

# Introduction from the Editors

## Reflection on Health & Wellbeing in the Post-Pandemic / Post-Crisis City

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The 24<sup>th</sup> Issue of *Forum A+P* aims at exploring the relationship between the urban environment and the recent COVID-19 pandemic under different perspectives and approaches. Considering the breadth of the discourse on health and well-being for a post-Pandemic city, and an effort to understand the relevance of those issues to the design process through both a theoretical or practice-based approach, we could not exempt ourselves, also in regard to the reader, from framing our exploration from a precisely theoretical point of view and manifesting our critical position within this vast field of interest. It is not news any longer that during the year 2020-22, millions of people around the world had to quarantine, self-isolate, and apply physical and social distancing<sup>1</sup>. Our lives, our family and work have drastically shifted into what many are increasingly calling the “new normal”<sup>2</sup>. People work, study, shop and even get health advice remotely. Yet not everyone enjoys suitable spaces for conducting virtual lives. While much of the public attention has been given to medical experts and government guidelines; *de facto*, it is clear that the way we have designed and planned our homes and cities so far has been shaping how we were facing the pandemic at an individual and social level.

The web reports and scholar articles on the role of architecture and urban design and planning on the post-pandemic life and city are thriving daily. Indeed, there are so many fundamental questions to raise on the societal response in the post-pandemic city: some relate to the nature of (post-) pandemic/crisis city transformations, while some others rely more on policies and top-down action that should be undertaken – locally and globally – to lead the design process and circulate meaningful information. Nevertheless, architects, planners and city experts seem excluded by the pool of experts outlining solutions for the current global crisis<sup>3</sup>. Yet, this is an historical moment where their contribution in proposing a new agenda for the future condition of our urban environments is much needed. Furthermore, whether we refer to the macro or the micro-scale, architects have been trying to collect and give meaning to the magmatic amount of data in which we have been constantly

submerged during the last two years, making them not less important in the international debate than other kind of experts.

Indeed, what this new issue wants to explore are the boundaries of the discipline that are always shifting in relation to the changing relationships with the external environmental conditions and the questions that arise in new circumstances.

Such questions become even more relevant when the society is imposed with measures of physical distancing that will eventually impose long-standing social distance; when new perceptions on sanitation and hygiene are emerging; when uncertainty over the strength of the public health system is just increasing; and the welfare of the society seems so depended on vaccination. In short, while citizens adjust to government guidelines claimed as short-term and of questionable ethics, we – as professionals – can only imagine long-term effects for travel and urban mobility, urban safety, environment, leisure and sports, and social interaction. There is no place for speculation as this pandemic evolves into a common routine of human life or remains an isolated event that calls to our collective consciousness for making cities sustainable. Whatever the case, the city needs rethinking and the urban space needs reinvention, using contemporary elements that be used as proper design material at different scales to address heterogeneous issues, with the capacity to lead the design process and circulate meaningful information in the urban environment.

At the same time, it is needed to be taken into account that, in the last few months, we have been hearing of the “new normal”<sup>4</sup>, which could become the “actual normal”. Obviously, people are concerned of the consequences that are hard to predict but possible to shape. Indeed the “new or actual normal” has been spoken of well ahead. Visionaries and scientists, artists and city makers have regularly theorized on the transformative shifts of the society, change of ideologies, or systems. *David Harvey* has long challenged the weaknesses of the “market economy”. Scholars of the ‘urban commons’ as an ideology, also criticize “neoliberalism” and privatization reforms. While authors of polycentric governance, from

Ostroms<sup>5</sup> to Sheila Foster and Christian Iaione, have also proposed and continue investigating cases of a new mode of governance, which can mitigate inefficiencies of the public and private. In this quest for the new normal, do we have to go straight towards what we may now perceive as obvious scenarios? Or, as predicted in architecture by Bruno Zevi, following the philosophy of Baudrillard<sup>6</sup> (1976), we should refuse any reassuring solutions and transform crises into “new values”, as elements and the reflection of a new possible world and society (Weber, 1920<sup>7</sup>). On a negative perception, reshaping human interactions we were used to might end up changing the concept of the relationship and of the sense of physicality, such as touch, engagement, etc. Therefore, new forms of engagement at the physical level would define new post-pandemic proximities (Hall, 1966<sup>8</sup>). In a more positive perspective, the current condition could be an invitation to thinking beyond “the stable state” or “the stable normal”. This idea persists since the seventies through many scholars, including Donald Schön. He wrote a book in 1973, “Beyond the Stable State”<sup>9</sup>, where he argues that we live in a time of loss of stability of the state, which encompasses occupations, interactions, religions, organizations, and value systems that have been already eroded. His words remind us now, at this very moment, about the need to learn from the current condition and adapt through learning to a system that is continuously under transformation. It also means we have to become resilient, therefore adapt to face and embrace the future, while being robust to shock (Mäler, 2008; Armitage, 2008; Perrings, 2006)<sup>10</sup>. The concept of resilience beyond the stability applies also to all of us - designers, individuals, organizations, governments, and communities. Indeed, it seems that the pandemic has only accelerated the urge to adopt this vision for resilience, which has long been there in the complex discourse on climate change. However, the organizations and individuals’ mindset to change has been rather slow, mostly resting on some form of dynamic conservatism. The pandemic has quick effects and requires rather quick responses, and, therefore, better capacities and abilities to adapt, appropriate or react quickly to the evolving dynamics. The mind-set of the organizations and institutions must delve into continuous transformation producing change at micro- and macro-scale, and at city level. Obviously, this will require flexibility embedded in everything that designers, architects, planners, and city experts do! Hence, the notion of adaptation – and of “exaptation” (Gould, Vrba, 1982<sup>11</sup>) and the idea of appropriation, is a possible contingent in dynamic situations.

Nevertheless, discussing in regard to this continuous need for changes, what about the poor neighborhoods, slums, informally developed areas, and the excluded ones? Can designers, architects, and city planners play a role in there too, and how does the pandemic affect these communities and settlements, differently than the highly planned environments? According to Robb Butler, equality and equity are two different things: we must remove barriers and talk about pandemic-conscious designs and architectures, and we need more dialogue between public health and health practitioners, social scientists, behav-

ioral scientists, and urban planners and designers. As we might recall, at the start of the pandemic, the focus was not on the informal settlements of Latin America, Africa, Asia, or even Eastern Europe. By late spring 2021, there were more and more reports from Rio, Cairo, Mumbai, (including Tirana in our local context), speaking of informal settlements too. Still, there is lack of information about the spread of virus in these “organically developed” living settlements, and there are no records on the numbers of infected people or loss of life. Poor access to such neighborhoods and the poor access of this portion of

<sup>1</sup>See World Health Organisation ([https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1)) and the following sites <https://ourworldindata.org/policy-responses-covid> and (2) <https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/research-projects/coronavirus-government-response-tracker> on information and data on the countries policy and social response towards COVID-19 pandemic. The US Cigna survey found that 79 percent of Generation Z and 71 percent of millennials are lonely versus 50 percent of boomers. The data is definitely worrying compared to the average 47 percent of the 2018 and with the fact that the increasing factor was found equally divided among different age groups. (source: “Social Isolation and Health,” Health Affairs Health Policy Brief, June 22, 2020. DOI: 10.1377/hpb20200622.253235)

<sup>2</sup>See: <https://www.who.int/westernpacific/news/commentaries/detail-hq/from-the-new-normal-to-a-new-future-a-sustainable-response-to-covid-19>.

<sup>3</sup>See <https://www.artribune.com/professionisti-e-professionisti/politica-pubblica-amministrazione/2020/04/ricostruzione-task-force-fase-2-coronavirus/>.

<sup>4</sup>Using a literary gimmick, the term was mutated from Robert A. Heinlein’s novel *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*, with a character telling lunar colonists: «[...] I hope you will comply willingly; it will speed the day when I can bow out and life can get back to normal — a new normal, free of the Authority, free of guards, free of troops stationed on us, free of passports and searches and arbitrary arrests». Heinlein, R.A. (1966) *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*, New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons.

<sup>5</sup>Vincent Ostrom wrote on polycentric governance in his seminal work Ostrom, V. (1972). *Polycentricity*. [Online] APSA Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10535/3763> [Accessed 9 May 2018]. See also: Ostrom, V., Tiebout, C.M. & Warren, R. (1961). *The organization of government in metropolitan areas: Theoretical Inquiry*. *The American Political Science Review*, 55(4), pp.831-42. Elinor Ostrom investigated the concept of polycentricity in her fundamental research of the commons. See also Foster, S. R. and Iaione, C. (2016). *The City as a Commons*. *Yale Law and Policy Review*, 34 (2), pp. 280-349; and Iaione, C. (2016). *The CO-City: Sharing, Collaborating, Cooperating, and Commoning in the City*. *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 75 (2), pp. 415-455. DOI: 10.1111/ajes.12145.

<sup>6</sup>Baudrillard, J. (1978), *The Agony of Power*, Cambridge MA: the MIT Press.

<sup>7</sup>Weber, M. (1920), *Gesammelte politische Schriften*

<sup>8</sup>Hall, E.T. (1966), *The Hidden Dimension*, New York: Anchor City

<sup>9</sup>Schön, D. (1973). *Beyond the stable state*; W. W. Norton & Company; 1st Edition 1973; ISBN: 978-0393006858;

<sup>10</sup>Mäler, K.-G. (2008). *Sustainable Development and Resilience in Ecosystems*. *Environmental Resource Economics*, 39, pp.17-24; Armitage, D. (2008). *Governance and the commons in a multi-level world*. *International Journal of the Commons*, 2, pp.7-32; Perrings, C. (2006). *Resilience and Sustainable Development*. *Environment and Development Economics*, 11, pp.417-27.

<sup>11</sup>Gould, S.J., Vrba, E.S. (1982) *Exaptation—a Missing Term in the Science of Form*. *Paleobiology*, 8 (1), pp. 4 – 15. With the term ‘exaptation’, we define the co-option of a specific trait during evolution. A trait, which might serve for another function, can be co-opted by the organism to guarantee better survival sciences for the species and the individual itself. The term has been translated in the architectural discipline by the Italian architect Alessandro Melis focusing the practice more on the ‘genoma’ of architecture and its possibilities

the population to the health system are two of the main causes behind the poor information. Such information and the way the disadvantaged are facing the pandemic, and not the pandemic itself, impose an imperative to introduce new targeted methods and strategies, new services, and new awareness campaigns for such significantly large parts of the urban fabric. This requires for collaboration between scientists, people and policymakers, to establish “new lenses” on the promotion of city-health and livability. These contemporary challenges we are facing should help us produce a new conception of the abused word ‘informality’, picturing it not only as something ‘unexpected’ and of ‘missing legal and social framework’, but on the contrary, as a relational concept at various scales of urbanization, to be tackled holistically (*Di Raimo, Lehmann, Melis, 2020*<sup>15</sup>).

This intertwined relation between health and wellbeing in the city and city-making process is essential to producing livability. Development in the health sector is often regarded as separate from the living environments, much like nutrition that, for a long time, was not seen as medicine – perhaps not necessarily a curing one, but definitely preventive. Similarly, health and wellbeing in the city, though not seen yet as critical factors of urban quality, constitute a stronghold in city making. But, why artists, designers, architects, planners and city scientists are not commonly part of the health and wellbeing conversations, when planning living environments? Is this because of lack of knowledge? Because politics and policy-making processes do not see a priority in such relations? Because periphery and informality are not considered as “planned” environments, the way that urban centers are? Is it because of a lack of access to ‘closed’ or ‘ghetto’ neighborhoods? Or is there something else behind we are not aware yet? On the other hand, there are organizations, volunteers or even passionate planners and architects who engage in collaboration with the disadvantaged to introduce basic services and health facilities, improve schools, reinvent public spaces, or even establish sanitation services. However, these efforts are faced with a scale problem, if official government support is weak or missing. In addition, in many cases governments usually intervene through demolition or other “instruments of force”, not only destroying the trust of the community, but also erasing hope and future. This “improvement-versus-demolition” is a challenge that artists, architects, and city experts need to continue working with. As, *Jean-Paul Sartre* said in his work “Existentialism Is a Humanism” (1946/1948<sup>16</sup>) “... *man is nothing other than his own project ...*”, emphasizing that what matters is not the abstract idea of power but the act itself. Through designing and imagining, we project a vision on the world, which allows us to be and to exist. The need for a transdisciplinary approach to city-making is inherently a transdisciplinary process and so is planning for the city. The transdisciplinary approach is already shaping the basis of design and production in architecture too. We spoke already of transport and mobility, of public space, of health and wellbeing, housing, education, and there is so much more to address in city-making. Another phenomenon – that has transformed while the pandemic is unfolding – is the migration. Seasonal work migration was largely affected, within

regions and even within states in the European Union, in North America, etc. Refugee routes changed and new restrictions were put by governments, but the phenomenon did not stop. Instead, a new form of migration appeared with the pandemic encouraging people to leave the crowded areas within a city<sup>17</sup> and reside for a while in the countryside or abandoned areas. People escaped from high density, towards open landscapes, perceived safer, more hygienic and supportive to the idea of resilience. We have yet to see the results of such migration, which is not clear to what extent is permanent or temporary.

In this broad scenario we are currently dealing with, some of the questions the 24th issue of Forum A+P addresses are:

- What is the nature of (post-) pandemic/crisis city transformations?
- What urban factors and qualities stand at the core of these transformations?
- In what ways do health and wellbeing intertwine with city-making in a post-pandemic context?
- To what extent COVID-19 will/could alter our understanding of urban space and pertaining life dialectics?
- In what ways will the society operate within urban environments in the future?
- What about our houses, leisure activities, public space, mobility, and work environments?
- What lessons will designers, architects, city planners draw on their role for city making?
- What is the impact in policy-making and decision-making facing physical, economic and political crisis?
- What about the education and research for these professions?

Such questions were first explored in various workshops and Conference contributions during *Tirana Design Week 2021 – Health and Well-being in the Post-Pandemic City*. The workshops were led from POLIS University staff and from some young talented designers, architects and city experts that were selected from the Future Architecture Platform network. Those workshops have dealt with the many different dimensions of the current global situation: they challenged the students in being able to intervene in rapidly changing societies, with rapidly changing systems, and a substantial load of inherited problems; in revealing the need for data, knowledge, and forward rather than backward thinking and response. The main aim of these workshops was to put under the spotlight how the young professionals should be capable to grasp and understand problems, sense the future and reconnect people with space, producing socio-ecological synergies that lead to positive impacts on human health and wellbeing. The COVID-19 city is more than ever and in a very short time revealing the need for data, knowledge, and forward rather than backward thinking and response. Meanwhile, the contributions of the invited keynote speakers have explored the relationship between the city and the pandemic under different perspectives, also considering their heterogeneous background and education.

Nick Dunn, Executive Director of ImaginationLancaster

and Chair of Urban Design, discussed the role of the 'New Normal', and focused on how cities are within a world which is increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous in terms of the challenges that might lie ahead and the impacts that those challenges might have. He highlighted a series of key issues, and further explained the reasons for which they are relevant and present fertile opportunities for the role of design education and design professions, including the broad public, in shaping tomorrow's world.

Greg Lindsay, generalist, urbanist, futurist, and speaker, and chief communications officer at Climate Alpha, suggested the topic of the 'Right to the City', and some interesting attempts in creating a new form of urban infrastructure that will enable fifteen or five or one-minute city to happen, and how we do need to think about interventions that will enable fifteen or five or one-minute city to happen. A new city where citizens could re-appropriate of their urban spaces where the 'right to the city' will not anymore be directed online towards elite classes but will be the chance for a more equal and supportive urban environment.

If the first two invited speakers were coming from the field of architecture and design, Robb Butler, Executive Director of the Regional Director's Office of WHO, conducted an interesting speech from the lateral perspective of a social scientist and public health promotion adviser with over 25 years of international experience working in public health, social protection, and humanitarian assistance. He shared with the audience his vision on how pandemics and health have always shaped cities they will continue to shape cities, and how we do need more dialogue between not just public health and health practitioners, social scientists, behavioral scientists, and urban planners and designers such as yourself, but also on how we need to think about how we listen better to our constituents, suggesting a new needed interest for 'choice architecture': the design of different ways in which choices can be presented to decision makers, and the impact of that presentation on decision-making.

Some related issues are investigated in a more detailed and methodical way in a series of peer reviewed scientific papers. The first essay, "The Post-pandemic, the post-war, the city in transition – Sarajevo case study", written by Nataša Pelja Tabori, explores the pandemic as a special challenge for Sarajevo, the post-war and the city in transition in Europe. In her vision, planning in the Western Balkans will have to change dramatically towards nature preservation and controlled urban development to enable our cities to become healthy, fertile, and functional environments again, otherwise our urban environment will suffer from zero resilience enzymes for future crises and pandemics. "Post-pandemic heritage. Game design tools for an engaging experience" is a choral contribution from Joan Ikononi and Dorina Papa. The work focuses on how technology allows us not only to easily access information on heritage and view 3D models of buildings or artefacts, but also to experience virtually historic sites or historic object, by representing them accurately, either referring to the recreation of existing objects or rebuilding models of objects as they may have appeared in the past. Interactivity is seen as the keyword to engage the audience and propose, in times of pandemic, more

resilient scenario for our historical and cultures sites. Vittoria Mencarini and Lorenzo Tinti, from the University of Ferrara, questions the incidence of human factors in our ecosystems. Their paper, "Processing Nature, beyond the antinomy of ecological pretence in contemporary planning. "A critical understanding Urban ecosystems, the epitome of liveable cities", is an attempt to describe how to provide precise and sophisticated tools capable of synthesizing agents and forces within territorial transformations starting from a global understanding of natural processes. Ecological dynamics must be transformed into project parameters involved within design process. Diego Repetto and Fabrizio Aimar, in their essay "The Fifth Landscape: a transdisciplinary approach to interpreting perceptual 7 landscape transformations?", deepen the concept of 'the Fifth Landscape'. Proposed by Repetto, in 2018, it takes up what was theorized in the Fourth Landscape but broadens its horizons. It aims to relate individuals and places culturally and empathically through the sharing of emotions using real and (above all) virtual works, preferring temporariness, and could become a key to transdisciplinary interpretations of perceptual landscape transformations. The last paper, "Adversities in Diver'city' The dark side of diversity", authored by Saiba Gupta, from the National Institute of Urban Affairs in India, explores the situation of India at the beginning of the COVID-19 Pandemic, and how the aftermath of that should be dealing with addressing these deep-rooted social inequalities, particularly in order to build the resilience of marginalized groups. Indeed, although cities' preparedness and responses to the crisis mainly rely on larger institutional and economic capacities, the local response is also crucial for future resilience and sustainable recovery, starting at the community level.

As in the others issues, the last section of Forum A+P is called Tel Qel, and contains focused and punctual impressions from several experts on the main topic of the journal. In this 24th number, Prof. Besnik Aliaj reflects upon the last political reforms in the Republic of Albania, highlighting how problems such as Representation, Increasing Decentralization, Regional Developmental Inequality, and Investments in territorial and regional development, are some specific knots to be taken into account for further and more effective territorial reforms in the country. The second opinion, from Prof. Skender Luarasi, is a lucid reflection on how architecture could be a conscious act in erasing the memory of places and their meaning. The Pyramid of Tirana, the former mausoleum of the dictator Enver Hoxha, is the exemplary case of an 'infection' – a word used by Luarasi in his essay – injected in the architectural body to annihilate his former values and expression. Indeed, a way through which memory is stripped of its meaning and the image of the city is erased and impoverished...

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<sup>15</sup> Di Raimo, A., Lehmann, S., Melis, A. (2020) (eds) *Informality through Sustainability Urban Informality Now*, London: Routledge. [16] Sartre, J. P. (1946) *L'existentialisme est un humanisme*, Paris: Éditions Nagel.

<sup>16</sup>Sartre, J. P., & Mairat, P. (1960). *Existentialism and humanism* (p. 28). London: Methuen.

<sup>17</sup>According to USPS data, in the US more than 15.9 million people left big cities to move to the countryside or smaller urban settlements. In comparison to 2019, there had been an increment of the 3.92%.