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Facing the new normal in a Post-Crisis and Post-Pandemic Cities

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Background- During the year 2020-22, millions of people around the world had to quarantine, self-isolate, and apply physical and social distancing[1]. Our lives, our family and work have drastically shifted into what many are increasingly calling the “new normal”[2]. 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 so far our homes and cities 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. Meantime, several strong earthquakes hit capital region of Albania leaving behind thousands of destroyed houses and tens of human victims. The incidence of flooding and fires has been doubled and tripled due to climate change. The global economic crisis and the logic of stabilocracy has worsened the situation. On the top of such general instability stay the events of last pandemic crisis and a desperate need for resilient actions. A research team has been working also at Polis University, on such subject, via research at: i) the international PhD program between Polis (Albania) and Ferrara (Italy) Universities, ii) the project on sustainable and resilient planning supported by the national agency

AKKSHI, iii) or discussions generated via the scientific debate of “Tirana Design Week” (www.tiranadesignweek.com) TDW 2021, focused in the matters that are specifically pertaining to the “new” role that schools of design, architecture, planning and built environment can embrace in this dynamically evolving context. However, architects, planners and city experts seem excluded by the pool of experts outlining solutions for the current global crisis[3]. 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. In this frame, Polis University has been aiming at housing a scholar and professional discourse on the following questions:

- 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 become relevant while 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 we adjust to government guidelines claimed as short-term and of questionable ethics, we 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.

Facing the “new normal”

In the last few months, we hear of the “new normal”[4], which could become the “actual normal”. Obviously, people are concerned of the consequences, which 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 [5] 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 [6] (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 [7]). 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 proxemics (Hall, 1966 [8]). 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” [9], 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 the need to 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)[10]. The concept of resilient beyond the stable applies also to all of us, to designers, individuals, organizations, governments, and communities. 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 organisations' 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[11]) and the idea of appropriation, is a possible contingent in dynamic situations.

Falling the trap of being virtually halted

To illustrate, travel and transportation are one of the examples of how urban planning and cities are affected by epidemics and pandemics. People who would usually commute to work are now virtually halted in most cities, or have been forced to change significantly their work and lifestyle. As a response to the condition, various modes of transportation are encouraged (Tosics, 2020) [12], while we still rely heavily on public transportation infrastructure. It seems like there will be more incentives for cycling to work, for encouraging walking and dissuasion of large public gatherings within transportation systems and nodes. But then again, what does this mean for the current local, regional and global mobility networks? And, most importantly, what does it mean for industries that inherently rely on travel, such as tourism? The intercontinental flights are not merely about transit trips; on the contrary such travel routes link cities' economies, tourism, entertainment, and leisure, etc., all in need for the physical aspect of globalization. In these conditions, we cannot merely "wait and see"! There is a necessity to oppose the fear and the passive culture imposed by it. There exists

a desperate and urgent need to jump into active thinking and projections towards a future of new/alternative models of living. In practical terms, the design and standards of transport infrastructure should change to accommodate the large number of people in constant flows that reduce density instead of creating concentration. There could be limitations and restrictions, as well as emerge of new spaces. This applies to public and private space as well. The retrofit of public space includes more ecosystem services, more space, but also more alternatives of what is considered public space. The retrofitting should extend to buildings to allow for more privacy and hygiene, while people still stay together. It is very important for planners, architects and designers, to move forward with developing new buildings/city standards that will lead new development and retrofitting practices. This retrofitting should look at space, alternated functions and ideas on a new housing role, including opinions on new materials, furniture, and even construction technologies. While aiming to integrate living and working space reflecting users' needs and features, it is also important to avoid thinking of users as 'passive' inhabitants, and consider them active vectors, able independently to appropriate (Dix, 2007[13]) and give new long-lasting meaning to urban space. All this brings us to the fundamental need for understanding "users"; their cultural background, age group, social and family dynamics, type of employment, etc. For instance, whether a person is an employee, a manager, an independent professional, or an entrepreneur, it would impose rather different spaces of home environment in relation to her/his work. The space balance for work, relaxation, leisure or family time activities would be different. Hence, in the post-pandemic city such aspects become crucial while new working and living cultures, thus spaces emerge. As mentioned above, new standards are needed, though not being generated yet. We are still grasping the old idea of maximizing the space and give a satisfactory existenzminimum[14] to every individual. However, this is not sufficient in the post-crisis city, where not only pandemics, but other disasters, such as climate change, earthquakes, floods and fires, financial shocks, wars or (cyber-)terrorism, etc. are an eminent threat too. As for design, architecture and city planning, this complexity requires for more than standards, it seeks for a new philosophy of education and execution of

knowledge.

What about the excluded ones?

In this context: 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? 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 at 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. Access to such neighborhoods and access of this portion of the population in the health system are two of the main causes behind the poor information. Yet, such information and the way the disadvantaged are facing or not the pandemic, is an imperative to introducing 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 policy-makers, aiming to establish “new lenses” on the promotion of city-health and livability. Those contemporary challenges we live in 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 opposite, a relational concept at various scales of urbanization, to be tackled holistically (Di Raimo, Lehmann, Melis, 2020[15]). This intertwined relation between health and wellbeing in the city and the city-making process is essential to producing livability. Development in the health sector is often regarded in separation to the living environments, much alike nutrition was for a long time 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 lack/hardship 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, as long as 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[16]) “... 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 [17] 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. Same tendency was noticed after the two strong earthquakes of 2019 in Albania, and in Bosnia, Croatia, Greece and Turkey earthquakes along 2020 and further on, which combined with the pandemic situation, busted further the phenomena. Think also of the seventies and eighties, when the hearts of many cities in North America and Europe were struggling with high crime rates and exclusions, due to deserted city centers after working hours. In view of history, could cities again end up struggling with their centers and neighborhoods? Here too, alike with other problems already discussed, planners and designers should look for solutions and new balance between health requirements and the city's need for vibrant social interaction. Again, the need for a "transdisciplinary approach" becomes prevalent. However, the "transdisciplinary effort" has its roots in the education system and approach. The understanding of disciplines and methods to exchange between them stems from the way we generate and apply the knowledge in practice for future generations in colleges, institutes and universities. The existing situation, the pandemics and its effects on the city and society, seem to encourage further a rise of scientific trends that built on transdisciplinary approaches. Clearly, the discourse on the post-pandemic city is not merely anthropocentric, it is a discourse of nature and socio-ecological relations; it is a discourse of values that are beyond utilitarian; and it is a discourse of ethics and morality, not only for this generation, but for the ones to come too.

The need for a "new school" and "new research" of design and city sciences!

The evolution of city sciences and design commences with education. Both, architecture and planning are in a constant need of reinvention. Professionals and scholars may feed their mature thought in city-making, but it is the new generations that will eventually produce change. While there are already interesting and powerful ideas about the evolution of the profession and the respective education, the context evolves quickly and students should qualify into young professionals, able to intervene in rapidly changing societies, with rapidly changing systems, and a substantial load of inherited problems. 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. Clearly, the pandemic has put again people and not the physical artefact into perspective. After all, cities are made by people for people. Obviously, this requires architecture, planning and design studies to focus the research on the dialectic between people and environments. Furthermore, schools should realize that as we do not live in a linear world, we need to align our interests on complexity, referring to the phenomena emerging from dealing simultaneously a sizable number of factors interrelated into organic whole (Weaver, 1948[18]).

Research on Resilient Planning and Design

The issues raised above are not new to city-making, planning, design and architecture. Furthermore, pandemics are not new to human society and cities, and – not to be proud of – the history of response, governance and ethics, seems repeating, while society has not drawn lessons [19]. Yet, what is new in the context of COVID-19, is the intertwined relation between the speed of events and effects on one side, and the growing evidence of city failures on the other. We may say that the complexity of issues has raised to a whole new level. The naturally following question is whether this pandemic has already affected or will soon affect the views of city scientists in a reforming fashion, while we move towards a "new normal". Will the next crisis find us as unprepared as in COVID-19, repeating the same findings over and over again? Or, will we search for how to reinvent our commons city space, streets, public space, parks and green areas, urban furniture, landscapes, leisure areas, commercial zones, and residences? Will socio-ecological interactions within the city change and what does this mean for human behavior versus urban space or city's carrying capacity? Are physical and social distancing there to remain, and if so, how are we to prevent collective "agoraphobia" or any form of "social phobia" from taking place in the future? The future is so uncertain right now, but there is no doubt that health and wellbeing will not only persist, but will also grow in importance in city-making. The role of nature and human engagement with nature will reveal itself as an important normative dimension of planning and design. Humans are threatening nature, but ironically enough, in time of crisis, they find refuge in nature. So, rather than act in emergency only, our

need for resilience teaches us that nature, health and wellbeing should shape design, architecture, and planning education now, rather than later. The transdisciplinary character of the profession is only inherent to such an approach. At TDW 2021, we would like to discuss on the post-COVID city and the role that designers, architects and planners should play in the three strands: education, research and the profession. To have a real impact in this context we need to change urgently the mindset, as students, educators, researchers and professionals, to be forthcoming and embrace values beyond utilitarian, to be actors in positively transforming society and habitat. With this in mind, architecture and planning will surely merge socio-ecological values with aesthetic ones, to contribute to the shaping of space in a biocentric fashion. POLIS University (www.polisuniversity.edu.al), with its research and teaching activities, PhD program, projects like those supported by AKKSHI, or practice based arms, such as Co-PLAN Institute (www.co-plan.org) with its applied projects and policy influencing efforts, and Metro_POLIS (www.metropolis.al) with its architectural contribution are currently utilizing these ideas and approaches, embedded in a new knowledge philosophy for our cities. These three institutions in Albania are pioneering their efforts with other scholars, researchers and practice based organization, under “debate platforms” like city and regional biennials, festivals, research activities of “citizens responsible science” inspirations, to delve into the “new normal” discourse, taking a critical design approach, exploring ethics, morality, values, and alternative practices and solutions for the world to come (Bardzell and Bardzell, 2013 [20]). Workshops, open lectures, an international conference with sessions of debates and open ateliers, and other public events will form the agora of TDW 2021, aiming at producing knowledge, tentative answers and ideas on how the society could move ahead towards healthy spaces and wellbeing in the post-pandemic city. We aim to be playfully ‘disruptive’ (Sicart, 2012 [21]), with projects and ideas that investigate the essence of society’s present condition, while developing mental tools that trigger positive change, by mining through problems and employing a large array of research approaches.

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[policy-responses-covid](https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/research-projects/coronavirus-government-response-tracker) 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)

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■ 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.

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