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Article

What does the global pandemic COVID-19 teach us? Some reflections

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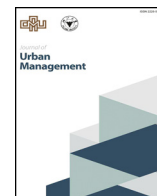


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Editorial

What does the global pandemic COVID-19 teach us? Some reflections



Climate change being a contemporary phenomenon exerts its pervasive impacts on every aspects of human civilizations. While the climate induced challenges are on the surge, both scientific and civic communities attempt to come to a consensual agreement on the best possible actions to fight against them. Although a complete consensus on the part of actions is still a far reaching goal, the impact magnitude of the overarching climate challenges reached an unprecedented state that left the current think-tank with a binary choice: (i) either to choose the “right” path for action or (ii) let the world continue to head to a stature where human civilization is going to lose its survivability. With the current dynamics of mutual agreement on carbon neutral actions, the global climate think-tanks and nation-states are advancing “green” initiatives in order to survive the human race. The global consensus has been seen to grow in that direction too.

Historic or periodical pandemics never perceived to be global threats, not as close to the scale of climate challenges. For instance, 1918's Spanish Flu (H1N1) did not pose a global threat to the civilization and habitability when comes to geographical coverage and number of people affected by that pandemic. In the early 21st century, resurgence of pandemics notably Swine flu, SARS, MERS and Ebola virus did have high trajectory of impacts, but they were confined within limited geographical entities and nature of spread was also within a fair degree of control. However, when COVID-19 made its global appearance, its unprecedented swath of ultra-damages quickly spread across the globe. Since its outbreak as a global pandemic, the daily actions across the societies literally came to a halt, clearly demarcating and declaring a state of “new normality”. The effects are still on and projected to stay through its momentum of 2nd and 3rd waves. As it turns out, the urban and rural life under the new normality is predominantly characterized by “stay home”, “self-isolation” and “physical distancing” while they continue to persist as the only non-clinical “panacea” to contain and battle against the COVID-19.

Put simply, the COVID-19 pandemic is caused by the spread of the virus throughout the system of cities. It is arguably true that the virus is simple and the city is complex. However, when they are intertwined, the resulting system becomes complex because of the dominance of complexity over simplicity. Given this presumption that the COVID-19 pandemic is a complex matter, we can begin to deal with it based on the ideas derived from complexity theory. For example, the virus spreads throughout the network of human interaction in the city which is scale-free in nature. If we could lockdown the hubs of the scale-free network, such as transit stations and CBDs, to eliminate the possible paths through which the virus spreads, we could then contain the virus. This is exactly what the Chinese government has been doing during the past months and it seems to work. However, this is one apparent solution to this complex problem, leaving out many facets of inquiries that need a fundamental re-start, many of which are associated with planning, development and management principles and their practices.

Contemporary green approaches to planning and management, notably high density and mixed-use development designed to fight against the climate challenges are seemingly under critical investigation. The effects of COVID-19 might further challenge the established principles and practices on urban infrastructure planning and management. To its continuation, physical interaction and mingling is considered to be an unwelcoming act as they have positive connotation with the spread of COVID-19. Contrarily, it is almost impossible to maintain a total isolation and physical distancing in contemporary urban spaces and built environment featured by high-density development. The urban spaces are experiencing a rapid evolution besides the “private” and “community” spaces. Such dynamics could be understood as an immediate response to this unprecedented situation while it could also be seen as an indicative pathway where the urban space could potentially transform into (Adam, 2020; An der Heiden, and Buchholz, 2020; Salama, 2020). For instance, home-based office as a private space is seen to become a noticeable feature under the new normality. This has transformed home into a mixed-use “semi-private” space with online schooling provisions for the kids (Engle et al., 2020). This has been a manifestation of rapid transformational use of space, aided by the smart technologies and ICT infrastructure. Such transformational response could be seen as an “immediate resilience” to respond as well as “adaptation” to the ongoing pandemic. In fact, the new home-based “semi-public” spaces (balconies, back and front yards) are seen to be used for daily amenities and interaction with the immediate neighbors (Forsyth, 2020; Nahiduzzaman, 2020). However, these features are not always available in high

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density apartment buildings. Furthermore, it is critically challenging to avoid any physical interaction and maintain needed distancing in public spaces e.g. neighborhood park. At a larger scale, the urban public spaces i.e. regional parks, recreation facilities, and playgrounds are under an excruciating challenge. The underlying assumptions of (i) greater physical cohesion and (ii) increasing interaction are at intense scrutiny because of COVID-19 posed greater physical distancing requirement and even a total absence of any interaction. Due to this fundamental change, the goal of cohesive urban spaces becomes questionable. This is more so when the consensual knowledge of resilient and inclusive communities advocate for a dense and highly interactive mixed-use development, current status quo of COVID-19 demands somewhat the opposite (Honey-Roses, 2020; Nahiduzzaman, 2020).

Given the conjunction of climate challenge and COVID-19 posed multitude effects, time has never been so critical to reflect upon the possible avenues in which contemporary planning and design fundamentals demand a complicated shift. Thus, fundamentals around land use regulations, planning bylaws, mobility, building codes, official community plan (OCP), planning for infrastructure, municipal and recreation services, and state-of-the-art technologies in digital socialization and daily necessities e.g. commuting, schooling, office works, shopping, etc., should be re-examined with evidence from across the world through a lens of “resilience”. Moreover, the post COVID-19 era might subject to a prolonged state of psychological fear, worries and confusion against any small to large scale physical gathering that is going to add a next level challenge to building inclusive and cohesive communities.

The current unprecedented composite of a global pandemic and climate challenges leads to a reconfiguration of “transformational” status quo. Whilst the full ramifications of this pandemic remain unclear, the webinar that took place a few weeks ago aspired to ignite a critical discussion and capture insightful reflections from the global leaders (<https://www.journals.elsevier.com/journal-of-urban-management/news/reflections-of-the-global-urban-leaders>). We hoped to pave out an essential foundation for possible transformation that the existing built environment needs to undergo in order to make the cities truly livable, healthy and resilient. Given the uncertain duration and periodicity of the occurrence of COVID-19, the forum essays in this issue attempt to critically review the built environmental think-tank that would be adaptive, predictive and responsive towards a “new” normal or future.

As the COVID-19 spreads worldwide, different viewpoints about the effects of the disease on the world pervade. Because the crisis is unprecedented in scale and speed in our generation, we do not know how to face the challenge in theory and practice. As a result, we have lost and are still losing thousands of lives because of this disease. However, we would argue that the COVID-19 pandemic is a complex matter and based on the ideas derived from complexity theory, we should be able to take effective actions fighting this virus on a scientific basis (Krakauer & West, 2020).

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