

POST-COVID CITY: WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

WINDOWS OF OPPORTUNITY FOR A MORE RESILIENT AND EGALITARIAN CITY

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ABSTRACT – As the pandemic progresses towards all corners of the globe, it becomes more noticeable how this crisis is undermining some of the central aspects that give meaning to urban life. In this scenario, future urban planning must learn to implement city models capable of responding to this kind of challenge. The constant reflections that appear regularly coincide in pointing out that COVID-19 has disrupted the dynamics of the contemporary city unveiling significant weaknesses in terms of management, social cohesion, and planning. From this evidence, scholars argue that a new model of the city will emerge once we overcome this crisis. But what kind of city? Through a literature review this paper identifies four central areas that underpin the construction of the new Post-COVID city, urging for a global and multidisciplinary debate and joint reflection on the opportunities that open in this context of global crisis.

Keywords: COVID-19; urban planning; pandemic; resilience; opportunities.

RESUMO – CIDADE PÓS-COVID: DO QUE ESTAMOS A FALAR? JANELAS DE OPORTUNIDADE PARA UMA CIDADE MAIS RESILIENTE E IGUALITÁRIA. À medida que a pandemia progride para todos os cantos do globo, torna-se mais notável como essa crise está a minar alguns dos aspectos centrais que dão sentido à vida urbana. Neste cenário, o futuro planeamento urbano precisa aprender a implementar modelos de cidades capazes de responder a este tipo de desafios. As constantes reflexões que aparecem regularmente coincidem em apontar que a COVID-19 interrompeu a dinâmica da cidade contemporânea, revelando fragilidades significativas em termos de gestão, coesão social e planeamento. A partir destas evidências, os estudiosos argumentam que um novo modelo de cidade surgirá quando superarmos essa crise. Mas que tipo de cidade? Através da revisão da literatura, este artigo identifica quatro áreas centrais que

sustentam a construção da nova cidade pós-COVID, instando a um apelo global e multidisciplinar para o debate e reflexão conjunta sobre as oportunidades que se abrem neste contexto de crise global.

Keywords: COVID-19; planeamento urbano; pandemia; resiliência; oportunidades.

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the first cases detected in Wuhan (China) in December 2019, COVID-19 has spread worldwide until reaching the declaration of a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2020 (TIME, 2020). Its virulence and breakneck spread have shaken the economic, social and political foundations of many countries, reporting daily a steady trickle of deaths that number in the tens of thousands. These territories have experienced strong pressure on their overwhelmed public health systems that, in many cases, they were already very bruised after the crisis of 2008. Having pierced the shell of many countries around the world with a strong socio-economic and health system, the COVID-19 outbreak is rolling out to supposedly weaker countries, such as Brazil, India, Bangladesh, or several countries on the African continent.

The COVID-19 outbreak threatens several essential dimensions that are found in the very genesis of the city and the urban as a way of life. As a response, there is a set of measures that countries have adopted trying to cope with the virus and that have their touchstone in “social distancing”. A sheer number of cities have placed upon a lockdown. For instance, 18 cities in China encompassing 56 million people, which represents a challenge in terms of potable water, fresh food and energy supplies, health infrastructures, human resources or mobility.

In recent days, there have been several voices that have risen demanding greater prominence from urban planners, as well as from those specialists focused on the city (Daneshpour, 2020). While in previous natural disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina or the tsunamis in Japan or Thailand, the role of the urban planner has been key in the reconstruction processes and the design of resilient architectures and spaces, this responsibility does not exist in immaterial disasters as the case of global pandemics. But, despite their intangibility, pandemics are also a planning problem (Klaus, 2020).

The COVID-19 impact has sparked the interest of many researchers. Numerous reflections have been published online and an incipient applied research has begun to be elaborated (Liu, 2020). Due to the dizzy spread of the pandemic, many of these works raise questions and few answers on how to approach the phenomenon. However, it is possible to identify a common axiom in the set of works addressing the impact of the COVID-19 on the contemporary city: this pandemic will transform the city as we know it so that, once overcome, we will witness the resurgence of a new model of city. But what kind of city are we talking about?

This paper is concerned with identifying the key aspects that different authorized voices in urban analysis emphasize as imperative for the reconstruction of the Post-COVID city. Although the process is expected to be long, this work argues that it is a

healthy exercise to intuit where the theoretical reflection on the future city is heading, on whether the expected changes will be structural or contingent, and on whether it is possible to identify opportunities that open up in this collective catharsis. Might this crisis become a favourable context for the definitive assimilation of more inclusive and equitable urban models, placing value on public space, and articulating a green economy in a wide low-carbon city network? This paper proposes four axes regarding the global imaginary about the post-COVID future city.

II. AXES FOR GLOBAL IMAGINARY ABOUT THE POST-COVID FUTURE CITY

1. Multifunctional spaces in resilient cities

One of the aspects that the design of the post-COVID city should strive to incorporate is that which refers to the functional flexibility of certain strategic spaces. The lack of hospitals has led to a frenetic and costly race to build them in places not originally designed for it. The outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan put a huge pressure on the healthcare facilities, leading to the construction of two hospitals with 1000 and 1300 beds. The entire world was shocked by the short time span in which the facilities were built (6-days and 15-days, respectively). In a more provisionally way, this type of emergency infrastructures has been replicated in different cities around the world, such as the temporally field hospital installed in the Institución Ferial de Madrid fairground (IFEMA) in Madrid with a capacity for 5500 people and built in just 48 hours.

Concern about the design of the city as a methodology for the prevention of pandemic crisis such as the one that is currently turning the planet upside down must be vindicated. From this approach, it is necessary to assimilate that some spaces and facilities must have enough resilience to adapting to new functionalities as a knee-jerk response to supervening threats (Shamsuddin, 2020). Architects and planners need to rethink shared spaces, public or private, to make them “crisis-ready” and able to be immediately re-purposed in an emergency. The “unthinkable” and the quick disaster response must be included in future urban planning. We cannot build urban spaces with a single function if we want them to be useful in emergencies (Viel, 2020).

Furthermore, from a political perspective, it seems reasonable to apply the idea of Muggah and Kazt (2020) and design a pandemic preparedness map where, in addition to an index of crisis protocols, they could benefit from spotting manageable and controllable spaces able to become in multifunctional and resilient tools. Thus, “an up-to-date dashboard tracking city capacities to manage pandemics could help build safer urban centers and minimize the threat of global and community spread”.

2. Data management in planning

The global fever for smart cities throughout the 2010's flooded our cities with devices and sensors that analysed, quantified, and measured an overwhelming array of data.

In doing so, the great acceptance of the “smart city” concept between political, business and planning agendas allowed the incorporation of technology in the management of urban space in a more natural way, although it is a process that is still in its infancy.

The general reluctance that always awakens the collection and management of data by public entities played in favour of private companies. Much of this information has been designed for business purposes by using private hardware and software. This underlying struggle for the privatization of information – the quintessential economic resource of our era – has resulted in a variety of mutually incompatible devices and an opaque network of data operating in sealed public entities and private corporations without any kind of communication between them.

Therefore, as Allam and Jones (2020, p. 3) have already pointed out, after this process, initially led by tech corporations, a second phase followed where policy makers, urban planners, placemakers and academics driven the “smart paradigm” as cornerstone of a new urban shift. Subsequently, a third tranche witnessed a merge between high-tech corporations and planners in activities to craft nodes of innovation and experimentation. Finally, we are in a shift stage towards a new paradigm that turn smart cities ideas into holistic liveability opportunities grounded in digital management of urban space.

As Patricia Viel (2020) highlights, we need to address flaws in digital infrastructure, as the data definitely has become in a core element in the management of the contemporary city. This process becomes indispensable when governments need to assess and forecast the virus’s spread and mitigate its impact in different urban geographies. Due precisely to the existing deregulation in this field, the author considers that the European Union should be a promoter of the standardization of digitalisation. This would facilitate “diffuse digitalisation, data sharing, creation of advanced technologies, and tools that promote the public good”. In this sense, the current global crisis has revealed that the “EU’s lack of a well-coordinated, multi-tiered, continent-wide response has highlighted its shortcomings as a guardian of Europeans’ wellbeing”.

3. Inclusive city

Bearing in mind that more than half the world’s population lives in cities, we have to accept that hubs for transnational business and movement in which contemporary cities have become, compose an ideal breeding ground for the spread of the virus. Several analysts emphasize that pandemics in general, and COVID-19 in particular, do not understand territories or social classes (Acuto, 2020). Well, in our opinion, this statement needs to be nuanced. Robert Muggah and Rebecca Katz (2020) highlighted as “cities with a high concentration of urban poor and deep inequalities are potentially more vulnerable than those that are better resourced, less crowded and more equal”.

Aspects such as commuting, means of transport, consumption and leisure spaces, housing, living conditions and hygiene, neighbourhood facilities and health resources may be awfully different between high- and low-income areas. That is why “identifying gaps in city planning and the underlying socio-economic determinants of population

health could also help stimulate more effective resource flows to vulnerable areas”. From a planning approach, nowadays should be inconceivable designing a city prepared for eventual disasters without bear in mind socio-economic cohesion, the right to the city of its dwellers, and the balanced distribution of resources over the territory.

4. Rescaling urban networks and political power

We cannot lose sight of the fact that cities are dual-edged (Daneshpour, 2020). On one hand, cities are a big part of the problem as they intensify the spread and transmission of infectious disease through increased human contact. On the other, cities play a central role in preparing for, mitigating and adapting to pandemics (Muggah & Katz, 2020).

But this is not only limited to large urban metropolises. COVID-19 has disrupted our imaginary about the “global city” and the urban. Secondary cities also have the capacity to multiply the ravages of the pandemic. Moreover, there is evidence that viral outbreaks arise at the peri-urban edge before they spread into the downtown core (Keil, Connolly, & Ali, 2020).

In similar fashion, the COVID-19 health crisis has led to two parallel processes. On the one hand, a deglobalization process that is foreseen temporary, and, on the other hand, a rescaling phenomenon. In this latter sense, we must introduce secondary and peripheral cities into transnational urban networks, made up until now only of central global cities in geographical and economic terms. We must, as previously discussed, alter our vision of the urban, focused exclusively on consolidated environments and integrate other peripheral spaces located on the edge of cities sharing common dynamics.

The generalized political wear and tear that crisis management has caused in some cases, such as in Chile or Sweden, is also explained by the dialectical tension between centre-periphery. The recentralization of political power that has been carried out in hitherto decentralized countries such as Spain, has revealed a latent struggle on how to hierarchize the direct management of the crisis. On the contrary, countries like Finland have opted to empower local communities (Wahba & Vapaavuori, 2020).

Could this be an opportunity to achieve a certain decentralization of world economic and political power, legitimizing the role of secondary cities and betting on the direct re-municipalisation of services in the search for more lax, balanced and close citizen management formulas?

III. CONCLUSIONS

This brief document barely outlines some considerations regarding the urban question in relation to the current global health crisis. Obviously, it is an ongoing process and therefore we do not yet know the depth and the gravity of the urban shift that looms in the long-term. Still, we believe that it is appropriate to begin to shape the phenomenon by

making an open call for joint reflection and multidisciplinary dialogue, and thus lay the foundations for a debate that is expected to be long and intense. We are aware that there are other standpoints of the phenomenon that have not been included in these pages. Similarly, other debates, questions and considerations will emerge as we move further.

Our main purpose has been to make a call to urban scientists to position themselves by stepping forward. In doing so, we want to stir up a debate, invite over assuming a proactive role in the current scene of health emergency in relation to planning, design and management of our cities, and thus identifying key elements in the construction of the future post-COVID city.

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