cars in the city center.

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