

Welcome To The New Normal! Emerging Patterns And Trends To Rethink What Cities Are

NICK DUNN

Executive Director of ImaginationLancaster, Lancaster University (UK)

Hello everyone, and thanks to Polis University for the introduction and to the conference organizers for the invitation to talk to you today. It is a genuine pleasure to be able to do so as the pandemic has profoundly changed the ways we relate to one another, and it has also transformed how and why we interact with places.

A renewed interest in how the pre-pandemic places we live, work, and play in our cities could be good for us and support our health and well-being, was gaining significant momentum during the pandemic. However, the pandemic has revealed existing health and social inequalities in many contexts, and the need to assess our health and well-being in relation to our environment. Now we must ask: what is the future for cities? My talk is split into two parts.

In part one I am going to look at some of the emerging patterns and trends that appear to change what we know about cities, in order to identify a number of opportunities for rethinking what cities are. Then I will ask *how* and *why* - in part two. I will discuss how we might approach designing in post-pandemic cities for health and well-being, and, in particular, how we can we think about who will be really impacted in such processes.

Let's move on now to part one: Welcome to the new normal! We've probably all heard this phrase a lot - the 'new normal' - over the last 2 years. In addition, there's been a lot of attention given to the idea of the 'great reset', namely, what things could be and how we can fundamentally transform our cities and societies. When they are back full, how they will operate, and maybe how they will move towards a more stable situation.

Yet cities are within a world which is increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous in terms of the challeng-

es that might lie ahead and the impacts that those challenges might have. So unsurprisingly, there has been a lot of dramatic headlines and press devoted largely to opinions rather than facts, about what might happen to cities. I'm going to look at what I believe are a number of key issues, and further explain the reasons for which I think 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.

To be clear, when I refer to design, I mean it in the widest sense, including architecture, planning, spatial and urban design, as well as other fields related to the design of environments. In my opinion it is clear we need new visionary designs and delivery mechanisms for collective life in the cities. The first two decades of the 21st century have been all about cities, but since the publication of a United Nations report in 2007 in particular, we have been frequently reminded that the majority of us (the global population) will be an urban one and a more recent UN report from 2018 projected by 2050 there will be about 68% of us living in urban areas.

However, the pandemic has destabilized some of these long-held ideas we have had about what a city is and who it is for. Time has shown that when pressed from urgent needs we can radically rethink how we organize ourselves and enact behavior that responds and adapts critically at different levels. The same holds at the city and urban level, at both a national or global level, when we need to face the potential impacts of climate change. It is surprising, however, and maybe even disappointing for some of us, to see how quickly some of our habits have bounced back to 'normal' despite the en-

vironmental and health emergent issues. The cities of today are still struggling in many contexts with the initial fears of the urban density contributing to the spread of COVID-19, which has led some cities to empty out their office buildings.

However, cities are resilient and if we look at history, we can see they have bounced back from recessions, pandemics and wars. You all know a couple of examples. You know in the 1850s London was on the brink of disaster due to the cholera epidemic, but once the problem was solved its population doubled. Following the Spanish flu pandemic a century ago, cities became vibrant once again in the roaring twenties. But I do think that, emerging from the pandemic, cities will be definitely different. I don't believe we are going to see the end of cities, but I think that, from now on, the problems will be really connected to social inequality and affordance, rather than density.

We have seen that expensive cities like London and New York have experienced to a certain degree a hollowing out as their residents have generally started to live in smaller spaces and have greater reliance on restaurant parks and other urban amenities to manage their daily life. Also, homeworking and homeschooling, as well as the closure of retail and civic venues, meant that these kinds of big cities have been really ill-equipped for the pandemic. Those that can afford to leave do it whether temporarily or permanently. But this doesn't mean a downward spiral for all cities. Of course, those people go somewhere else, so there are population gains elsewhere either in the suburbs or in smaller and cheaper cities. Such picture has increasingly appeared in different cities around the world.

There has been a real shortage of decent affordable housing in many cities before the pandemic, and the housing prices have significantly increased while rents have drastically dropped especially in those large expensive cities I was talking about a few moments ago. So, people that could afford large homes have been buying them, and they can work from home, but this has happened in parallel with long-standing trends of low housing production. In a lot of countries, this has led to steep increases in housing prices because of the pressure on the market. This is hugely problematic since many of the people left behind in cities are those that may have been struggling to afford being in the cities in the first place. They often have low-paid and even precarious forms of labor, but many of these people have been identified as essential or key workers, who actually keep the cities and countries moving and livable by providing vital services including health care, transport utilities maintenance repair, and other really important services.

So, something has to change as this current situation is simply unsustainable, and this strange real estate market might present the key to urban revival by reactivating communities and enticing new generations. Indeed, old residents back into urban neighborhoods and a renewed emphasis on 15-minute city and other similar urban models we have heard, seems to make a lot of sense in this new emerging world of urban centers, that during the pandemic have become ghost towns at least temporarily, although they are slowly coming back into life.

At the same time, even before the pandemic there was a

long-term trend of people living downtown close to city centers, because they naturally wanted to be surrounded by the urban buzz. It was a lifestyle choice, but the decline in office demand is likely to accelerate the trend of converting older office buildings to residential use. With the increasing demand, we are likely to see more people in the cities. Actually, I think this is probably the most important issue: the diversification of the activities in formally heavy business districts and offices. At the same time, the nature of work is changing dramatically, and this will alter how urban centers and business districts function. This is a real opportunity for us today, as some of the long-standing functions within cities will evolve, while architecture, planning and urban design need to respond to this condition by going beyond the tourism mentality. The food and beverage industry and associated entertainment industries have been hit very hard by the pandemic. We've seen these weird geodesic domes, - and I am sure Mr. Fuller would be very proud of them, - appearing outside restaurants. As you can see, many places have found it challenging to survive with takeout and outdoor dining and limited seating, but people are keen to be together. So, retail and leisure offered in cities will develop to accommodate this obstacle, by bringing back much needed civic life and vibrancy to cities. We are nothing if not creative!

Pre-pandemic retail had been in decline anyway, as more and more stores were closing their bricks and mortar and moving online. Perhaps just leaving a few flagship experience locations of Covid-19 just accelerated this and I don't think it will reverse. A lot of space will continue to appear in cities and of course outside them as evinced by regional shopping centers and malls. I think it is going to take us a while to work out how we fill in these empty spaces, but in a way that also makes them ideal for temporary intervention forms of urban acupuncture and prototyping urban design and policy, in order to see what works, how it works, and why the narrative for public transport during the pandemic is one that really illustrated and exacerbated the inequalities in our cities. Indeed, the future of public transport is quite uncertain. Nothing defines a livable and sustainable urban life more than the ability to travel without a car, whether it happens by walking, cycling, or public transport. But during the pandemic nobody had a choice to really get on a bus or train, and this emptied out public transport passenger levels in many cities. At the same time, there is of course a subset of passengers who continued working through the pandemic, and for them public transport has become more important than ever. Many key workers are in low-income brackets and can't afford a car for commuting, and yet some services have been cut down with restricted timetables and some re-routing to priority areas. The impact of such decisions is that these key workers who remain poorly paid, but are more apparently significant and valued by society than ever now, have had to navigate increasingly hostile public transportation systems and services in order to be able to do their important work.

We are going to need more agile alternative public transport to respond to this shrinkage and perhaps through ride share initiatives and being integral to 15-minute city visions. We really

need to rethink where we travel, why and when, in an inclusive and equitable manner. In the meantime, I think that furnishing urban amenities might be the most important lesson from the pandemic in terms of urban design, because as many people are released from their commutes, they are looking for more than just bigger homes and gardens. Wherever they go, they are still looking for those place amenities, such as parks, restaurants, and walkability social effervescence that they found in cities. So, to be clear, the city isn't dead due to the pandemic: it's going to re-emerge in some form and I would hope, perhaps with a more robust provision for all its people. It will be different, not as densely concentrated as before, probably more diverse and likely to become more balanced too. The urban amenities that have shaped big cities today are likely to reappear, probably, in smaller cities and suburbs. They will provide a significant opportunity for us to think about how we design our environment with amenities. This is like the connective tissue for urban resilience in an equitable way, and it will range from domestic routines, changing dynamics of work and workplace, and leisure and retail outdoor spaces, including green and blue with greater emphasis on the weak social ties that give us a community identity. These are some of the biggest changes that have occurred since the pandemic. I would also like to discuss here the following points: What do we mean by well-being? How do we design for millions of individuals/people? How do we design important places that perform like important services and products, and then how do we share some ideas about post-pandemic cities by design? What do we mean by well-being? Does doing well refer to a certain material standard of living and or economic prosperity? Feeling good involves personal subjective perceptions of levels of satisfaction with our lives. Doing good relates to a more collective shared understanding of how the world is and should be? Feeling well stresses the significance of health to well-being. In some of the work we've been doing in Lancaster UK, we tend to use White's definition because we find it quite helpful, because it includes both the subjective and the objective dimensions alongside personal and collective notions of well-being. It also incorporates the idea of effective functioning connected to health, thus it is not just some abstract idea about well-being. Well-being is not static! It is a dynamic concept that allows people to assess and compare how they are doing both in the present and the past. This sounds all right, but what about future well-being? How can we assess our well-being at a later point in life? Understanding the subtleties of well-being is going to be key if future cities are to be designed to support people in urban areas and make them flourish. Using well-being as a lens, we can critique and interrogate what we currently know about cities. Further we can apply this knowledge in the design of future cities. Well-being measured across a wide range of variables and considering the underlying systems of governance tax are key in long-term approach. The evidence suggests, however, that while a few leading cities are trying to take a long-term approach, we are still designing our cities to cope with demand, and that we're not really actively and consciously improving well-being and the quality of life

for people. It is not that straightforward to identify those cities which are exemplars and can be easily compared as case studies for the benefit of other cities. Action must be taken on the way in which we live to save both humanity and the planet and, of course, the other species we share our world with. This means that when we think of ourselves, we must also think about our neighbors locally and globally and we need to consider the wider world in which we live, particularly the legacy of our cities that will support and enable the lives of subsequent generations to flourish. Designing places that are prosperous, sustainable, resilient, livable and healthy over the long term is a massive challenge. Let's not forget that cities are collectives of individuals with different aspirations and values, and those aspirations and values may be even competing with one another and this I think raises two key challenges:

First of all, it is important to understand what we mean by a future city, even if the term 'post-pandemic' sounds straightforward enough, especially in terms of the post-pandemic parks after the pandemic! The diversity of the urban environments around the world and their tendencies toward the future suggest that the current manner in which terminology is applied to describe future places does not really account for the differences in those places. Being able to better understand the granularity of the future cities is crucial.

The second challenge concerns our ability to explore futures, especially radical ones, that may appear very different from the existing path dependencies most people are not comfortable with. In order to develop more holistic and appropriate solutions, the design of places must address the future through multiple lenses. To a certain extent, I think professional designers are trained to do so. However, we all know that, when creating places, we all have the potential to shape urban life. How a city looks and functions is often brought together by accident, rather than by purpose, through the collective action of political leaders, government officials, local people involved in business, public issues, cultural and leisure services, and of course local residents of all ages and social status. It is this collective dimension that must be at work in designing our cities for future well-being. In the previous talk, Dan Dubowitz from Manchester UK, explained some of the collective actions in activating communities. These are some very useful lessons about the methods we might apply. What you can see here is a little bit of the work that I have done with colleagues where we have been really looking and conducting this pre-pandemic research. We were looking at how we have thought about the future of cities over about the last 500-600 years, when cities are seen and investigated as a phenomenon related to the future, rather than simply in terms of the history of civilization. We looked at over 2,000 examples from all different forms of media, which evinced how different ideas about an ideal society really started to emerge. So here you have got cities that were built, you know from 1,500s onwards. You have got cities that are imaginary, so they are works of fiction that could have been shown in films or existing literature or graphic design. You have speculative cities that were designed by architects and urban designers but

they are never actually built. They remained unrealized. And then you have actual places that existed in the world and in some cases still do. What we are trying to do here is really think through and better understand how we have thought about the future of cities. I think it was *Marshall McLuhan* who said that (I am sort of paraphrasing him) you can always understand the future by looking at the past, through a rear-view mirror. Therefore, we started to look at different categories for cities and understand the values and ideologies that they were trying to express, and there is a government report that is freely downloadable. We are trying to open up the conversation about cities because it is very limited. Dan also spoke very eloquently earlier about the need for methods, he said it is all about methods, and I think methods are critical, but I am also sure it is about thinking the future literacy not only of students but also of designers, professionals, the public and policymakers and many other actors that shape and have agency in shaping the city. We need a better understanding of the alternatives for the future, and this is true of design education as we learn about design, and as we create our pluri-verses. We are great at creating multiple universes, and design education is typically very good at exploring futures. The professions that deal with the built environment are reasonably good at understanding futures but, of course, such expertise is often resisted and compromised with delivery and budget issues, not the least of which is the limited knowledge or information provided by business-as-usual scenarios or maybe catastrophic worst-case situations, which are less informed about the future. There is a lot of background noise and misinformation about the issues we have discussed so far, namely, about the city and its futures, and in my own work I have been really trying to open up the debate on urban futures by offering different ways in which we might view ideas and visions for future cities. In our recent book, myself and *Paul Cureton* proposed three thematic types of futures: social, global, and technological. The point here is not to ignore technology but to remind ourselves of some pre-industrial ideas about what the city could be. It is by emphasizing complementary types of future that we can explore different ideas, including those which are deterministic and path dependent. Our findings illustrated that when visions for places are viewed through different critical lenses, the respective themes and features, and the ideologies the values, come to the forefront in different ways (figure 1).

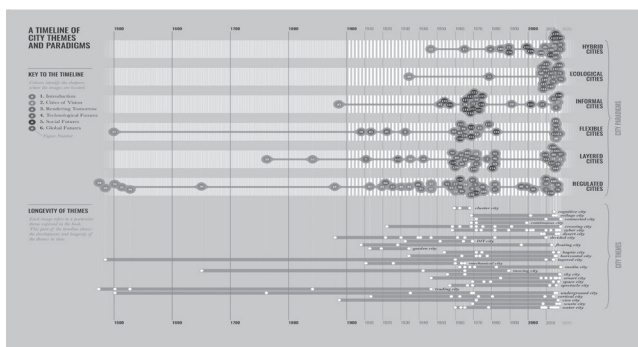


Figure 1. Timeline of City Themes & Paradigms from *Future Cities*, Nick Dunn, Paul Cureton & Serena Pollastri, 2020.

By actively identifying visions that represent social and global futures, in parallel with technological ones, it becomes possible to have a broader conversation about what is preferable, for who, and how this is framed. I think a post-pandemic city will have elements of the global, the social, and the technological mixed together. It is not about this, being a divisive way and only having one. Regarding health and well-being, at its heart a city needs people to interact with one another build connections ease separations to help create a sense of society, a sense of belonging, and ways of acting that generate well-being. Therefore, the first principle to adopt in designing future cities is to recognize the human dimension of city living.

This might sound very obvious to you all today but it is often forgotten that this is central to designing for people, and this understanding is dynamic. There is an ongoing need to keep building and connecting evidence many of which are currently siloed. We have to examine how aspirations connected to a natural sense of community and safety can be translated into design principles, and we must also recognize different aspirations that are unique to places or cultures, and are not necessarily transferable. The design perspective must be one of designing for the entire life. Of course, a lot of cities are not that great for raising families or for older residents, and we really have to think about the city from antenatal all the way through to end of life: What is a city for? How can it support its citizens?

However, a lot of the evidence based at the moment focuses on research in middle and high-income countries as opposed to developing countries, and that means you cannot take that information and make neat conclusions that you can apply everywhere. We have to understand design with regard to behavior change, both in terms of its intentional but unintentional consequences, as well as its interdependences, which lead us to the issue of designing for the future. By rigorously understanding the interdependencies of people in a complex system behavior change, and the impact of technological, social, environmental and economic change demand a major step change, we push for a huge shift in the way we approach the design of cities.

There is no shortage of guidance on how to design places. Every country, and many cities have examples of it, and this is obviously the comfort zone of a lot of professional designers, but in terms of well-being it is really important to focus on people and in their relationship. Cities are places to enhance social and psychological well-being and this is often engendered by the aesthetic quality of place, both its buildings and spaces. We know that the incorporation of green spaces in urban environments enhances well-being, but this has to go beyond urban form and needs to be repositioned in policy and in practice.

The scope for interventions aimed at ending homelessness and reducing housing instability is far wider than what residential urban design and planning approaches enable at the present. Some of those things I argued above in relation to the post-pandemic city provide clues on how to redesign housing policy in relation to the built form in a new city formation that is changing. This means that we can support well-being for everyone in post-pandemic cities especially in terms of city's social spaces.

They are spaces of collective effervescence; before and during the pandemic much of this occurred on the street, but also in other spaces which were distinct from home or work, like cafes, restaurants, bars, etc.

Active sidewalks where people socialize outside of both the home and work can nurture a sense of social connectedness and trust between people in the city and the role of weak ties in supporting positive social connection. The geographic scale of their significance varies from city to city, so different cultural ideas different values. So, we do require suitable analyses that identify those design factors and simulate urban interaction. Understanding the nature of interpersonal interaction is key and needs a lot more attention, since it has implications beyond the technological aspects of the smart city approaches. The latter dominate a lot of the current research but do not account for urban emergencies as a result of human complex social inter-relationships. It is just worth noting that in the early days of the pandemic there were ideas that density was sort of responsible for increased infection rates and certainly urban space was something to be feared.

What we are generally seeing, however, is that people do want to be back together. It is important to think about what the new work-schedules might be, which require new urban models. The social responsibilities and interactions are a real keystone for us to achieve and sustain our health and well-being in the post-pandemic city. Services and products are not less important. The design of services and products is interdependent with the design of the urban environment and infrastructure, but in the sphere of design there is a need to raise awareness of urban issues and their impacts on health and well-being. Research and practice in this field should be a double nexus of interdependency between home design energy consumption and health improvement on the one hand, and education attainment and independence in an old age on the other. This raises awareness of where decisions are made: central or local government, private sector, third sector. Residents can influence how we design products and services to achieve the desired increase in well-being. Essential to this process is a better understanding of the impacts of urban life that do not necessarily manifest themselves in the immediate context of the city but in remote areas where the labor and materials needed to provide the services and products to people living in cities are extracted. Several years ago, this project was very common. But I think we need to go beyond and think about what we really want the city to be, because these trends and innovations implicate artificial intelligence, internet of things, smart cities, wearable technologies, intelligent products, which might deeply affect our experience and expectations in and from future cities. It is plausible that these technologies will allow for greater levels of customized adaptability and interactivity with the environment. These technologies might generate positive well-being outcomes, but they may also produce unexpected negative ones, as well as cause greater inequalities. There are really important issues about accessibility ethics, privacy trust, and security, which are going to drive the comparative adoption of these technologies and their

application. It is important, however, to reflect and be aware who is able to utilize these technologies and who is excluded, and why will be central to designing ways to support wider inclusion of future post pandemic cities, as a shared and equitable resource for all.

The hyper-reality film by *Keiichi Matsuda* shows the overall effect of a digital city, a post-pandemic city, and how such technologies implicate the boundaries of infrastructure and its longevity as products and services change rapidly and behavior change can take moments or decades depending on the context and the issue on how do we take this into account? How do we establish the need for a vision of the future in which millions of individual needs are catered for, in design terms? This means radically rethinking the boundaries of the design disciplines. And this is where we all have a collective responsibility by considering places as organisms that support humanity and other species, conceptualizing cities as containers for services and provisions of life support throughout the course of our life. Such rethinking is going to be tricky, not least for designers who are going to need to draw on additional expertise from a diverse range of disciplines and professions, including the life sciences and public health. Fundamental to this change is designing the system for transparency and for the integration of places, products and services. This means including all resident stakeholders in the design process. Then radical alternatives are only going to emerge through a shift away from path dependencies and a careful balancing of urgent needs and contemporary priorities with long-term goals. It is also worth raising the idea - something we have been thinking about over the last couple of years, that human-centered design seems increasingly ridiculous, given the anthropogenic impacts we are having on the planet. This impact leads to environmental destruction of ecosystems and habitats, and various forms of pollution. It puts animal lives at risk and of course it continues to contribute to climate change. The coronavirus pandemic has brought even greater attention to the role of green and blue spaces and infrastructures for humans to flourish. Many new agendas that promote health and well-being in cities are nearly always accompanied by visions of clean green and daily urban environments. The images in pictures might look beautiful, but they say little about the complexity and the inter-dependencies of our relationship to other species. Instead, they tend to give us a very manicured and sanitized view of nature. We need to rethink health and well-being agendas that are more than human in their ambitions and objectives. The work that I have been doing recently explores what human cities mean, and how we might change deeply rooted existing practices to radically improve urban resilience against climate change. Rather than prioritizing human needs over all of the species' we really need to recognize our position within the wider ecological systems and processes of the planet, and this is important, because it will enable us to establish design values very different from the ones we have at the present, in terms of how we consider the lives that co-produce the city towards a multi-species urbanism.

Perhaps now more than ever it is useful to turn our attention

to those elements that are often under-represented or even excluded from design. The idea of spatial justice is really useful, and there are four points to consider: where we are now, where we want to be, how we will get there, and what are the options. First, we need to establish a baseline of where we are by understanding what is going on in a place and its levels of well-being. This needs greater evidence to challenge assumptions about well-being. For example, examining the links between deprivation-built environment and well-being will enable us to refine a lot of correlational evidence in terms of the socio-spatial characteristics of the urban environment, and how these impact upon the well-being of residents.

Second, where do we want to be? We have to understand the values, needs, and aspirations of people, and Dan also spoke just before about things being done to people or for them, rather than with them. Doing things with them is really important to articulate the perspectives of a city which is designed for the well-being of those people. Our processes for integrating these must enable the expression of competing values, needs and aspirations. Suitable ways of negotiating towards shared fundamental principles form the basis of such an agreement for collective well-being. Clearly the hope in such processes is social inclusion, which has a direct relationship to who is able to thrive in our cities.

Third, leadership and governance are essential in bringing together and implementing future cities through the strength of professional designers. We have to look holistically at situations. We are good with wicked problems, and we can diagnose and identify alternatives and opportunities. and then visualize them and bring them into us, in a process of becoming that changes places. Design is a process by which we conceptualize and visualize futures both near and far, especially through design speculation, design scenarios, world building or narrative creation. The value of these methods has been established in some academic and professional communities, but I feel there is still a need to bring them into the mainstream by educating designers in conjunction with other stakeholders, so that everyone can speculate and explore what those scenarios are. There are tools to aid us in this process, which set out frameworks and the quality of place and well-being, sustainable development, and respective methods for addressing complex interdependences.

Fourth, the designers and design decision-makers, which are members of communities - professional, elected officials, residential, or other - should determine and undertake specific and contextually related inquiry such as the studies of aspirations, energy mobility, and food consumption in relation to well-being and public health factors. However, in order to implement any plans, a process of leadership and articulation needs to be in place whereby alternative voices are addressed, and we do not always agree on everything. We often have competing and contesting ideas and difficult decisions need to be made so that we can establish trust to deliver the preferred outcome that is the best overall. Engaging with the political dynamics of a place is not an easy principle to understand and engage with it, and it can feel quite frightening for designers, but it is essential

for designers and decision-makers to carry out decisions. This means that design informers, design decision shapers, design decision makers, and design decision takers, they all need to come together, something that surely, we have not yet done it yet. We have not moved design beyond the individual place, and it is imperative to do so now, more than ever, and work out a way that we can deliver well-being in post-pandemic cities for everyone. If we are to develop convivial, ethical, sustainable, and resilient post-pandemic cities for the present and future generations, then the role of design education, professions and the public in the dynamic evolution of coming together for this collective right to post-pandemic city is essential.