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The distanced city. Editorial

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The way measures were implemented in response to the Covid-19 crisis has shaken up accepted urban design norms across Europe and can pave the way for future fields of development in landscape architecture. During the crisis, large numbers of people had to observe periods of lockdown in varying degrees of severity. The collective experience of staying at home, applying social distancing or having to justify basic movement, raises serious considerations about the use and experience of public urban space and how design principles are taken for granted. In a recent report, the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) lists a series of 'key uncertainties' regarding the impacts of Covid-19 on various interconnected systems. Spatial scenarios are diverse, ranging from 'de-urbanization' with urban dwellers moving to rural and suburban areas, to 're-urbanization' with populations concentrated in cities providing medical facilities, co-working and contactless infrastructures, to a middle ground scenario of 'self-contained enclave lifestyles'.[1] The study also mentions phenomena such as migration pressures and shrinking civic spaces. This direct confrontation with the notion of 'uncertainty' is a cause for reflection for many designers regarding the responsiveness and adaptability of design practices.[2] With subsequent epidemic waves likely to arise, how can we learn to live in and share an urban environment with the advent of uncertainty and social distancing and what will be the impact of Covid-19 on our way of designing? How can landscape architecture position itself in this context? Multiple calls for opinions on Covid-19 and possible scenarios for urban planning have been published in various public and professional media.[3] In diverse short contributions and essays, new directions for landscape design in public spaces in Europe have emerged.

The current pandemic illustrates the scale of globalization through the rapid propagation of the virus in our interconnected world. The dimensions and scales at which designers generally conceive landscapes are challenged, from small local interventions to the urban planning scale to the larger territorial project. The lockdown and the restriction of movement greatly impact the local scale. With the closure of nonessential shops, people have to (re)focus on strict necessities, on nurturing a network of mutual assistance, with neighbours and resources in their immediate vicinity while also ordering goods online. Local production and distribution points become obvious, as well as the efficiency of global distribution networks. Writing about the excessiveness of urban life, philosopher Thierry Paquot advocates the return to a human-scale system and a 'frugal' urban model.[4] Creating social links and political awareness through design at a small scale is one of the powerful, yet simple aims of landscape architects. An evolution is occurring in landscape design from a formal approach based on plan and composition towards an ascendant approach that produces territorial visions and strategies and premeditates a landscape matrix where smaller, simpler and more frugal landscape interventions can emerge.

In Vallée de la Vilaine near Rennes, landscape design studio Agence TER published a landscape plan that embodies a vision for the whole valley.[5] In this 'territorial park', the plan considers the future potential evolution for ecological systems over the coming decades and installs a network of local paths through semi-natural areas, agricultural fields and along the river. It also proposes tools for people to reclaim their territories. Agence TER worked alongside a collective as well as with sociologists and artists to conduct pilot actions, temporary exhibitions, shared walks and festive openings for small designed schemes. This 'cultural urbanism' allowed implication, reclamation and appropriation of small spaces for the local inhabitants. 'Territories', in this case, is a concept less concerned with political administration, but instead closer to geography and the notion of a biome with managed land uses in relation to inhabitants' perceptions and imaginaries of this 'territory'. Agence TER proposes a social project as well as a planning project.

With Covid-19, standard spatial measurements and norms are challenged in order to accommodate social distancing. While post-Covid architecture is already being explored through increased floor area, increased minimum area per person in offices, wider crossing surfaces, staircases, hallways, reduced maximal occupancy rates and contact-less pathways, what will the post-Covid city look like?[6] The PUCA[7] in Paris points towards the notion of a 'distanced city', reflecting on lockdown social behaviours such as working from home, home delivery services or public transport avoidance.[8] Emergency temporary measures are also implemented: pop-up bike lanes, shopping pick-up stations', accommodation solutions for key workers, multipurpose public or residential spaces. In the long term, the re-dimensioning of public spaces might become essential. Spaces with high usage rates, intensive crossing points, waiting areas and even single footpaths might have to be expanded. This could trigger the reduction of road space for cars in favour of public transport, the dedication of some streets to pedestrian and bicycle use only, and overturn the privatization of public spaces.[9]

The notion of 'distancing' that came with Covid-19 requires the reassessment of the role of publicly accessible open spaces in cities. In some European countries, the lockdown limits time spent outside one's home and only allows people to meet in public outdoor spaces such as streets, parks and gardens. In other European regions, parks and public places are simply closed or made inaccessible. Covid-19 is revealing spatial inequalities in terms of socialization and access to nature in the way that such measures have had a greater effect on households without gardens or terraces living far away from any public open space. The need to develop a matrix of public open spaces distributed within easy walking distance for all residents across cities has therefore become obvious, particularly in dense urban areas or around high-density buildings with high occupancy and no access to outdoor spaces. The implementation

of social distancing and the inequitable distribution of inhabitable green spaces and outdoor gathering spaces emphasizes the need to maintain unbuilt, flexible and adaptable land reserves in dense urban areas. Faced with the urgency of the situation, designers are exploring ideas for short-term proposals such as opening private gardens, churchyards, cemeteries or private parks to the public or taking advantage of brownfields and vacant spaces, *friches*[10] around road and rail infrastructures in order to implement social distancing more comfortably.[11]

Another solution could also be to transform spaces currently dominated by motorized vehicles into pedestrian- and cyclist-friendly areas. More planting could turn some of the very functionalist local streetscapes into shaded schemes where it becomes more pleasant to socialize (at a distance). Paved areas and mineral surfaces would be turned into permeable living surfaces. These solutions have recently been explored through concepts of 'bike superhighways' or 'garden streets'.[12] This could mean possible access to more inviting open spaces rather than vehicular-dominated spaces within a 1-kilometre range. The lockdown also triggered debates on the acceptance of low-maintenance natural areas and wildlife within cities. During the spring 2020 lockdown in Europe, some cities saw their maintenance crews furloughed and, as a result, vegetation flourished between the cracks, cobbles and kerbstones. Perhaps inhabitants appreciated the new spontaneous flourishment of pavement plants and urban meadows and questioned the requirement for constant grass cutting and municipal manicuring. In times of calls to increase biodiversity in cities, a minimal approach to urban vegetation management arising from the exigencies of Covid-19 serves as a prototype for creating a civically acceptable aesthetic that shows intent, but without the removal of all spontaneous natural plant growth.

One could hope that post-Covid urban planning might adopt more landscape-led solutions. The quality of landscape discourses, critiques and essays that are emerging in landscape architecture is a strong signal that the profession is not only actively involved in the urban design process, but also with publications on landscape issues by other disciplines such as architects, urbanists, historians, journalists and geographers—that landscape design is all the more pertinent and crucial when responding to change at a strategic and planning-scale perspective.[13] A demonstration of how landscape architecture can contribute to rethinking the urban planning arena is the emergence, in the last decade, of calls for proposals for landscape-led strategic urban planning studies in several large European cities, for example in Brussels or in Bordeaux.[14] These strategic plans propose a landscape vision, a way of envisaging the metropolis through landscape. In these approaches, landscape is the notion that allows for a more inclusive envisioning of a whole territory. Landscape architect Michel Desvigne suggests three operational dispositions for landscape architecture as a foundation for urban design: '1–work from the natural geography of a territory to endow it with a landscape structure that will shape its urbanisation over time, 2–design specific areas where the nature supplanted by urban expansion is recomposed, 3–consolidate a constellation of small planted areas.'[15]

Could such notions be a guide for rethinking the post-pandemic city? As the pandemic demands rapid action, will it accelerate the incorporation of landscape design practices into the city-making process towards a more systematic and broader acknowledgement of the interrelationships between landscape and human well-being?

The editorial of the JoLA issue 2-2019 discussed 'the collapse of fixed disciplinary boundaries' versus the necessity of a 'holistic idea of a landscape professional field with a distinctive core and fixed boundaries'. We concluded with 'the image of an extended family of landscape architects, gathering around different tables with a variety of disciplines to solve future problems'. In the wake of a post-Covid city, specific design and research methods and a developing body of literature progressively contribute to refining landscape architecture as a discipline and profession that has the potential to adapt to rapid change, create more flexible spaces and fracture concreted urban norms, at all scales.

1 The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development OECD Policy, 'Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19): Strategic Foresight for the COVID-19 Crisis and Beyond: Using Futures Thinking to Design Better Public Policies. 10 June 2020', œcd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/strategic-foresight-for-the-covid-19-crisis-and-beyond-using-futures-thinking-to-design-better-public-policies-c3448fa5/, accessed 1 November 2020.

2 Ward Rauws, 'Embracing Uncertainty without Abandoning Planning', *disP – The Planning Review* 53/1 (2017), 32–45.

3 For example the blogs: 'Et demain, on fait quoi?', spontaneous contributions from mainly urban designers, architects and landscape architects published online by exhibition centre Pavillon de l'Arsenal, Paris, pavillon-arsenal.com/fr/et-demain-on-fait-quoi/, accessed 10 October 2020; 'Urban Readings, Urban Futures Spurred by Covid-19', Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, slu.se/urbanreadings, accessed 10 October 2020; and 'Landscape Exchange: Impacts of Covid-19 on Current and Future Landscapes', lex.landscaperesearch.org, accessed 10 October 2020.

4 Thierry Paquot, *Mesure et démesure des villes* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2020).

5 Project Vallée de la Vilaine, Rennes, France, valleedelavilaine.fr, accessed 10 October 2020.

6 Oliver Wainwright, 'Smart Lifts, Lonely Workers, No Towers or Tourists: Architecture after Coronavirus', *The Guardian*, 13 April 2020, theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/apr/13/smart-lifts-lonely-workers-no-towers-architecture-after-covid-19-coronavirus, accessed 10 October 2020; Francis Nordemann, 'The Post-Covid City', 'Urban Readings, Urban Futures', op. cit. (note 3).

7 PUCA: Plan Urbanisme Construction Architecture, French Inter-ministerial research and experimentation programme run under the aegis of the Ministries of Territorial Cohesion and Relations with Local Authorities, and of Ecology and Inclusive Transition, Culture and Research, urbanisme-puca.gouv.fr.

8 Aziza Akhmouch et al., *Quelle ville demain? Impacts immédiats et premières leçons de la crise sanitaire*, News Tank Cities webinar, Paris (2020), cities.newstank.fr/fr/tour/news/181579/deconfinement-ouvre-periode-10-ans-adaptation-villes-aziza-akhmouch-ocde.html, accessed 10 October 2020.

9 Tim Waterman, 'Covid Thoughts: During and After the Pandemic, Our Streets Need More Democracy', 'Landscape Exchange', op. cit. (note 3).

10 French term for 'wastelands', refers to the notion discussed by Gilles Clément in the *Third Lansdcape Manifesto*. Gilles Clément, *Manifeste pour le Tiers paysage* (Paris: Sujet-Objet, 2004).

11 Ed Wall, 'Covid Thoughts: Reopening Public Green Places', 'Landscape Exchange', op. cit. (note 3).

12 Chris Michael, Lydia McMullan and Frank Hulley-Jones, 'From Garden Streets to Bike Highways: Four Ideas for Post-Covid Cities—Visualised', *The Guardian*, 25 September 2020, theguardian.com/cities/ng-interactive/2020/sep/25/garden-streets-bike-superhighways-cities-future-coronavirus, accessed 26 November 2020.

13 Ed Wall, 'Special Issue: The Landscapists: Redefining Landscape Relations', *AD Architectural Design* 90/1 (2020).

14 *Metropolitan Landscapes*, Brussels, Belgium (2015), vlaamsbouwmeester.be/sites/default/files/uploads/Metropolitan-Landscapes_web.pdf, accessed 20 July 2019; *55000 Hectares de Nature*, Bordeaux, France, bordeaux-metropole.fr/Grands-projets/Grands-territoires-de-projets/55-000-hectares-pour-la-nature, accessed 10 September 2019.

15 Quoted in: Françoise Fromonot, 'Landscape Design as Urban Design?', in: Françoise Fromonot (ed.), *Transforming Landscapes: Michel Desvigne Paysagiste* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2020), 22–27.