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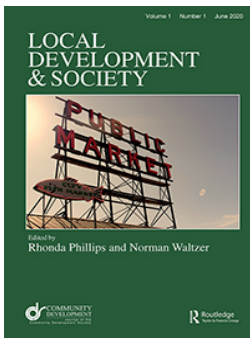
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COMMENTARY



Communities and space – Post-Corona avenues for “new normals” in planning research

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ABSTRACT

The Corona crisis questions basic understandings of the relation between people, communities and spaces. It influences how society uses space and focuses our perspective on the importance of critical infrastructures, public services, and community networks. Which “new normals” regarding the changes in use of space by communities might emerge during this crisis? Individual and collective action emerge as a coping mechanism and a sign of collective hope. The current crisis makes the digitized more visible, while we exclude others who are outside cyberspace. Trade-offs between health and economy and new ways of organizing society are discussed publicly. What are the consequences for spatial planning and how does this open up new research avenues? This commentary aims to stimulate further discussions by putting forward six facets of the “new normal” that might impact upon post-Corona communities from a spatial planning perspective.

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Crisis; new normal; planning; post-Corona; research agenda

Introduction

The Corona crisis influences how society uses space around the globe. It focuses our perspective on the importance of critical infrastructures, public services, and community networks. During the last centuries, health needs and sanitary movements have shaped and changed the cities we are living (Chang, 2020). The Corona pandemic also changes our life in space rapidly, while available options for moving in space are limited. Private and business trips have been on hold and are far from getting back to pre-Corona numbers. New localized lockdowns appear when new waves of infections are popping up unpredictably. While the use of many “third spaces” like cafés for living and working was disrupted, we became more attached to our local communities. We have learned to live digital and #stayathome in private spaces, leaving public space, and public infrastructures underutilized. Neighbors, and close networks gained importance, while density of people became suspicious and a potential risk, especially in cities. It might take years to recover from the immediate Corona crisis.

The role of scientific and health experts in decision-making has increased since governments around the world started to take radical measures and lock-down situations. A growing

number of scholars and civil society organizations emphasize or recommend that we should not go back to normal, removing the current restrictions, but invent a “new normal.” Governments respond to crises by becoming more directive, authoritative and nationalistic, taking measures varying from so called “intelligent lockdowns” (in the Netherlands), to forms of policing and authoritarian decisions, intervening in people’s private lives. In society we see diverse responses to the situation at hand. On the local scale citizens explore new ways forward via innovations and experiments (White & Stirling, 2013). The many examples include online platforms making inventories of new initiatives or bringing people together who want to be volunteer in their own neighborhood (e.g. nebenan.de in Germany, co-vida.com in Italy and nlvoorelkaar.nl in the Netherlands; see also Duffhues, de Moor, & Vriens, 2020). Organizations such as CitizenLabs organize online processes of participation so that people can engage in policymaking on issues such as urban housing. Since the start of the crisis a wealth of adaptive civic initiatives has popped up. Engaged citizen groups emphasize solidarity with those affected, providing social support for the vulnerable. The COVID-19 crisis offers the opportunity for collective societal capacity-building, supporting long-term system change.

The role of the states and public institutions, among these also professional planners, is now more relevant than ever. With growing global threats and disasters, talk of innovation has made policy makers scratching their head to develop creative solutions. Academics working on communities, local development and planning have to find and to adjust to a not yet known “new normal.” This raises the central question in this essay: which “new normals” regarding the changes in use of space by communities might emerge during this crisis? What are the consequences for spatial planning and how does this open new research avenues?

The “new normals” in community and planning research

The word crisis derives from the Greek verb “krino”: to separate, or in the broad sense to evaluate. In the current usage the word has taken the negative meaning of “to make a situation worse.” But, reflecting on the etymology of it, it is possible to identify a nuance that the word brings forward of a moment of reflection, discernment, and of a possible rebirth for a forthcoming blooming. In this sense, the word crisis contains seeds for the rise of creativity. Especially in difficult situations, creativity might arise as a diffuse activity of design (Manzini, 2015), as successful exploitation of new ideas and their transformations into solutions. COVID-19 has ruptured both public health and the economy, often sacrificing one for the other. Only the most creative solutions can resolve this tension and fully satisfy both competing demands. For example, the local and state governments in California paid hotels a discounted rate to house health care workers and the homeless, thus protecting vulnerable people while also keeping hotel workers employed (Cohen & Cromwell, 2020).

New individual and collective initiatives emerge as a coping mechanism and a sign of collective hope. Society will never be completely online but relies on simultaneous and place-based actions by all individuals and organized communities under common objectives. Diverse discussions about the “new normal” begin to surface as society and communities think about loosening restrictions of public life. This debate is inherently spatial and touches upon basic ideas of community development and planning. Urban development and planning need to engage with larger societal questions beyond the Pandemic

now (see, e.g. Chatterton, 2020; Haughton, White, & Pinto, 2020; Lamker & Schulze Dieckhoff, 2020). A systematic understanding helps to develop research agendas forward and to position planning as a political activity with high societal relevance. The following part splits up the new normal into six domains to get a clearer grasp and to open up avenues for targeted research. The information in this paper is not just based on academic literature and professional publications, but also the huge recent wealth of gray literature, such as newspapers, blogs, websites, videos, and podcasts.

The “scalar normal”: Processes of rescaling

Many people live in lockdowns, digital and #stayathome, leaving public space underutilized. We see that our circles of physical connection shrink to the neighborhood level, where new digital ways of community organizing and collaboration emerge, and networks of volunteers helping the vulnerable and those at risk. Even balconies become vital spaces of community life to talk, to sing, and to thank. The crisis also affects the spatial ways we organize our production and consumption, witnessed in the localization of food networks, relinking producers and consumers.

Several civic food organizations have stepped up to help those in need during the pandemic. For example, The Granville Community Kitchen in London has helped some 150 people per day to access healthy and nutritious food, including delivering cooked meals (Leitheiser & Horlings, *in press*). *De Streekboer* (literally: the regional farmer) is an online marketplace in the northern Netherlands with a mission to connect people to regional farmers who produce affordable and healthy food with respect for nature. It has seen its customer base double and revenues quadruple since the beginning of the crisis. At the same time, this impacts producers and traders across scales and in distant spaces. Traceable effects reach far beyond our own communities. The coordination of health services and the distribution of medicines and materials require a scaling up to the international level. Current market-based coordination mechanisms are pressured as countries compete to get medicines, health materials, vaccinations, and breathing devices. As each country develops measures on the national level, this creates a “hardening” of territorial borders. Re-scaling is especially relevant for the role of institutions, which is also time-related: should we support the economy and the unemployed now, and create joint mechanisms showing empathy with people in other places and countries?

The “perceived normal”: Perception of closeness and distance

Communities in spatial planning terms are, among other factors, described by a certain physical closeness of their members. A thriving community acts, meets, and celebrates in space. This perception is a cornerstone in planning education and in supporting local communities by providing spaces to meet, to interact, and to play. Corona may alter the perception of closeness and distance between the members of neighborhoods and thereby change attachment to public and semipublic spaces. Our world has been “speeding up” and “spreading out” for decades due to internationalization. However, amid the crisis our sense of community is changing. Not just the vulnerable or poor people are “chained to places” as the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2012) mentioned, we are all locked-in smaller scales than we were used to. On the personal level perceptions and

experiences of space and nearby environments change: digital working patterns allow breaks for enjoying gardens, parks, and small pockets of accessible green spaces at different times of the day which are intensively used by people without balconies or gardens. Volunteering activities are already vibrant in many rural villages and now shifted to online engagement. We see new urban community activities especially popping up in cities (such as shopping for others, singing or playing from balconies or providing basic goods at donation fences to homeless people). We have shifted to engagement in smaller circles of interaction, in streets and neighborhoods, while we expand our digital engagement in wider networks. Will people fear close contact with others on streets, sidewalks or on benches? Compact city structures support physical interaction of people and mutual support. Will people be afraid of density and apartment buildings and how can spatial designs support people to feel comfortable in their neighborhood?

The “lived spatial normal”: Using public spaces

Spaces built for travelers such as airports and train stations, for consumers and for foreigners stay empty during the pandemic. The reemergence of a mobile and consuming society has yet to be seen. At the same time, public spaces are used differently. Some have been closed off for weeks (like playgrounds in Germany or in Italy), others show a neat spread of people instead of dense concentrations. Public spaces are redesigned with lines and zones for people adapting to the “1.5-meter society” without the need to have close physical contacts. This means putting people at a distance while trying to maintain a sense of belonging and community. Regarding the economy, the new spatial normal calls for place-based innovation to spur economic development. University campuses and other educational institutes can play a role here, connecting researchers with governments, education, and community-based practices. An already existing example is “Brainport Eindhoven,” a successful collaboration between small and large firms, the University of Eindhoven, and the municipality, where place leadership played a key role (Horlings, 2014). Social support depends also on unplanned meetings and “byproducts of doing something else” (e.g. taking children to school or visiting events) in public or semipublic spaces like cafés, parks, and playgrounds (Blokland-Potters, Krüger, & Vief, 2020). A main risk here is that we stick to our familiar networks, and stay in our bubble, losing an appreciation for unexpected encounters and unexpected support. How can we then connect with the diversity of life?

The “mobility normal”: Use of public transports and health safety

The current lockdowns and measures put in place are challenging the use of public transports. The post-Corona time might continue to push the population toward the use of private cars and individual means of transport. Cities around the world experiment with transforming lanes for cars, as the new “pop-up bike lanes” in Berlin and Bogotá show. Such options are strongly advocated by neighborhood organizations and local civil society associations. As organizations get used to working online, international gatherings, business meetings, and academic conferences will be replaced more often by online meetings and webinars, while there is also the chance to reduce commuting travels. Designing urban and rural spaces to enable walking, cycling, and convenient public

transport is crucial to connect communities and target environmental and climate concerns. Initiatives to reorganize transport space (e.g. reducing parking spots, designing parklets) could open opportunities for community interaction in public space even with greater physical distance between all its members. The answer depends on government responses toward sustaining different transport options (e.g. flight carriers, car manufacturers, bus providers), adapting roads and public spaces and planning to enable desired mode shares. Global social movements like the Stay Grounded Network combine regional or national activism with a global agenda and advocate for a climate-just transport system. Will the current crisis be an opportunity to foster healthy transport choices (walking and cycling) and reduce emissions from car and flight mobility?

The “community normal”: Emotions, values, and organization

While some people value the shrinking of personal space, creating room for reflection and creativity, others experience the sharing of small space with others as “the hell,” to paraphrase Sartre. Individuals show differences in psychological resilience, which refers to the capacity to cope with emotions of fear, uncertainty, and stress, and the capability to bounce back after a situation of crisis. On a collective level, the notion of resourcefulness (MacKinnon & Derickson, 2013) is helpful, which is the ability of a community to use their physical and social resources, skills, and local knowledge, while being recognized by others. To become resourceful, communities have to deal with dynamic situations and develop more “place-based” initiatives and tactics (Horlings, 2017). The crisis increases the interest in local initiatives like supply arrangements between food producers and consumers and community circles of care. It is an incentive to explore community capacity for resourceful self-organization but also brings to the surface situations of inequality as people have different capabilities to organize themselves and uneven access to material resources.

The dilemmas we are facing and the lessons learnt potentially can open up opportunities to develop solutions for other crises. A similarity between Corona and the climate crisis is that they rely on a strong role of experts, scientific projections, future risks, and people’s anxiety. Is Corona a fast-tracked version to understand the climate crisis as it opens windows to see how social activities reorganize, and how we can adapt and support each other?

The “never-normal”: Inclusion and exclusion

Last, planners should be wary of celebrating any “normal” and open it up for critical and democratic discussions. As Corona changes community life, it also changes processes of inclusion and exclusion. In general, it changes debates and perceptions of basic human rights, privacy, access to education, and democratic debate. When the so-called Corona apps will be introduced, dilemmas about privacy, voluntary participation, and traceability will become more pregnant. The current crisis makes the digitized more visible, while we exclude others who are outside cyberspace. Groups of people face exclusion such as homeless people, lonely single-person households, functional or full illiterate people, children, and elderly people (Lamker & Schulze Dieckhoff, 2020). Members of a community are affected differently, and it becomes even more important to include and support the disadvantaged and excluded who cannot adapt to new circumstances. So-called “heroes of Corona,” especially workers in health care and in providing basic

public services, are often very low-paid and their work is to a larger share done by women. The International Labor Organization already sees an unemployed “lockdown generation” emerging (United Nations, 2020). How can we ensure that existing inequalities are not exacerbated by the Corona crisis and that new inequalities do not arise?

Post-Corona avenues for planning research

Planning research must be careful to distinguish between different dynamics that unfold simultaneously. They touch upon basic understandings that are taught in planning education and the necessary skills for planners to interact with local communities in the short term and being able to adapt to uncertainty and disruptive events in the long term. Private and semipublic spaces become a more important concern for local communities as we see times when carefully planned and maintained public spaces become inaccessible. Closer links between neighbors and a sense of a localized community should not divert attention from the solidarity between communities. Communities are part of the larger global society in which planners can support learning from transnational experiences. Digital tools show their potentials to hold together neighborhood support and support civic engagement, social cohesion, and inclusion. Moreover, they bridge between the individual and the community. More attention has to be paid to the models of community communication and support that happen outside of public or communal spaces. Supportive community leadership, such as for local and regional food initiatives, caring for homeless and most disadvantaged people or pushing advocacy to get space for climate-friendly mobility options, could emerge with the need for a new set of skills for organizing groups of people.

The threat of Corona has proven how resourceful and adaptive many communities and whole societies are. It has shown how bold actions are possible to save lives and to sacrifice current economic development, possibly leading to a different type of growth. The lives of most communities change, and it will be important to understand the emerging power dynamics and to avoid a focus solely on positive examples and successful “community bubbles.” Power imbalances, inequalities, and injustices surface after the immediate shock diminishes. Not the least does the global perspective show shocking numbers and individual stories. While community responses should be valued, it has become apparent that we can face situations in which a social and even strong state is necessary. Securing a democratic balance will be a task beyond community and planning research alone. The Corona crisis has shown a core position of research for political and societal decision-making. Any planning researcher should be even more aware of the political dimension of research, its potential (mis-)uses, and the consequences for communities.

This commentary has put forward six facets of the “new normal” that might impact upon post-Corona communities. They question basic understandings of the relation between people, communities, and spaces. What becomes the future normal for local communities does not just happen. Responsible and active research is needed to stay critical and reflective to understand and support diverse communities after COVID-19.

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