Reflections on a Post-COVID-19 Urban Praxis Agenda

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Abstract

The connection between the COVID-19 pandemic and the urban condition is inescapable. From a numbers and quality of life perspective, the pandemic has challenged cities in profound ways. COVID-19 sharpens the link between global capitalism and cities. The urban planning profession and movement in the face of this pandemic is presented with an unprecedented opportunity. It is now up to urban planners, activists, civil society formations, policy makers and ordinary people to imagine and build a more equitable and sustainable urban-led future.

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Introduction

Prof. David Harvey, the renown anti-capitalist academic, urbanist and geographer, recently argued that he "*had long refused the idea of "nature" as outside of and separate from culture, economy and daily life.*" He elaborated that,

> "*I take a more dialectical and relational view of the metabolic relation to nature. Capital modifies the environmental conditions of its own reproduction but does so in a context of unintended consequences (like climate change) and against the background of autonomous and independent evolutionary forces that are perpetually re-shaping environmental conditions. There is, from this standpoint, no such thing as a truly natural disaster. Viruses mutate all of the time to be sure. But the circumstances in which a mutation*

becomes life-threatening depend on human actions."[2]

The views of Harvey are a good starting point in trying to understand the complex relationship between cities and pandemics like COVID-19.

This article argues that COVID-19 presents us with at least four inescapable sets of challenges focusing on the urban condition, which are framed as imperatives requiring our urgent collective attention.

The Quantitative Imperative

COVID-19 is an opportunity to reaffirm our common human destiny, our connectedness as a species to the planet and the centrality of our emerging global urban future. We need to ask where are the highest number of global COVID-19 cases found and who are the most vulnerable in these locations?

World-wide cities and urban areas are the epicenters of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to UN-Habitat[3] 54% of the world's population reside in urban areas and over 90% of all COVID-19 cases globally are found in urban areas affecting over 2550 cities. In the United States for example, by mid-April 2020, 32.4% of the total national COVID-19 cases were found in New York alone. In Kenya, Nairobi accounted for 75% of total national cases. In South Africa, by the end of May 2020, the two most urbanized provinces of the Western Cape and Gauteng made up 78% of COVID-19 infection cases in the country[4].

The most vulnerable global urban residents live in slums and informal settlements. Slum dwellers make up 23,9% of urban residents globally, 56,2% of Sub-Saharan Africa's urban population and 13,9% of South Africa's urban residents

[2] https://davidharvey.org/2020/03/anti-capitalist-politics-in-the-time-of-covid-19/
[3] https://unhabitat.org/covid-19/key-facts-and-data
[4] Media Statement by the Minister of Health, Dr Z. Mkhize, on the 31st of May 2020

spanning 2700 informal settlements in this country[5].

For now, COVID-19 is a predominantly an urban pandemic where the highest number of global cases are concentrated. There are different theories as to why urban areas have become the global hotspots for the COVID-19 pandemic. From a numbers and vulnerability perspective, there should be little disagreement that our response to this pandemic must target the spaces where the majority of people on the planet reside and also the most vulnerable in these same urban spaces.

The Qualitative Imperative

Secondly, COVID-19 has laid bare the deep inequalities and varied quality of our lived experiences across and within urban and rural spaces. This pandemic has exposed our unacceptable societal imbalances, the vulnerability of the planet and our collective well-being and prosperity.

Prior to this global pandemic, urban areas displayed the best and the worst of our political, economic, social, built environment, environmental and health achievements and conditions across the public and private domains. During this pandemic we have seen these pre-COVID-19 imbalances and injustices nakedly unmasked, but also we have simultaneously seen glimpses of a better, and more equitable and sustainable future.

Projected macro-economic indicators of the pandemic are worrisome. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic far exceeds that of the 2008-2009 global financial crisis and that global job losses could increase by 195 million people[6]. World Bank data for 166 countries shows a rapid spike in global poverty associated with COVID-19 where between 40-60 million people could be pushed into extreme poverty. In Sub-Saharan African it is projected to push 23 million people into extreme poverty[7]. Educationally, the number of closures of schools and universities in 192 countries due to the pandemic has adversely affected nearly 1.6 billion learners, or 90% of the world's student population[8]. From a gender perspective, various data sources have shown that since the outbreak, violence against women and girls has intensified, e.g. since the lockdown in France in mid-March 2020 the number of domestic violence cases increased by 25%[9].

At a personal level, a recent Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) poll conducted in late March 2020, found that nearly half (45%) of all adults in the United States reported that their mental health had been negatively impacted due to worry and stress over the virus[10]. Devora Kestel, the director of the World Health Organization's (WHO) mental health department, has also recently stated that the mental health and wellbeing of whole societies have been severely impacted by this crisis and are a priority to be addressed urgently[11]. In another global study[12], it was found that over 40% of people said their mental health has declined since the COVID-19 outbreak.

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[5] South African Human Rights Commission: Response to Questionnaire: Informal settlements and human rights - Submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing; May 2018
[6] https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061322
[7] https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/overview
[8] Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities (CCSA) (2020): How COVID-19 is changing the world: a statistical perspective

[9] Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities (CCSA) (2020): ditto
[10] https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/poll-finding/kff-coronavirus-poll-march-2020/
[11] https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-mentalhealth-idUSKBN22Q0AO
[12] https://www.forbes.com/sites/sap/2020/05/19/the-other-covid-19-crisis-declining-mental-health/#6a7259bc3d65

On a positive note, COVID-19 has seen some noticeable benefits from a climate and environmental perspective. There are several reports indicating that local air and water quality have dramatically improved where shutdowns were implemented. The air quality levels in the world's major cities have reportedly improved dramatically in March and April 2020, which is largely attributed to a reduction in factory and road traffic emissions. For example, the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, has reported that London's Oxford Street, usually a hub of activity, has seen its daily average of nitrogen dioxide drop by 47%, while Marylebone Road – one of the U.K. capital's busiest roads – had posted a 48% reduction. Furthermore, since the global lockdown, air traffic worldwide has dropped between 60% and 95%[13]. In the month of February 2020, China's discharge of carbon dioxide fell by 200 million tons, or 25 percent, compared to the same period in 2019[14]. The waterways of Venice in Italy have become visibly clearer, with small fish seen swimming around[15].

The aggregated impact of the pandemic on the quality of life from a people and planet perspective shows varied results. This calls for a closer interrogation of government and sub-national policies, our personal daily routines, current consumerist business practices and varied city planning instruments which either enhances or diminishes the quality of life for all people and our fragile planet.

The Structural-Systemic Imperative

Both global urbanization and COVID-19 are embedded within, and both shapes and is shaped by, the current hegemonic international capitalist system.

Within this global political economy architecture, cities perform common and differentiated functions. The advent of COVID-19 could impact on this hierarchy and network of global urban spaces.

The dominant trend of capitalist urbanization as a worldwide phenomenon is that it has penetrated both urban and rural spaces and transcended the boundaries of nation states.

These urban spaces are reflected in the array of global city regions, dynamic metropolises and towns, which manifest themselves as, *inter alia*, centres of global capital and finance, the urban sweatshops of South East Asia, the decadently contrived urban shopping Meccas of the Middle East, port cities, transnational and local aerotropolises, thriving and emaciated mining towns, boutique university urban enclaves, harsh manufacturing and industrial hubs and Silicon Valley–type urban conglomerations and countless sprawling fragile slum cities.

The impact of capitalist urbanization has disproportionately benefitted, appropriated and discarded these different urban spaces in its perpetual search for the production, circulation and accumulation of capital, surplus and profits.

Not all urban spaces are equal under COVID-19, nor will they be post-COVID-19.

We know that the COVID-19 pandemic was found in Wuhan, China, late in 2019. It soon spread through major metropolitan centres of Europe affecting countries like Italy, Spain, Germany and the United Kingdom. There is general consensus that the first wave of transmissions spread rapidly through these major European cities due to their close interconnected economic, political and social ties. This is not unsurprising since the intrinsic logic of 21st century global capitalism requires the seamless and differentiated flow of people, goods, capital and services between key urban centres.

[13]https://unctad.org/en/pages/newsdetails.aspx?OriginalVersionID=2333
[14]https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/03/12/world/climate-crisis-coronavirus/

[15] https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/venice-canals-clear-water-scli-intl/index.html

Harvey (2020)[16] argues that the major Western powers significantly underestimated the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak in China on their own countries and cities. He suggests there was a belief that there would be a re-run of SARS, which turned out to be fairly quickly contained and that there would be a low global impact. Notwithstanding the initial disruption in global production and supply chains due to the halt in certain manufacturing hubs in China these problems were viewed as localized and not systemic.

Harvey further argues that it was the Italian outbreak that sent ripples through the global capitalist system and which, subsequently in March 2020 ,led to the net devaluation of about 30% of stock markets worldwide. What was interesting is that the least neoliberal countries, China and South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore, at the time came through the pandemic in a better shape than Italy.

For Harvey it has now become obvious that the economic effects of COVID-19 are now spiraling out of control across the globe and that these disruptions are working through the global capitalist value chains of corporations and in certain sectors. Furthermore, the impacts appear to be more systemic and substantial than was originally thought. It may be early to foresee all the long-term effects, but according to Harvey it may include shortening or diversifying supply chains while moving towards less labour intensive forms of production and greater reliance on artificial intelligent production systems.

Other envisaged COVID-19 impacts may include shifts in the nature of contemporary consumerism, migratory flows of urban work seekers and differentiated mass retrenchments etc., which is already taking a severe blow across the globe and within some cities. This is also likely to see the already vulnerable new working class being expected to be in the frontline of taking care of the sick and resume work in a number of labour intensive unskilled, low and semi-skilled sectors and work categories.

For Harvey, COVID-19 is shadowing global capitalism where it is exhibiting all the characteristics of a class, gendered and racialized pandemic.

COVID-19 is the second economic crisis of global capitalism within the first two decades of the 21st century. The first crisis emanated from the mortgage banking sector in 2008 and the second is the current 2019/20 global COVID-19 pandemic.

Joseph Stiglitz, the former Chief Economist of the World Bank, previously argued that the 2008 global financial crisis was the most traumatic global economic event in three quarters of a century, which inevitably left an indelible legacy. More recently he has argued that the current COVID-19 has shown that market fundamentalism is no longer in the interests of the corporate sector nor the financial elites and that it ultimately poses an existential risk to capitalism[17]. There is yet another interesting view, which argues that the 2008 global financial crisis will be seen as a dry run for today's COVID-19 economic catastrophe[18].

From an urban agenda perspective, the fundamental issue is what anticipated structural changes and legacy the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have on 21st century international capitalism and the global space economy. We have seen following 2008 that some cities, like Detroit, bore the brunt of that economic crisis. The contemporary question is what legacy

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[16] https://davidharvey.org/2020/03/anti-capitalist-politics-in-the-time-of-covid-19/
[17] https://www.resilience.org/stories/2020-04-16/covid-19-and-the-death-of-market-fundamentalism/

[18]https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/apr/08/the-2008-financial-crisis-will-be-seen-as-a-dry-run-for-covid-19-cataclysm

COVID-19 will have on the global urban condition?

The hierarchy, nature and network of global city regions, major metropolitan centres of the Global North and South, functionally specialized cities and urban slums requires close monitoring under COVID-19. Either urban planners, community activists and progressive policy makers will be spectators or directors of the post-COVID-19 global urban agenda and practice.

COVID-19 sharpens the link between global capitalism and cities. COVID-19 is a historic opportunity to advance a global anti-capitalist agenda from an urban perspective.

The Post-COVID-19 Urban Praxis Imperative

COVID-19 is an opportune moment to critically reflect on the history, nature, role, techniques and impact of urban planning as an intellectual and professional movement.

The main global responses to COVID-19 affecting cities, and more generally, have focused on themes such as the need for social distancing, a rethink of high density environments, caution when using public transportation, the wearing of masks in public, emphasizing remote working arrangements, the importance of safe and adequate water and sanitation infrastructure, stringent personal health and hygiene protocols and maximizing the use of technology as instruments for social interaction, spiritual nourishment, leisure and work.

What lessons might the history of modern urban planning teach us in navigating the current pandemic and the period beyond?

Modern urban planning, and its intersection with public health systems, originated and developed as a response to the horrific conditions of 19th century industrial capitalism and its associated degenerated urban condition. Cholera and other diseases were rampant in those early 19th century industrial cities. It is against this context that mantras, such as "disease shapes cities" and "the history of cities and infectious diseases is inseparable" emerged and have recently received renewed attention.

A similar view holds for the overall posture of urban planning in the next century. 20th century city planning movements further developed as a response to the evils of the previous 19th century city[19].

But what key global events and moments shaped the 20th century and which subsequently impacted on urban planning? These global events laid the basis for a number of grand urban planning movements and built environment experiments. These historic global events included, World War 1 (1914-18), the Russian Revolution (1917), the Spanish Flu Pandemic (1918), the Great Depression (1930), World War 2 (1939-45), the global economic recession of the early (1973-75) and the end of the Cold War (1990).

These events spawned, both directly and indirectly, a plethora of urban planning and city design movements which characterized the 20th century. Hall[20] summarizes the main 20th century urban planning movements as,

- Mass suburbanization enabled by new transport technologies in the early 1900s;
- The Garden City Movement and its New Towns (1900 – 1940);
- The Regional Planning movement (1900 – 1940);
- The City Beautiful Movement (1900 – 1945);
- The Cities of Towers and Corbusian Radiant City Movement (1920-1970);
- The Community Design Movement (1970s and 1980s);

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[19] Hall, P (2014) Cities of Tomorrow, Wiley Blackwell, West Sussex

[20] Hall (2014:ibid)

- The City on the Highway and the Automobile City (1930-1987);
- The City of Theory (1955-1987);
- The City of Enterprise (1975-2000);
- The Global Informational City and the City of he Tarnished (1990-2010); and
- The City of the Permanent Underclass and Enduring Slums.

The critical question for the 21st century is what lessons might we learn from the 20th century urban planning movements to inform our response to COVID-19 by imagining and constructing a new city for this century.

COVID-19 has been labeled a once in a lifetime (or more modestly, once in a century) global moment. In our response, urban planners, civic activists and policy makers must improve on the city experiments of the 20th century.

In scanning the current debates, it appears that planners and urban policy makers are hemorrhaging on the matter of densification and its link to the pandemic. It bears reminding ourselves that in 2016 the World Cities Report of UN-Habitat[21] spoke glowingly of the merits of densification,

> *"Densification has many advantages: more people on the street (which usually offers a safer environment), more shops, more amenities, more choice, more efficient mass transit, higher property values. Densification also produces a larger municipal tax base. Urban densification tends to occur in proximity to amenities such as downtowns, cultural districts, parks, and waterfronts. It is precisely density that allows these amenities to achieve their full potential."*

Evidence from different parts of the world does however seem to suggest that urban density does play a role in disease transmission. Also it is claimed that relative to rural areas, urban centers do provide stronger chains of viral transmission, with higher rates of contact and larger numbers of infection-prone people. The statistics from UN-Habitat arguing that over 90% of all COVID-19 global infections are found in urban areas bears relevance.

It is worth recalling that there have always been those opposed to densification for varied reasons. The following quote comes from an article from the Cato Institute[22] in the US, which is a public policy research organization dedicated to the principles of individual liberty, limited government, free markets, and peace. The article argues,

> *"… stop encouraging densification. Stop subsidizing transit-oriented developments. Stop demanding that single-family neighborhoods be rezoned for denser housing (which, paradoxically, will actually make housing less affordable). Abolish urban-growth boundaries and other restrictions on development at the urban fringe. If someone wants to live in a high-density building, that's fine, but let the market determine how people live, not urban planning dogma based on a crazy lady who was right to question the high-rise housing projects but wrong to think that, because she liked Greenwich Village, it was the model for all urban life."*

A recent World Bank study[23] that presents a counter-argument on the subject of COVID-19 and densification. The study argues that some of the most densely populated cities in the world, like Singapore, Seoul, and Shanghai, have outperformed many other less-populated places in combating the coronavirus. The study collected data for 284 Chinese cities on two relevant indicators: (i) the number of confirmed

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[21] Un-Habitat (2016: 153) World Cities Report
[22] https://www.cato.org/blog/we-were-warned

[23] https://blogs.worldbank.org/sustainablecities/urban-density-not-enemy-coronavirus-fight-evidence-china

coronavirus cases per 10,000 people; and (ii) the population density in the built-up urban area.

The study concluded that the evidence does not support the argument that density is a key determinant of coronavirus transmission risk. It found that cities with very high population densities, such as Shanghai, Beijing, Shenzhen, had far fewer confirmed cases per 10,000 people. The important caveat however, was that the group of dense cities were the wealthier ones making them more able to mobilize enough fiscal resources to cope with COVID-19.

Theoretically, where does densification rank in the body of urban history, theory, planning, practice and praxis? It is my understanding that densification and compact urban environments are not an end in themselves. Densification serves, and is shaped by, a larger socio-political and economic context. This context can be more important than the spatial condition of densification. As an instrument, densification can be a used to perpetuate unspeakable tyranny and inequality or it can be used as a springboard for more noble ends.

If densification is therefore viewed as a *progressive instrument* of urban planning and design, then it introduces more flexibility in our understanding of this concept and its intended purpose, use and impact.

Many researchers, urban planners and policy-makers are presently grappling with this connection between COVID-19 and urban density. Some emerging insights are arising from the following interventions to address COVID-19 *within* the paradigm of compact cities and densification:

a) State authorities and public institutions need to re-conceptualize and explore the decentralization of essential services[24], such as health care, to its residents;

b) Linked to this are the benefits of scale in delivering quality public health services. It is argued that higher densities, in some cases, can even be a blessing rather than a curse in fighting epidemics. The economies of scale enable cities to meet a certain threshold of population density to offer higher-grade facilities and services to their residents[25];

c) The benefits of "herd immunity" against infectious diseases are best realized in dense urban areas. It is argued[26] that if a large enough percentage of a population has received vaccination to an infectious disease, the community can effectively stop its transmission to vulnerable people or those who didn't get the shot;

d) Then there is the argument that high densities within slums are in themselves are not the problem, but the rather the absence of adequate and basic services, such as potable water and decent sanitation. Some of the most affluent households in the world live in the most highly populated and dense global cities, yet their level of risk is fundamentally different to slum dwellers because of their access to excellent public and municipal services; and

e) Others have pointed to smarter and more creative urban design solutions within compact cities. The example[27] is given of the "defensible space" movement started by urban planner Oscar Newman in the 1960s/70s. This was at a time when parks and public housing projects were crime-ridden, and Newman's view was that all space belonged to somebody. He argued that by giving residents a sense of ownership of these spaces gangs wouldn't take them over. This route suggests that instead of

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[24]https://www.citylab.com/design/2020/03/coronavirus-urban-planning-global-cities-infectious-disease/607603/

[25]https://blogs.worldbank.org/sustainablecities/urban-density-not-enemy-coronavirus-fight-evidence-china

[26]https://www.citylab.com/life/2020/03/coronavirus-data-cities-rural-areas-pandemic-health-risks/607783/

[27]https://kinder.rice.edu/urbanedge/2020/03/30/how-covid-19-pandemic-will-change-our-cities

fleeing cities, innovative urban planning and design is the better solution; and

f) Finally, there are examples from South East Asia where local neighborhoods in inner-city poorer areas are leading with civil society area-based interventions to self-manage the risks of COVID-19[28].

As early as 1961 Jane Jacobs, the American-Canadian writer and urban activist, argued for the merits of densification as distinct and different from overcrowding. In a scathing attack on the Garden City movement she argued[29],

> *"The Garden City planners and their disciples looked at slums which had both many dwelling units on the land (high densities) and too many people within individual dwellings (overcrowding), and failed to make any distinction between the fact of overcrowded rooms and the entirely different fact of densely built up land. They hated both equally, in any case, and coupled them like ham and eggs, so that to this day housers and planners pop out the phrase as if it were one word, "highdensityandovercrowding."*

Her argument pleaded that we should not conflate the two concepts[30],

> *"… it still remains that dense concentrations of people are one of the necessary conditions for flourishing city diversity …*
>
> *One reason why low city densities conventionally have a good name, unjustified by the facts, and why high city densities have a bad name, equally unjustified, is that high densities of dwellings and overcrowding of dwellings are often confused."*

The common strand running through the interventions and arguments highlighted is that they do not seek to discard densification as an instrument of progressive urban planning. This approach is useful in that it forces us not to conflate the means and ends of urban planning.

Many are beginning to argue that urban life, as we know it, is likely to change (under and) post-COVID-19. If this is the case, what are these changes likely to be? The possible trends that are likely to affect cities and towns post-COVID-19 include the following:

• Deeper levels of urban poverty, inequality, joblessness and under-employment;
• A reconfiguration of the urban middle and working classes, which will reveal new fault lines, as a consequence of the changing nature of the capitalist political economy under and post-COVID-19;
• More attention will be given to the interdependencies between public health and urban planning and design;
• A greater focus on urban resilience and disaster management planning and management;
• A larger number of middle-class professionals working remotely from home;
• A blurring of public and private life;
• A re-thinking by governments and local authorities on how public spaces are planned, designed and utilized;
• A sleuth of new or revised urban and municipal planning standards, bylaws and regulations;
• Greater use of technology as a tool for work, learning, leisure, shopping etc.;
• New forms of, *inter alia*, technology-based economic activity and consumerism;
• New forms of speculative property developments and offerings that feed

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[28] Webinar: LSE, 3 June 2020; Post-Covid-19 Futures of the Urbanizing World

[29] Jacobs, Jane (1961: 205): The Death and Life of American Cities
[30] Jacobs (ibid:205)

off the "social distancing" and "de-densification" narratives;

• Growth of new industries and production/ supply chains supporting the post-COVID-19 economy;

• Innovative community- and civil society-based interventions, initiatives and networks to adjust to life post-COVID-19;

• The introduction of new/ adjusted infrastructure provision and protocols to govern private and public transit and public transportation systems;

• New forms of retailing and shopping spaces and activities focusing on personalized home-delivery services; and

• The continued growth of the informal economy in ways which both accepts and rejects the emerging new realities of post-COVID-19 urban life.

In response to these anticipated changes to urban life, there is no shortage of emerging urban planning ideas and proposals on how to prepare for a post-COVID-19 urban future.

Two North American professors recently suggested a 10 Point Plan[31] to prepare communities for a future beyond the pandemic. They argued for the following: (i) pandemic-proof airports; (ii) prepare large-scale civic assets; (iii) modify vital infrastructure; (iv) ready key anchor institutions; (v) embrace telework; (vi) ensure Main Street survives; (vii) protect the arts and creative economy; (viii) assess leading industries and clusters; (ix) upgrade jobs for front-line service workers; and (x) protect less-advantaged communities.

This is what urban planners are called to do; to urgently rethink the role of the urban planning movement and urgently imagine and chart a path informed by the lessons of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Conclusion

There are many reasons why we need to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of an increasingly urbanizing world. This paper offers at least four imperatives and areas of intervention why the urban lens is necessary to address the COVID-19 pandemic.

Firstly, COVID-19 is a global urban pandemic. Next, our quality of urban life is being fundamentally challenged and compromised, where the urban working class is bearing the overwhelming brunt. Thirdly, COVID-19 is playing itself out on an urban stage facilitated by the space economy of global capitalism. Lastly, the urban planning profession is faced with a moment in history where it can usher in an urban-led golden age that is markedly different to the deeply inequitable and unsustainable world we currently call home.

To paraphrase the words of David Harvey, COVID-19 did not drop from heaven unmediated by human action. Diseases and epidemics opportunistically exploit conditions created and fashioned by urban planners, communities, policy makers, governments and global capitalism.

It is this nexus between COVID-19 and our urban condition that compels us to imagine and build an alternative urban, more equitable and sustainable anti-capitalist future.

Collective human action is the key.

end

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[31] https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2020/03/24/how-our-cities-can-reopen-after-the-covid-19-pandemic/