



Planning the post-pandemic era

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planning in the post-pandemic era

The COVID-19 lock-down has exposed shortcomings in how we have been planning our towns and cities, and in the new political space that this is opening up planners should look for a 'new normal' that reduces inequalities and risks, say **Graham Haughton, Iain White and Nuno Pinto**



Dan Burton on Unsplash

The near-deserted streets of Central Leeds

The current COVID-19 pandemic, and in particular the lock-down policies of governments around the world, including the UK, have exposed some deeply troubling issues about how we have been planning for our cities in recent years. It has also, however, opened our eyes to the possibilities for better urban environments. While elite politicians work to try to return the country quickly to 'business as usual', many people around the country are debating alternatives for a 'new normal', one where cars do not dominate the city and planes do not pollute the skies, where walking in unpolluted streets is seen

as a right, and where safe cycling routes for all are demanded.

The onus on significant public sector investment facilitating a rapid economic recovery presents excellent opportunities for improving the form and function of places. The search for 'shovel-ready' infrastructure projects currently going on in many countries, for instance in New Zealand,¹ could favour progressive and greener planning ideas – ideas which need to be much more than re-badging previous policies. It is much quicker to expand cycling networks, improve the urban realm, or retrofit parks



than it is to go through the time-consuming process of gaining consent for new roads, while giving a more direct boost to local jobs and economies. The new infrastructure that will be announced soon will shape behaviour, but in what ways and with what legacy?

If the current lock-down has shown us anything, it is how city parks and green networks have become welcome havens for those seeking to get outside to exercise and tap into its mental and physical health benefits.² Certainly, where the authors live, local off-road cycle tracks are busier than ever, while the emptiness of the roads and car parks serves to emphasise how much space planners have historically given to these uses. It also exposes some existing social inequalities, where, for example, lower-income neighbourhoods may be less likely to have nearby high-quality green spaces.

Planners will need to address larger societal questions that emerge out of the current pandemic. Ten issues are raised here as an invitation to debate:

- What kinds of public space should planners incorporate into future plans, and what minimum levels of public spaces, in particular parks and others forms of green infrastructure, should be required? How accessible should these be? Where needs them most?
- What kinds of mobility best serve the needs of our local areas? One of the biggest failings of UK planners in the past 50 years has been in facilitating the rise of car-based cities, admittedly very much under the direction of government policies favouring mobility policies that emphasise speed, travel time savings, and commercial haulage at the national and metropolitan scale over safety, local economies, and health and wellbeing at the neighbourhood level.
- How can new mobility technologies (autonomous vehicles) and services (shared last-mile bicycles or scooters) be used strategically to adapt existing city centres, potentially reducing the amount of land given over to cars and car parks in order to accommodate more space for recreation, walking, and cycling, especially when needed for social distancing?
- Relaxing permitted development rights in England for living space, light and ventilation has allowed developers to convert buildings into homes that, according to a recent report from the TCPA,³ amount to little more than contemporary slums. How can allowing flat conversions without windows⁴ to go ahead be acceptable in a civilised society, especially now that we have all experienced some degree of prolonged home confinement under government order?
- In the context of both climate change and the current COVID-19 pandemic, politicians and planners need to put hazard planning and risk management at the *centre* of their efforts – not as something to be weighed in the balance against government economic growth priorities. All strategic plans need to contain detailed scenarios for a range of alternatives that can be used to inform public and expert debate about what kinds of future cities we want to build. The recurring inadequacies of flood risk policy⁵ should serve as an everyday reminder of how little has been achieved in recent years.
- Good planning for better cities will only work if local governments are adequately resourced to provide, maintain and run high-quality local infrastructure, from walking and cycling routes, to libraries, parks, and sports centres. A decade of austerity funding cuts to local government has left public services denuded and degraded. The result has been a set of blinkers which have limited what planners could aspire to in devising their plans.
- How can we increase resilience to shocks and stresses by helping to decentralise economies and pivot towards localism? The pandemic has emphasised the precariousness of global supply

chains and just-in-time models, just as the recovery will see other global businesses rationalise workforces far removed from their base of operations. The need for localism and vibrant high streets or liveable communities has never been so valuable, and apparent – from the day-to-day interactions with neighbours to the development of new types of social capital and networks. But how and to what degree have we enabled this over the last few decades? Has this happened in spite of planning, rather than because of it?

- What opportunities to rethink space and behaviour will emerge out of the current disruption? The shift to working from home has hastened the integration of technology, and much of what we are currently experimenting with will become more mainstream by the time we emerge from the crisis. The use of online retailing and home delivery has accelerated during the lock-down, and it is difficult to see how some high streets will recover. How might some of these digital responses be leveraged to help improve our quality of life and lessen our environmental impact? How can we transform some of our town centres to alternative, mixed-use functions?

‘What opportunities to rethink space and behaviour will emerge? ... This crisis has already opened up new political space ... The question that planners should be asking is how our ideas can actively shape these debates and occupy this political space’

- How can we adapt in a way that prepares us for the ‘next’ crisis? There is an understandable tendency in the wake of disasters to restore ‘business as usual’ and get back to normal. But the scale of the global and national fiscal stimulus packages on the horizon presents wider opportunities to transition and adapt our economies and lifestyles to the pressing issue of climate change. The challenge is to do this without restoring a normality that reproduces inequalities and risks.
- Intensive daily discussions about pandemic models and indicators are increasing the public’s literacy about the nature of science and in particular about how it is used in decision-making processes. These debates have highlighted the potential that models have to be used as public debate-support tools, not just technical decision-support tools.⁶

Planning modellers need to seize this opportunity by increasing model intelligibility and transparency to make participatory planning practices in local communities more inclusive.

Much of the literature on crises emphasises that they do not automatically lead to a period of reflection and change, regardless of how flaws in current processes and practices are revealed. The almost automatic response to get back to ‘normal’, to bail out existing businesses or restore previous practices, rather than create new ones, presents the next challenge for planning. This crisis has already opened up new political space, and ideas which only recently were seen as unviable or undesirable are now being discussed and even implemented. The question that planners should be asking is how our ideas can actively shape these debates and occupy this political space, rather than seeing planners reduced to responding to the ideas of others.

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Notes

- 1 See I White: The problem with the ‘shovel ready’ strategy for post-Covid-19-rebuild’. *The Spinoff*, 14 Apr. 2020. <https://thespinoff.co.nz/politics/14-04-2020/the-problem-with-the-shovel-ready-strategy-for-post-covid-19-rebuild/>
- 2 See also, for example, I Mell: ‘Coronavirus: urban parks can be a lifeline – if we respect lockdown rules’. *The Conversation*, 24 Mar. 2020. <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-urban-parks-can-be-a-lifeline-if-we-respect-lockdown-rules-134185>
- 3 W Ing: ‘Immoral slums’: Raynsford slams government over permitted development policy’. *Architects’ Journal*, 17 Jan. 2020. www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/immoral-slums-raynsford-slams-government-over-permitted-development-policy/10045986.article?blocktitle=news; reporting on *Planning 2020 ‘One Year On’ – 21st Century Slums?* Raynsford Review of Planning in England. TCPA, Jan. 2020. www.tcpa.org.uk/the-raynsford-review-of-planning-one-year-on
- 4 See, for example, M Moody: ‘Appeal: Flats with no windows allowed under permitted development’. *The Planner*, 10 Jul. 2019. www.theplanner.co.uk/decision/appeal-flats-with-no-windows-allowed-under-permitted-development
- 5 See, for example, G Haughton and I White: ‘Groundhog Day: Why the Government needs a new approach, to stop failing on flooding’. Blog Entry. Manchester Policy Blogs, University of Manchester, 16 Mar. 2016. <http://blog.policy.manchester.ac.uk/posts/2016/03/groundhog-day-why-the-government-needs-a-new-approach-to-stop-failing-on-flooding/>
- 6 G Haughton and I White: ‘Risky spaces: Creating, contesting and communicating lines on environmental hazard maps’. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 2018, Vol. 43 (3), 435-48 <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12227>