

Reimagining Public Spaces: Adapting to a New Reality

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In spring 2020, COVID-19 is everywhere. Its impact on countless aspects of our everyday life are slowly becoming clear. For urban planners, the question is how to adapt cities in the future so that they will be more resilient towards health crises like pandemics. Some drastic changes in urban fabrics all over the world are already visible: People are biking much more, walking on the streets to maintain social distancing, working from home and not using public spaces as much as they used to. This article uses the theory of first, second and third places to understand what the crisis means for our cities. Towards the end, it provides some recommendations about our new reality.

The Notion of Public Space

Sociologist Ray Oldenburg coined the term “third places” in 1989, meaning public spaces that are crucial for neighbourhoods as a space to interact, to gather, to meet and to talk (Oldenburg, 1989). According to Oldenburg, these three different spaces can be discerned:

“First place: Home; Second place: Work; Third place: Public spaces, such as libraries, parks, and social spaces” (Oldenburg, 1989).

Oldenburg identifies these places as “the public places on neutral ground where people can gather and interact. In contrast to first and second places, third places allow people to put aside their concerns and simply enjoy the company and conversation

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around them” (Oldenburg, 2000). In recent years, urban planning has focused on providing liveable third places or public spaces. The Project for Public Spaces (PPS, 2020) has been on the forefront of this effort. However, the COVID-19 crisis is changing many aspects of public spaces. Suddenly, most of us are at home most of the time, are discouraged from using public space or only using it with a safe distance.

The First Place as a Combination of All Spaces

Our first place, home, is suddenly a combination of all spaces during the worldwide lockdowns. This can be fatal for people who suffer from domestic violence, for example. It is also a big challenge for parents or persons taking care of elderly or sick relatives. As working from home is a new reality for many, at least for the foreseeable future, improved home office design and new labour laws will become big challenge for architects, planners, and policymakers (*The Economist*, 2020).

But some daily tasks cannot be done from home, especially in countries with higher poverty rates and informal labour. That means that crucial services should be available within walking distances to people’s first place, so that they can satisfy their needs even during a pandemic. Dense cities with many local centres, corner shops and similar facilities in a mixed-use design allow citizens to easily meet their basic needs even during a quarantine (World Bank, 2020).

Current developments show that priorities in public spaces are shifting: biking, access to green and blue spaces as well as the possibility to visit national parks are important to keep spirits up and allow people to go outside while maintain social distancing rules (C40, 2020). Here, urban planners and policymakers need to provide adequate upgrades to urban infrastructure and public spaces that should be implementable quickly and, if necessary, repetitively. Particularly for dense

cities, this is a challenge. The provision of public space that can function even during a crisis is something to be taken into consideration even once COVID-19 is over.



(The above picture shows social distancing being practiced in India during the nationwide lockdown. Photo courtesy: *DNA India*)

The Virtual Third Place

As more and more citizens in lockdown take to online games and celebrations, it seems possible to imagine a virtual third place. While socialising and community-building is not the same in front of a screen, we are still able to use third places for community-building, as intended by Oldenburg, the Project for Public Spaces and other experts (Planetizen, 2019). However, the elderly and people without internet access will find it difficult to join these virtual third places, which is something to be worked on.

Now that some countries are lifting the strict lockdown rules, people flock to public spaces more than ever. They need to live their inherent urge to socialize, observe others and get out of the house for a while - the house that has become a combination of all places. While it seems that the trend to ‘work from home’ is

there to stay in many cases, you cannot take away the physical third place from people. Its importance is becoming very clear during these challenging times (Project for Public Spaces, 2020).

For urban planners, this means that we must think of new and creative ways to enable community-building (The Creation of Place Design Team, n.y.). We need larger public spaces that make social distancing possible. We need accessible, attractive infrastructure that allows everyone to use public spaces. The following viral image from a market in Myanmar is a good first example:



(Photo courtesy: Chan Myae Aung)

Can a Fourth Place be the Solution?

Economic geographer Arnault Morisson argued in 2018 that our evolving economies are calling for a fourth place. The current crisis invites us to re-consider this idea, since the separation between the different places is more blurred than ever. New social environments such as co-living (first place + second place), co-working (second place + third place) and comingling (first place + third place) have been on the rise in recent years already

(Morisson, 2018). Now that all our places are combined in the first place – i.e., we are living, working and socialising at home, and therefore, we need to rethink our distribution of place to make it resilient to extraordinary circumstances like a pandemic.

Fourth places, according to Morisson, could look like huge innovation centres that combine all three places in one. They are so big that they would even allow for social distancing, while still living, working, and socialising in the same space. But fourth places can also look like they already do for many of us – virtual and with blurred frontiers. Policymakers and urban planners should favour the creation of fourth places and innovative public spaces to incorporate different dimensions of place and to adapt to circumstances quickly.

While not all the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic are clear yet, it is important to already think about how current events are shaping our social and public life in the months and years to come. This might mean implementing measures specific to regional context, such as building more cycling lanes, providing more parks or focusing on innovative fourth places, but it also means rethinking the role of public space and the city as a social construct. The goal should be to allow for public life and community-building to continue safely - and a city that is able to adapt its public spaces as and where necessary. This readiness to adjust with prevailing circumstances will be the most successful.

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