

Corona, the Compact City and Crises

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**UNDER THE SKY**

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# Corona, the Compact City and Crises

The Covid-19 pandemic might have a lasting impact on the way we deal with our built environment and open spaces. From its start, scholars and practitioners have felt the need to reflect on its consequences, which are spatial and social as well as political and economic.<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing, social distancing still determines how public space is used in many countries around the world. Some authors are convinced that the current situation will become permanent and there is subsequently an urgency to envision future scenarios to make cities more resilient to epidemiological crises. Will the central design question of the future consist of the search for a 'balanced proximity'?<sup>2</sup> Despite the social unanimity and selfless efforts that the pandemic brought with it, the health emergency also highlights the social and economic inequalities that exist. Susceptibility and exposure to Covid-19 has proven to be far greater for minorities and lower-income groups, as they are often less able to socially distance. How could urban open spaces be adapted, transformed or designed in order to respond to the needs of everybody and offer more equitable accessibility?

The pandemic is stirring up discussions on knowledge, expertise, politics and policies all over the world. The political response, and the measures and means taken to combat the virus, highlight the differences in prosperity, knowledge and democratic capacity between different countries. Unprecedented international scientific cooperation to find a way out of the crisis is therefore being overshadowed by a geopolitical joust, in which Covid-19 is used as a pretext to exacerbate conflicts that were on the table long before the outbreak of the virus. The relationship between science and politics is being pushed to the forefront: the role of experts in giving advice to a government that thereby makes well-considered decisions in the interest of society has been undermined in many countries. The way—mainly medical and economic—experts find themselves now in the middle of a tense political arena, raises many questions: not only questions about the relationship between science and economy, but also about a more holistic approach to a critical situation. How can we ensure that other voices, those of for example sociologists or psychologists, but also the ones of designers, urban planners and ecologists, weigh on solutions in the short and the long term?

In the couple of months since the outbreak of the pandemic, Covid-19 has already contributed to revealing what the future role of landscape architecture and urban design in facing eventual similar crises might be. The direct relationship between air pollution and the death rate due to the virus has given weight to active, low-impact transport, and cities such as London or Turin are currently implementing their green transportation infrastructures. As the risk of contracting the virus appears to be lower outdoors, pressure is higher on local green open spaces in terms of the social benefits they provide, particularly for both mental and physical health. A variety of temporary new designs or initiatives to transform urban landscapes and increase their use were quickly implemented: they included the temporary closure of urban streets to traffic that aimed to provide more public spaces in closer proximity to residential areas; the prompt adaptation of public parks to social distancing, as shown by the already iconic images of the white circles painted on the lawn of Domino Park in Brooklyn to define those areas that can be spontaneously colonized; or the current implementation of outdoor land-based curricula for schools, such as those that are being defined in Scotland. As ephemeral designs for streets, parks, sports fields, playgrounds or schoolgrounds implemented in the last few months show, new sociospatial solutions, both temporary and permanent, are needed across the world.

Of course, the development of design solutions driven by crisis or risk is not a new task.<sup>3</sup> It influenced how public spaces were designed, but it was also an important factor in the (re)design of cities and urban regions in general. In transforming the medieval town into the modern metropolis—with the Haussmannization of Paris as the example *par excellence*—the prevention of epidemics was one of the reasons for the construction of boulevards and parks as well as sewer systems, a venture with a profound social, economic and political impact. Landscape architecture and urbanism provided the machinery and spatial form to address human well-being by remediating the flaws of the historically grown, compact city by means of demolition and the introduction of open spaces. In the Garden City idea, hygienic motives (such as the prevention of contagious diseases) accompanied both social-reformist ideas about the emancipation of the lower classes and the ambition to create a city based on low density and a safe distance

between different social groups. The quest for a safe, individualized and green living environment, however, nurtured waves of suburbanization and dispersion.

While once low-density settlements with a greater number of green spaces were thought to address questions of urban health and hygiene, solutions for our existing environmental crisis are sought in re-densification. However, as a result of the recent pandemic, the value of density has been questioned from various angles, because it complicates social distancing. In the *JoLA* theme issue on Compact Cities (1-2019), the challenges of dense cities raised by urban researchers were listed: not only crowdedness and lack of open space, but also inequitable access to urban amenities, urban poverty and decline in psychological health. Vulnerability to a contagious disease wasn't included in the list of the disadvantages that high-density cities might bring with them, as this had not been a priority on any political agenda in quite some time. In issue 1-2019, it was argued that compactness formulates an adequate response to the current-day ecological problems and the climate crisis, by reducing suburbanization and unbridled land-take to start with. This leads to the following question: can solutions for the Covid-19 crisis be reconciled with re-densification, providing a possible way out of the climate crisis? How can the problem of the locked-up crowds in dense cities, lacking access to green open spaces or other green infrastructures on a metropolitan and regional scale, be related to questions on how selective urban growth or densification is compatible with increasing biodiversity and reinforcing ecologically performant green infrastructure?

Apart from the intelligent ephemeral design solutions mentioned above, landscape architects can respond to the conflicting demands by designing new types of public spaces, green infrastructures and urban development strategies that work across scales and integrate responses to both climate change and the epidemiological crisis, together with urban planners, traffic engineers, ecologists, sociologists, epidemiologists, health experts, policymakers and the public arena at large. Globalism and its unbridled transport of goods and people are triggers for both the Covid-19 and the climate crisis, and it is plausible that the climate will benefit from the raised awareness and 'demystification' of globalism (and for that matter, neoliberalism) during the pandemic. As more localized means of production and consumption (of food and other resources) as well as low-impact transportation methods are related to a decrease in air pollution, how does it reflect in our discipline? How can the design of our cities and open spaces accommodate systemic change, for example through 'urban mining', local production of energy or reuse of water? These questions are not new, but they gain urgency in the present context that calls for a reinvestment in the local. Another issue that will determine post-Covid-19 design is the persistence of the virus and the availability of a vaccine.

It is clear that climate change has become a latent crisis. But it is uncertain how long and to what extent social distancing measures arising from Covid-19 will need to be in place and how extreme they will be or if there will be recurring pandemics of other viruses. We might think of this critical situation not only as a challenge to design for the '1-metre society', but also as an opportunity to rethink public space, and its relation to private space in an equitable and resilient way.

The present crisis confronts us both with uncertainty for the future of our cities and with the way we deal with natural phenomena. From the current debate on urban resilience and insights in urban ecology, the need emerges to be prepared for constant change: we operate in contexts that don't automatically evolve to an equilibrium 'end state', no matter how far we think to control them. The first response to the pandemic, however, is regaining control by means of surveillance, or as architect and urban theorist Ross Exo Adams puts it: we're dealing with an urban space 'made whole only through the associative metadata relevant to re-presenting the urban as a population-system—an ecology of bodies immersed in a climate of emergency'.<sup>4</sup> Landscape architecture and urbanism are essential for *spatializing* instead of *abstracting* our response to the health risk, by localizing our solution in the fabric of the city, its nature and those who live in it. Both the climate and the Covid-19 crises urge us to rethink relationships between culture and nature, and between humans and other-than-humans. An emphasis on keeping ourselves and each other safe is accompanied with a renewed interest in the local and the well-being of all. Landscape architecture and urbanism can take up the challenge on the terrain, whatever crisis we want to tackle.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Kammerbauer, 'Corona and the Built Environment', *Topos Blog* 20 March 2020, [www.toposmagazine.com/corona-and-the-built-environment/](http://www.toposmagazine.com/corona-and-the-built-environment/), accessed 28 May 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Gandy, 'The Bacteriological City and Its Discontents', *Historical Geography* 34 (2006), 14-25; Martin V. Melosi, *The Sanitary City: Environmental Services in Urban America from Colonial Times to the Present* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Ross Exo Adams, 'An Ecology of Bodies', *The Avery Review* 14 (March 2020), [www.averyreview.com/issues/14/an-ecology-of-bodies](http://www.averyreview.com/issues/14/an-ecology-of-bodies), accessed 11 June 2020.

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