

Opinion **Urban planning**

## Cities are not dead — they will get younger

Covid-19 will create opportunities for those who have been shut out of urban areas

**BEN ROGERS**



Grounds for hope: the crisis could lead to the development of smarter and more dynamic cities © AP

**Ben Rogers** YESTERDAY

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The past 30 years have been a great age for large advanced global cities. But with the pandemic they now suddenly [feel vulnerable](#). Madrid, Paris, London and New York were among the areas hardest hit by coronavirus. Governments have forbidden people from mixing. Mayors are warning people off public transport, and commuters are learning they can work from home. Urbanists, city leaders and businesses are rightly worried.

Yet Covid-19 could also lead to the development of smarter, younger and more dynamic urban economies. There are some grounds for hope.

Many have predicted that the pandemic will lead to a resurgence in suburban and rural living, as older and better-off city dwellers, the most at risk from coronavirus, abandon cities. Powerful anti-city forces such as out-of-town developers, carmakers, road builders and the champions of conservative, small town values will surely cheer them on.

But that would leave more room for younger people to move in as urban life becomes cheaper, and the young often contribute most to dynamism.

Cities have always worked particularly well for young people. They flock to them to build up vital social and professional networks, meet their mates and learn how the world works. Around the world there is massive unmet demand for city homes and workspace. The idea that the centres of London, Paris and New York will turn into tumbleweed towns is fanciful. The age composition of these cities might change, but people and business will still be jostling for space near the centre.

A lot has also been written about the way in which lockdowns risk worsening inequality by favouring well paid knowledge workers able to work from home. But the switch to homeworking has also revealed the inefficiency in the way we use cities.

It is unnecessary for millions of commuters to leave their homes empty every work day, travel to work on overstretched transport networks, and then leave their offices empty. Face-to-face interaction is essential to the successful working of most enterprises. But we don't always need to meet face to face.

Again, it has been widely pointed out that the visitor and hospitality sectors rely heavily on physical proximity and tend to be concentrated in successful cosmopolitan cities.

But coronavirus is encouraging the further digitalisation of our lives. London, Paris, New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles already lead the world in tech, online creative content and online business services.

Covid-19 will surely force some markets to become more local, as consumers stay closer to home and governments and businesses try to cut the spread of infection and increase supply-chain resilience. But other markets could go more global, as we spend more time online — to the advantage of global cities.

There is also the uncertain future of the public transport systems on which cities depend. But it does not necessarily follow that everyone will take to cars, making cities more polluted and unpopular. Where people have to travel, they can be encouraged to use buses and trains at less busy times — another efficiency win.

With the right policies there could be a surge in walking and cycling, especially as e-bikes, scooters and modes of transport increase travel range. Mayors around the world are already grabbing the opportunity to reallocate carriageways to pedestrians and cyclists. We should make this permanent, while using pricing to discourage car ownership and use.

The years ahead still will be very uncomfortable for cities. Many businesses and mayors will see current funding models falter. But the relationship between disease and density is complex. Some highly dense cities, such as Seoul, Taiwan and Singapore, have largely suppressed the virus. Other lower density places, such as Lombardy and Louisiana, have seen it spread fast. London now has a much lower infection rate than the UK's north-east.

Contagion is just one of a family of ugly urban problems, along with pollution and congestion, that can be managed. Cities will need to be especially rigorous in instilling habits of personal hygiene, testing and tracking, and crack down on overcrowding in all its forms. But these are perfectly practical, at least in well-run cities.

The city is not dead yet. In fact, it might be about to get a lot younger.

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