

A Reset for Cities?

The novel coronavirus has been especially tough on America's cities—stripping away cultural and social amenities and spotlighting stark realities of income inequality, inadequate healthcare, and punitive policing. Alumni and faculty experts weigh in on whether and how they can be reimagined for a post-pandemic world.

By JoAnn Greco

Winter is upon us and our discontent is palpable. While local conditions vary according to public health policies and the level of coronavirus spread, Americans overall continue to experience the places in which we live, work, recreate, learn, shop, and go to the doctor/dentist, etc. quite differently than ... before.

That's particularly true for people in cities, where the COVID-19 pandemic—and a coterie of concurrent developments—has left an especially deep mark. “Every inequity that many of us have

been talking about for decades has been not only revealed, but exacerbated,” declares former Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter W’79, currently the David N. Dinkins Professor at Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs and a senior fellow at Penn’s Institute for Urban Research. “From incarceration, healthcare, and economics to access to the internet, transit, and parks, every facet of society has been touched. The tenuous nature and fragility of cities has been drastically, even devastatingly, impacted.”

Our cities even *feel* different—leading many to question the value of living amid empty office space and boarded-up stores, barely-there cultural institutions, and crippled restaurants. The pandemic “has been a wakeup call,” says Philadelphia City Planning Commission Executive Director Eleanor Sharpe GCP’99 WEv’09.

“The pandemic has shaken the foundations of our cities and how their economies are structured, for sure,” agrees Ryan Debold GCP’14, managing director at Drexel University’s Lindy Institute for Urban Innovation. “Who’s considered essential, how are they compensated, who has access to healthcare, who gets

to build wealth? It's all on the table, and it will be impossible to ignore and to not scrutinize any planning decision from these perspectives from here on out."

Is it time, then, to try the stuff that urban planners' dreams are made of? "The reasons we have cities is for work and commerce and for people to come together to recreate and innovate," says Eugenie Birch, the Lawrence C. Nussdorf Professor of Urban Research & Education and codirector of the Penn Institute for Urban Research, which has unveiled several initiatives aimed at unpacking the impact of the pandemic on cities. (See sidebar, page 51.) "City planners are now rethinking those intersections. They're interested in reevaluating land use and encouraging density while keeping urban populations safe and healthy."

The pandemic has spurred many cities to take actions long advocated by planners but not often given priority. "When the federal government began printing money and cities started suspending regulations to make, say, dining outside so much easier, I was like, *Wait a second, we could have done this all along?*" says Sharpe. "Decisions like that have changed both the look of the city and the way we look at the city."

During the pandemic, uses became fluid: unbooked hotel rooms transitioned to emergency housing for the homeless and shuttered restaurants began selling their bulk food inventory to the public. "I hope we've learned to consider more flexibility in how we use spaces," says Debold, who specializes in land use policy and equitable development.

Crisis begets ingenuity. Gilles Duranton, the Dean's Chair in Real Estate at the Wharton School, notes that we have cholera to thank for sewers, tuberculosis for access to air and light, and overcrowding for the boulevards of 19th-century Paris. "Cities have always been adaptable to reframing how they operate," he says. "Whether it's creating more open space for humans to congregate comfortably or converting office and

retail space for a new kind of need, I'm confident that we'll adapt." After all, few imagined that one day we'd have thousands of self-storage facilities, Airbnbs, or coworking spaces.

On the other hand, the need to maintain social distance during the pandemic has given a big boost to things we think of as anti-city: solo transport instead of shared mass transit, working and convening from home, attending arts events and happy hours ... from home, learning and shopping...from home. If cities are about chaos and intersectionality and happenstance, do these pod-like situations pose a threat to that existence?

Steven Conn Gr'94, the W. E. Smith Professor of History at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, and author of *Americans Against the City: Anti-Urbanism in the 20th Century* (2014), remains confident that "the city" will rebound. "Cities have proven to be remarkably resilient in the face of bombings, terrorism, invasions, hurricanes, pandemics," he says. "I fully expect that there will be a certain amount of business churn, shifting populations, decreased rents, and the like. But wouldn't it also be great if, as they rebuild, cities undergo a useful and much-needed reset to become fully accessible to lower-income and middle-class families and to small businesses? Cities should return to serving as the first place where you go to get on the economic escalator?"

Cities teem with individuals who create and participate in a host of intricate systems that transport, protect, and govern their inhabitants, that provide housing and recreation and places to shop and work. As these systems confront fiscal vulnerabilities and questions of access, it might be time to consider just what exactly makes a city a place where we can all thrive.

Planning For Everyone

Talk to experts and a general picture of the ideal city emerges: a place hospitable to those starting out, those who have made it big, and everyone in between.

Its neighborhoods abound in parks and play spaces and there are plenty of opportunities for independent shops and innovative startups. Equitable and green modes of transportation dominate, not highways and cars. And, of course, it's safe and well-run.

Attaining this vision starts with the discipline of urban planning—which imagines, and provides guideposts for, how residents will use, enjoy, and flourish in a city's streets, green spaces, and buildings. "Cities that make residents feel as if there's a plan in place, with good leadership backing it up, will win back their confidence," says Richard Voith G'80 Gr'86, principal and specialist in real estate economics and transportation at the Philadelphia-based consulting firm Econsult Solutions.

Consider those empty office buildings and storefronts. Duranton, who studies urban economics and land use, suggests that we move toward truly mixing up our spaces, as Tokyo and other Asian megacities do, stacking restaurants and shops high in the sky in the same buildings that hold apartments and offices. Birch points out that as corporations left Center City and other downtowns for suburban office parks in years past, office-into-condo conversions took off. Conn suggests that instead of bemoaning the "exodus" from expensive cities like San Francisco and New York we welcome the drops in mortgage rates and rents that will make it easier for newcomers to settle in those meccas or in other less pricey places.

Debold would love to see opportunities for "incentivizing Black-owned small businesses, which are underrepresented in many cities with large Black populations, and especially so in Philly." (A recent Center City District report noted that Philadelphia's overall weak business climate includes just 1.8 Black firms per 1,000 Black residents, compared to five in Washington, DC; 4.7 in Atlanta; 3.4 in New York; and 2.5 in Boston.)

Sharpe adds that planners must keep in mind other signifiers of economic and

social health—parks, grocery stores, clinics, affordable housing—in attempting to fill in the gaps and make tattered neighborhoods complete. “That’s complicated when cities are dealing with communities at the base poverty level or below it and don’t often have the luxury of thinking aspirationally. Since, ultimately, planners are not the decision-makers, the political will has to be there,” she cautions.

Others suggest that the discipline should assume a more activist stance. “I recognize that planners may not have real power, but they shouldn’t kid themselves that if they remain disinterested observers anyone will take their advice,” says Lance Freeman, an urban planning professor at Columbia University who is joining the Weitzman School of Design as this year’s provost’s distinguished visiting faculty fellow. “Planning has been implicated in racial inequity since its beginnings during the disastrous history of urban renewal and through racist practices like red-lining and exclusionary zoning.”

He cites as a welcome corrective the recent decision by Minneapolis to become the first US city (followed by the states of Oregon and California) to eliminate single-family zoning—a move designed to increase housing supply and affordability by allowing apartment complexes as well as houses to be built in an area. Freeman, whose research focuses on affordable housing, gentrification, and ethnic and racial stratifications in the real estate market, would like to see planners push such ideas with more vigor.

As a Black woman, Sharpe thinks it would help if her field was more racially diverse. Before COVID, her city planning commission office had begun going into elementary schools and making up planning exercises with the kids. As planners visualize their cities, she believes that diversity, inclusion, and equity must be part of the discussion. “There’s going to be a new emphasis on listening, an acknowledgment of the voices that haven’t often been heard.”

Breathing Room

Tone deafness to the needs of marginalized communities has often plagued placemaking attempts in the pandemic. “We definitely saw renewed arguments about whether closing streets to cars or allowing restaurants to add seating on the sidewalks are top-down decisions that only happen in affluent areas,” says Drexel’s Debold. “But on balance, I think these uses of existing public spaces work both from the standpoint of improving the public realm and in terms of opening up more square footage so restaurants, and even stores, could operate and thrive. From an equity standpoint, there’s no reason why these can’t happen citywide in other commercial corridors.”

By the summer in fact, municipalities were catching on to the desirability of expanding such efforts. For example, a batch of grants from the National Association of City Transportation Officials, in partnership with Bloomberg Philanthropies, allowed a handful of cities to implement programs designed to transform streets into public spaces in underserved communities. Among them, Denver, Philadelphia, and Portland, Oregon, issued proposals to help nonwhite and low-income business owners thrive through outdoor dining and commerce. And New York, Atlanta, and Minneapolis promised to create car-free streets near transit stations in neighborhoods most heavily affected by the pandemic, as a way to ease access to public transportation and/or connect residents to bike share docks.

Meanwhile, with indoor “third places” like public libraries, coffee shops, and gyms off-limits, city dwellers everywhere took a closer look around their neighborhoods and discovered just how much underutilized open space lay at their disposal. “Even before these crises, we were starting to see some reconsideration of how we use the public realm,” says Prema Gupta GFA’05, vice president for parks and public realm for the Center City District. Take the swings- and planter-filled Porch at Philadelphia’s 30th Street Station and the lush

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park setting of the 40th Street trolley portal, both of which were created under her watch a few years ago when she was director of planning and economic development for the University City District.

“What the pandemic did is accelerate that thinking,” Gupta continues. “It reminded us of how sacred even the smallest of open spaces are and how much unmet demand there is for them.” She points to Dilworth Park—an outdoor space managed by the Center City District that opened in 2014 featuring greenery, a centerpiece fountain that transforms into an ice rink in the winter, and a café that replaced a previously barren City Hall plaza—which “has become a crown jewel destination, with a diversity of users who come from all over the city. We crave connection and being able to people-watch and to enjoy shared experiences.”

Now that urban dwellers have gotten used to grabbing every patch of available land outside of their apartments and rowhomes, the “genie is out of the bottle,” Gupta adds with a laugh. “I’m really curious about whether we’re ever going to put it back in. I think we need to lean into what makes a city magical and keeps it competitive. Planners can advocate from their bubbles, but it’s more powerful when someone like a small business owner starts to consider whether she really needs those two parking spots in front of her restaurant.”

How People Move

Well, not so fast on those parking spaces. While urbanists like (no, *love*) to rail against the automobile, Americans in general don't share that distaste. Pandemic-sparked fears about using public transportation—compounded by bus and train service reductions—have only strengthened the demand for cars. Even in pedestrian-centric New York City, analysis from the *New York Times* shows, new car registrations went up by 18 percent during June and July compared to last summer. Meanwhile, according to market research company J.D. Power, used-vehicle sales rose 17 percent nationwide above pre-pandemic forecasts.

Only a handful of other nations depend on their cars as much as we do. "In most US cities, cars account for 90 percent of the way people travel," says Sam Schwartz GCE'70, former chief engineer for New York's Department of Transportation, author of *Street Smart: The Rise of Cities and the Fall of Cars* (2015), and fabled coiner of the term "gridlock" ["Street Fighter," Mar/Apr 2016]. "We've gone too far in relying on the automobile, and this is the moment to start making corrections."

Schwartz called for closing Times Square to traffic as far back as the 1970s and is a longtime advocate of congestion pricing to disincentivize car traffic in crowded downtown areas. (After decades of negotiation, America's first version of the pricing scheme is scheduled to be implemented in Manhattan in 2022.)

Prompted by the growing realization of how vulnerable mass transit can be in the face of natural and manmade disasters, he and other engineers recently released a proposal centered on three 20-foot-wide car-free bridges called "ribbons" that would connect Manhattan's central business districts with Queens, Brooklyn, and New Jersey. Touted as healthy, nearly risk-free, and equitable, each bridge would carry up to 20,000 people per day, for a combined capacity equal to "roughly 60 packed subway trains or roughly 50,000 cars," according to a report by the group.

Meanwhile, "getting public transit back on its feet is absolutely essential," says Voith, citing a recent study his firm did for SEPTA (Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority) showing that the agency generates a regional economic impact in excess of \$3 billion. "Trains have to be perceived as safe and clean. Bus lanes can't become parking lanes for cabs and Ubers. Good integration with rail and share services is important; so is improving how tech is used for schedule information and payments across systems. Public transportation needs to be valued and invested in."

The recovery will be tough. Systems across the country are facing budget shortfalls in the hundreds of millions, and in many cases billions, of dollars.

"The pandemic definitely highlighted the fact that mass transit is an essential service," says Leslie Richards GRP'93, general manager of SEPTA, which suffered a 92 percent decrease in ridership during the spring and has only rebounded to about 35 percent of its pre-COVID numbers. With a \$400 million loss projected through the next 12 to 18 months, the agency "obviously can't rely on fare-box revenue anymore," Richards continues. "We'll have to look at how emergency services such as fire and ambulance are funded and see if that's relevant. SEPTA, as well as every mass transit system in the entire country, did not stop for one day during the pandemic. We are an essential service—I can't say that enough—that is needed every single day."

Beyond its financial woes, mass transit also has its own issues of equity and fairness that need to be addressed—such as basic questions of cost, access to poorer neighborhoods, and concerns that fare evasion "crackdowns" are little more than a form of criminalizing poverty. Then again, as Los Angeles evaluates a move to a fare-free model, opponents contend that the tradeoff might involve service reductions, thereby harming more than they help. "The best systems are the ones that serve everybody,"

Schwartz says. "We just have to remember to focus on how people move rather than how vehicles move."

Public Safety Versus Policing

One of the most trenchant questions facing cities today is what should be done with urban police forces. In the face of widespread calls to reform their police departments, many cities have taken steps to address the issue, whether by cutting budgets and reallocating the money to social service agencies (New York and Los Angeles) or removing officers from certain roles (as in Portland, Oregon, where they no longer patrol high schools). In Chicago, municipal funding to local anti-violence initiatives has been increased even as police budgets stayed the same, while in Minneapolis, a plan to build an entirely new public safety department is under review.

For John MacDonald, a professor of criminology and sociology at the School of Arts and Sciences who studies disparities in criminal justice systems, police reform can't be separated from community services. "A blue-sky situation to me would include serious infrastructure and quality of life improvements, such as rebuilding housing stock, cleaning up vacant lots, and carving out more parks and spaces for people to let off steam and stay cool."

MacDonald is a proponent of community policing, which emphasizes a relationship-building, problem-solving approach between police and residents. "Research shows that people are more trustful of the police when they know an officer by name or sight, when they feel their interactions have been respectful, and when police exhibit interest in and concern for their complaints," he says, adding that any such program should include surveying community members on a regular basis about the quality of service they're getting from the police.

MacDonald is careful to emphasize that the police should continue to have a role in controlling crime. "The answer isn't

always about more or less officers but about making what they do more tactical, less scattershot,” he says. “And we need to think about higher standards for recruitment and training, providing opportunities for greater job mobility, and increasing professionalism all around.”

Michael Nutter—under whose mayoralty former Philadelphia Police Commissioner Charles H. Ramsey (now a distinguished policy fellow at Penn Law) made community policing a priority—agrees. “Why do we send someone who has had 30–40 weeks in an academy out on the street with a badge, handcuffs, a taser, and a gun to solve every problem?” he says. “For sure there are dangerous people in our society who shoot, stab, rape, maim, and kill and we need to deal with them. That’s why I like to talk about ‘public safety,’ which is done *for* you rather than ‘policing,’ which sounds like something that is done *to* you.”

Reimagine Everything

But, it’s not just the functions of the police, or of transit, or of public space that have been called into question during the pandemic. With cities and their mayors forced to grapple with a set of new predicaments and old ones made worse, everything is up for grabs. “As we come out of this, municipalities will be faced with unprecedented budget crunches and they will be reevaluating every service they offer,” predicts Nutter, who came into office as mayor on the eve of the last great economic crisis in 2008. “Why do we provide this service? Is it efficient? Is it cost-effective? Are we the best ones to do it?”

He points out that much of the leadership in the current interlinked crises has come from mayors and governors. “They were the ones issuing mask orders, stay-at-home orders, shutdown orders,” he says. “They were left alone to figure everything out. They didn’t have time for the bullshit, the standing behind a podium and saying everything is wonderful and under control. First of all, it’s a lie and second of all, it’s a lie.”

Learning From a Pandemic

“**W**hen this all first happened, we looked around Penn and said there’s a lot of people here who can talk about cities and contagion,” says Eugenie Birch, codirector of the Penn Institute for Urban Research. “So we asked them to contribute their ideas to the *Urban Link*, our monthly publication, and it became one of the most read documents we’ve ever released.”

As the pandemic continued, PennIUR began building an informal collection and in late May announced its Cities and COVID-19 Resource Library. An evolving online compendium of data, reports, webinars, podcasts, and articles, it’s categorized into five broad areas: governance and finance, economy and real estate, vulnerable populations, infrastructure and urban services, and planning and design.

Next, spinning off from an existing initiative looking at municipal fiscal stability, PennIUR partnered with the Volcker Alliance—a nonprofit launched by former Federal Reserve chair Paul Volcker to promote effective government management—to feature panel discussions on the coronavirus crisis economy. Later in the summer the Institute offered a second webinar series, *Research for Equity in Recovery*, presented with the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia and the Upjohn Institute.

Its latest initiative is a joint effort with the Mansueto Institute for Urban Innovation at the University of Chicago, the Center for Quality Growth and Regional Development at Georgia Tech, and Rice University’s Kinder Institute for Urban Research that will monitor the recovery of five big cities—New York and Philadelphia (which IUR will cover), along with Atlanta, Houston, and Chicago—using metrics for health, economy (including employment), fiscal status (budgets) and quality of life issues (transit, open space, work at home, etc.). “They will be looking at benchmarks,” Birch says. “What did the city look like in January 2020 and what did it look like at other points in time? Did they have to learn to turn on a dime and respond to things that they hadn’t before considered or were they instead prodded to take things out of their planning back pockets?”

Cities are going to have think more about preparedness for shocks, Birch concludes. “Just think of the last 20 years we’ve had: pandemic, hurricanes, terrorism,” she says. “I mean, come on.” —JG

Which isn’t to say that being a Lone Ranger is the way to go. “It’s never a good thing not to have money,” Nutter adds dryly. “It’s really hard to run a government with no money.”

IUR’s Birch expands on the proper role of the federal government in times of crisis. “You need the federal government to complete the structure of support, but you have to create an enabling environment,” she says. “Think about what happened here early in the pandemic. It made me so angry to see cities competing with each other for PPE [personal protective equipment]. These are the reasons why national governments exist!”

Nutter thinks about all this and his mind moves from one issue to the next,

riffing on how things will, and should, change. “Mass transit is going to need help,” he says. “We’ll need a massive investment in broadband, since a lot of people will probably never go back to their offices. And by the way, what are we doing with all of that office space? We need to reimagine everything.”

“I’m the eternal optimist, though,” he continues. “It’s been horrible, but we’re going to come through this. Our way of life has changed, but we need to take some of these lessons learned to figure out how to incorporate them going forward. That is our responsibility as public servants.”

JoAnn Greco writes frequently for the *Gazette*.