

Rethinking neighbourhoods

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has restricted the movements of millions of people around the world, causing our social and physical worlds to shrink. This enforced time spent in vicinity of our own homes offers us the opportunity to reflect on what we cherish and what we might wish to change about our own neighbourhoods. In this Viewpoint, we consider the effects of the pandemic on urban planning and design, and argue for an active commitment to creating better neighbourhoods.

It is human nature to want to live in clustered groups. When small bands grew into villages, and villages grew into cities, the neighbourhood was born: a group to belong to within the boundless, impersonal city. Even amidst all the technological ‘advances’ that allow us to sprawl out, order online, and stay at home in front of our computers and televisions, humans still search for ways to cluster. As Lewis Mumford (1954) attested: neighbourhoods are simply the “social facts” of cities.

So what is the effect of this neighbourhood instinct under COVID-19, with its restrictions on human clustering? The potential long-run effects of the pandemic on urban life have already brought forward a range of debates and occasionally contradictory predictions – but what is clear is that the current situation affords us an opportunity to reflect on how we think about neighbourhoods as urban planning professionals and academics. The argument put forward here is a simple one: neighbourhoods are central to urban life, and in an ever-urbanising world are only likely to become more important. If anything has changed, it is that we are now acutely aware of our local surroundings – brick and mortar, stranger and friend – the streets we encounter in the daily escapes from the four walls of our homes. In grasping this opportunity to rethink neighbourhoods, we might facilitate urban change that makes us more resilient to future threats and improve the lived experience of cities at the same time.

In this essay we identify a number of issues concerning the nature of neighbourhoods that may generate more interest once restrictions on movement are relaxed. It seems unlikely there will be paradigmatic change, not least because the urban fabric evolves slowly. Some consequences may offset each other: more people working from home might make for quieter roads during rush hour, but concerns about over-crowded public transport might push others towards private

vehicles. A large number of factors will determine how neighbourhoods, cities and regions will be affected. For these reasons, we steer clear of predictions and instead reflect on a number of issues in relation to neighbourhoods that both urban planners and local citizens might consider when a semblance of normality resumes. Even though everything a localised social grouping might be based on may seem to have lost relevance long before the pandemic – extended families living in the same locale, face-to-face communication as the main form of social connection, the close integration of work and residence, daily shopping at the corner market – neighbourhoods continue to matter in all kinds of ways.

A new sidewalk ballet?

The recognition of interconnections between the urban form and public health precede the modern urban planning profession. Indeed many major infrastructure interventions have been predicated on epidemiological grounds. So if, as seems likely, some form of social distancing continues once more stringent restrictions on movements are lifted, then urban design may once again have to adapt to meet new requirements. Emerging research reveals that only 36% of pavements in Greater London are at least three metres wide (i.e. an approximate minimum required for people to keep two metres apart) (UCL, 2020). The space devoted to cars has long been a complaint of many urban planners; requiring more space for pedestrians and cyclists may lead to a recalibration of space devoted to transportation. Already, pop-up bike lanes have been created from Bogotá to Berlin in attempt to encourage workers to maintain social distance whilst commuting. Such a change can bring benefits: not only can cyclists move more safely whilst not hindering traffic, fewer car journeys improves air quality. The benefits of more walkable cities are well established too. Now many of us will be more aware of how walkable our neighbourhoods are and more attuned to the importance of access to local amenities for the vulnerable and those without access to private motorised transport.

Green shoots

Perhaps the least controversial revelation of the present situation is the importance of open, green space. The role of urban parks have long been recognised: Victoria Park, the first public green space in London was championed on health grounds by the epidemiologist William Farr, opening in 1845. Pre-eminent planners such as Ebenezer Howard, Frederick Law Olmstead Jr. and Le Corbusier all placed green space at the centre of their plans. More recently, prominent urban transformations such as the High Line in New York and Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway in Boston have placed greenery at their heart. In addition to their benefits on physical and mental health, parks provide habitat for wildlife, cleaner air and aid in urban cooling. What the current situation has brought into focus however, is the unequal access to green space. Green infrastructure requires investment. In the UK, green space provision is a discretionary (as opposed to statutory) service that has been predictably hit by a decade of austerity (Whitten,

2020). As we rethink neighbourhoods we should embrace green space through living walls, green roofs, greenways and pocket parks such that all neighbourhoods provide adequate green space.

New municipalism?

The economic effects of COVID-19 will be significant. We know from past recessions that more deprived communities and less-educated households are less able to cope with economic shocks, and so urban policy post-pandemic must be tailored to such unequal local economic impacts. This said, there are opportunities. With interest rates at historic lows, national governments are likely to turn to large stimulus programmes to reignite global economies. Investment in infrastructure and public works could have massive effects on new and existing neighbourhoods. In his recent book, Colenutt (2020) cites examples from Germany and the Netherlands where local governments are buying up land at existing use value, drawing up masterplans and offering sites to housebuilders, thus circumventing the planning gain problem. With this type of municipal oversight, what type of neighbourhoods might we create? History provides plenty of lessons concerning the planned neighbourhood (see Talen, 2019a), but it is not just new neighbourhoods that might benefit from public sector investment. Existing neighbourhoods are replete with quick-turnaround opportunities for improvement through restoring civic buildings, improving parks, expanding cycling lanes, upgrading street furniture, and extending and improving broadband networks – all of which will bolster local economies whilst helping create better places.

Density

The issue of density will no doubt continue to be contentious in planning circles. The UK Government's recent turn toward urban design has generally promoted increased density (MHCLG, 2019). Although density is often regarded as a good thing (denser neighbourhoods are more energy efficient and economic activity benefits from greater proximity), a number of early commentaries have suggested that fear of future pandemics may lead to widespread aversion to denser forms of housing or be leveraged by those whose wish to promote lower densities. Early analysis of 284 Chinese cities however suggests that density is not a key determinant in the transmission of COVID-19, and indeed, since higher density cities are often wealthier, they have the infrastructure and fiscal resources to combat public health emergencies (Fang and Wahba, 2020). If calls for “gentle diversity” in the Victorian and Georgian styles are to be met for example (Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, 2020), the challenge for planners will be to find design solutions for homes and neighbourhoods that meet with public acceptance. There are ways to maintain density and also allow social distancing. Low density housing in the form of car-dependent sprawl will never be the answer, but high-rise density requiring people to

cram together in elevators may not be appropriate either. Density comes in many forms – what has always mattered most is the quality of the urbanism.

Working from home

In many countries, lockdowns were accompanied by an active encouragement to work from home. Almost overnight a significant proportion of the workforce switched to homeworking. It is hard to imagine this will not have at least some long-lasting effect on the nature of work, simultaneously reconfiguring the home itself and increasing the time spent in local neighbourhoods. Demand will no doubt increase for high-speed broadband and housing choices may change with less of the population tied to dwellings at commutable distances. But what other effects might this have on neighbourhoods? Will people desire quieter neighbourhoods with more garden space as a buffer? Perhaps an increase in home deliveries will require specialised infrastructure such as drop off points? The effect of such changes will not alter neighbourhoods overnight, but as the weight of individual alterations accumulate, their effects will require careful analysis. Such shifts are likely to highlight the importance of everyday services and facilities for workers who no longer travel outside the neighbourhood to work. There are social justice ramifications here too. Lower-paid jobs tend to be less amenable to home-based work, and in the UK at least, the more affluent regions of the South East and London have higher shares of self-employed and workers able to work from home. This points to the importance of promoting external as well as internal connectivity and guarding against successful neighbourhoods becoming middle-class enclaves.

As more people work from home, main streets will be increasingly relied upon to service home workers throughout the day. Closer integration between work space and the public realm – new kinds of meeting spaces and pop-up offices – will motivate more investment in public space (Woods, 2020). The rise of neighbourhood-based co-working is likely to stimulate main street retail, especially for businesses that had already been integrating online delivery and storefront operations. An emphasis on localising and new aversions to everything “big” (e.g. large work places like office towers) is likely to be good for neighbourhood-based retailing. But as these streets transition, finding their footing within a new post-pandemic social and economic reality, neighbourhood organisations will likely need to be vigilant and step up efforts to fill commercial spaces and address the negative effects of vacant storefronts.

Social connection and collective action

Neighbourhoods matter because they provide social connection, the maintenance of which in an era of social distancing is more important than ever. This connection might be as simple as exchanging a glance with a fellow resident when shopping in a local shop or nodding when passing someone on the street. Neighbourhoods matter for political relevance too, providing a means through which collective action can take place. Neighbourhoods define a collective

enterprise, and small actions derive meaning by being situated within them. The spot interventions of do-it-yourself city repair, like painting a piazza in an intersection, or ‘taking back the block’ by putting up chairs and tables in the street, are stories that are situated in, and derive meaning from, a neighbourhood. In US cities with neighbourhood representation, collective life translates to real political power. The neighbourhood makes collective life possible and productive. A neighbourhood is within reach; the city, the place of globalised capital, is not. This could have an equalising effect, since inequality inherent in global capitalism – which many argue is perpetuated by neoliberal city governments eager to dole out corporate subsidies – is a debate that is not as easily obscured at the level of neighbourhood. Within a collectively organised neighbourhood, problems can be addressed by an engaged constituency.

In the UK, a proliferation of mutual aid groups have sprung up as neighbours seek to provide support for the most vulnerable during isolation. Anecdotal evidence suggests this has brought communities together across social and demographic divides, particularly among younger urban residents for whom the affordability crisis has made urban living both precarious and transient (Shenker, 2020). This return to communities of place could be maintained post-pandemic through a reengagement with neighbourhoods. Neighbourhoods served with physical community infrastructure (town halls, libraries, pubs, shops) bolster the social solidarity and local identity necessary to promote community participation. Such considerations point to the importance of the neighbourhood as a spatial unit, a frame for built environment professionals, and for all of us as residents.

The pandemic will pose thorny new problems for those charged with the governance of towns and cities, and entrench existing ones – but perhaps there is a moment of opportunity in the time spent in the immediate vicinity of our homes: more than ever, we are generating local knowledge. One of the lessons of statutory Neighbourhood Planning in England has been the enthusiasm of thousands of communities for shaping their neighbourhoods, often in innovative and exciting ways. Although the exclusively pro-growth orientation of the policy has produced mixed results (Wargent, 2020), it has at least sought to marry the dual components of a physical plan and an ongoing community process (see Talen, 2019b). Neighbourhood planning can be used to clarify what we value – how neighbourhoods matter in terms of identity, access, connection and empowerment – and if we know what we value about neighbourhoods, then we can be confident in asserting what we want them to be. As many of us become more aware of the physical limits of our neighbourhood, reflect on what we cherish and what we might seek to change, perhaps now is the ideal time to encourage representative neighbourhood participation and promote progressive change through neighbourhood planning.

Better neighbourhoods

Despite the ubiquity of neighbourhoods in all human settlements, the concept of ‘the neighbourhood’ continues to be at once contested and ambiguous (Talen, 2019a). We know that poorly planned neighbourhoods create negative externalities, not only for local communities but

for wider society and the environment. That these issues have become more visible presents an opportunity to reflect: reliance on neighbours, community services and local amenities may serve as a useful reminder of the importance of creating resilient neighbourhoods. Taking up the cause of better neighbourhoods is a task for any us who sees value in making neighbourhoods more relevant to our lives. Professional planning faces a dizzying range of new and enduring dilemmas (Wargent and Tasan-Kok, 2020), but nonetheless taking up the cause of neighbourhoods presents an opportunity for real change to peoples' lives. Moments of rupture provide opportunities to reflect on the *status quo ante*, and perhaps the time many of us have spent in our own neighbourhoods will provide a mandate to change them. As we emerge from the worst effects of the pandemic, there will be an understandable urge on behalf of both governments and citizens to return to 'business as usual' as quickly as possible – however the trick will lie not in simply returning to business as usual, but to commit to better neighbourhoods that create great cities.

Neighbourhoods matter for everyone – and not just in ways that are about being rich or poor. Neighbourhood life is about more than access to a grocery store or how close you are to a highway exit. It is about identity, social connection, and empowerment. In times of crisis, calls for neighbour helping neighbour become a rallying cry, giving the neighbourhood an elevated role in the political and cultural life of a nation. In *Community Building*, Aronovici (1956) defined neighbourhood as “a place where everyone knows what everyone else is doing and cares”, a “spiritual concept” endowed with “a soul”, and the crucial step between family and citizenship. These aspirations will continue. Local attachment, social connection, and place stewardship are the common descriptors of what living in a real neighbourhood is supposed to be about. Caring about the places around us – our neighbourhoods – is the very root of democracy, and the present crisis has only elevated the importance of place, participation, and the need for an active commitment to it.

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