



RESILIENT CITIES

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Reframing Public Spaces as Civic Goods for Resilient Cities



“Human parking spaces” in Mission Dolores Park in San Francisco, May 2020.
Image: Courtesy of Natasha Chu

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that public spaces are essential for community resilience and quality of life. Beyond disaster responses and protective infrastructure, city resilience frameworks must incorporate access to public space and evaluate how amenities such as walking paths and informal spaces are distributed.

As COVID-19 sweeps through cities around the world, governments have ordered businesses to shut and residents to shelter at home. This extraordinary combination of physical distance, emotional isolation and limited mobility—often for weeks or months on end—has exacerbated existing urban challenges while revealing opportunities for action. Cities must embark on serious soul-searching to re-examine the values they believe will truly matter in a “new normal”.

A Renewed Mandate for Resilient Design

While urban planners typically regard open spaces, such as parks, as desirable amenities, the ongoing pandemic shows these are not only beneficial but also vital. Once viewed as spaces for leisure, sport or monuments, parks are now also appreciated for their social, economic, cultural and environmental value. Planners increasingly recognise how parks nurture civic identity and boost physical and mental health. Still, open spaces too often are an afterthought—a box for developers to tick. Many cities in the developing world still lack sidewalks, much less adequate open space for residents.

This must change. COVID-19 heightens the urgency for planners to ensure that high-quality public spaces, with sufficient area for physical distancing, are available to all. It is crucial for liveability and, in times of pandemic, basic survival.

Parks and plazas are generally considered “social” places: William Whyte’s seminal studies of New York suggested that “what attracts people most...is other people.” While the social nature of our species gives this continued merit, what has attracted people in the current crisis is the absence of other people.

Future designers must accommodate these competing uses, so that parks can host social gatherings in normal times, while enabling safe distancing for park-goers during a pandemic. Their design approach must also be climate-sensitive: in tropical cities, heat and humidity leave monumental lawns without shade (popular in temperate cities) conspicuously empty—a missed opportunity for other suitable uses.

Conventional ideas of “accessibility” are also due for a rethink. Cities must emphasise the quality of open space, not merely its presence. There are vast differences among

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To better serve users, public space designers must take into account climatic conditions. In the tropics, people tend to avoid places without shade, which can become unbearably hot in the daytime.

Image: Centre for Liveable Cities

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a tiny pocket park within walking distance of one's home, a privately owned, publicly accessible open space that can be chained shut by a company, and a large public commons that supports physical activity. Evaluating quality and access must also prioritise equity. When planners measure ease of access across households, they can also account for factors such as income, ethnicity, language, physical ability, gender and age, to ensure that all residents have equal access to public spaces, and to identify areas that need improvement.

Valuing Informal Places, Promoting Public Goods

Many informal spaces, often taken for granted, are shut and sorely missed during the pandemic. Though not marked as parks on government land-use maps, they

still serve important social functions. Singaporeans, for example, gather in local coffee shops or *kopitiam*, hawker centres that serve meals, and the void decks of public housing blocks. While traditional parks are still needed, the value of informal spaces should not be underestimated.

As cities look to the future, planners can strive to identify and track these informal spaces—observing and engaging with the public where they spend their time rather than hosting a town hall meeting. After mapping and inventorying these spaces, planners can better recognise what the public values and incorporate their preferences into development plans.

Even without a pandemic, the need for genuinely public spaces pervades many cities in Asia.

The public can visit shopping malls to shop, eat and enjoy air-conditioning, but these privately owned complexes are still “financialised” spaces that value people only by their spending, and may thus be exclusionary.

Cities would do well to ask themselves: do they really need another shopping mall? Or are there public alternatives, such as parks, hiking trails and accessible waterfronts, that would better serve citizens, both in good times and bad? In Hong Kong, for example, malls continued to operate during the pandemic, but many residents chose to hike in country parks rather than shop in stores. Their preference for natural landscapes proves the point of Hong Kong's urban activists, who have consistently resisted proposals to open cherished nature areas to real estate development.

Seize the Moment: Stakes are Low, Willingness Is High

With street activity on hold, cities have a moment to breathe. It is an opportune moment to reconsider the balance of streets for cars versus people, and to ask whether valuable land should be held hostage to automobile traffic and parking lots. From January through May this year, more than 50 cities, ranging from Boston and Cologne to Lima and Sydney, closed at least one road or lane to motor vehicles, allowing the public more space to exercise. A good proportion of these experiments proved popular with residents and may become permanent.

Upgrading walking paths gives more space for residents to enjoy the outdoors, both improving liveability and strengthening sense of place. Adding cycling lanes or pedestrian-only areas is sometimes opposed by retailers, who mistakenly believe that reducing parking spaces will negatively impact their businesses. The opposite is true: greater foot and cycling traffic can drive spending and boost sales. With great change already afoot, cities can seize the moment to improve sidewalks, return parking lots to pedestrians and complete cycling infrastructure, without triggering the usual predictions of economic disaster. The non-profit Regional Plan Association in New York released a proposal for an expanded network of linked cycling paths throughout the city, while New Zealand will support cities with an “Innovating Streets for People” fund. If dovetailed with pandemic resilience-building efforts, swift action on such projects can overcome the usual inertia and deliver results.

Decentralising Jobs, Revitalising Historic Neighbourhoods

Spurred on by COVID-19, transformative change can also distribute amenities citywide, instead of clustering them in a Central Business District (CBD). The mayor of Paris has floated the concept of a “15-minute city” where housing, work, groceries, healthcare, education and leisure are accessible to local households on foot or by bicycle. Historic mixed-use hutong neighbourhoods, such as Da Shi Lar (大柵欄/大柵栏) in Beijing, serve as inspirations: they offer most necessities that residents need, in closely nestled courtyards and alleyways. By contrast, the glut of segregated housing estates constructed in recent years provides far fewer amenities and services.

CBDs are frequently congested during the day while hollowing out at night. Now is the time to create and distribute job opportunities and foster “complete” neighbourhoods that contain a full suite of amenities needed for everyday life. Working from home has proven feasible, while community-serving small businesses, from dry-cleaning to professional services, can also be encouraged. Co-working spaces in neighbourhoods could support entrepreneurs, remote teams and knowledge-based industries. Millennials, who prefer flexible but social spaces, may appreciate the opportunity to live and work in revitalised, historic neighbourhoods, with adaptive reuse projects reducing the need for premium downtown office space. Working close to home will also facilitate greater interaction with neighbours and engender closer community bonds.

Accessible and Equitable Public Space in a “New Normal”

As countries emerge from the pandemic, insights about public space can positively influence how cities are planned and managed. Planners can think of public spaces not only for recreation, but as a critical element of resilience. Parks must accommodate diverse and distanced activities, and change function during public health crises. Informal spaces, sidewalks and cycling paths are other excellent public amenities to expand quickly and inclusively. With some imagination, these features can rise above being mere mobility corridors to enhancing quality of life. In this process, historic districts can inspire planners seeking to decentralise jobs and amenities, in pursuit of “complete” neighbourhoods. Access, quality and inclusiveness of public space will be new fundamentals for resilient cities adapting to the “new normal”. 📍