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Cities, COVID-19, and the new normal

31 Mar 2021

As cities recover and reorganise post-pandemic, policymakers should take into consideration how communities' mobility, livability, security and sociability are affected

Besides being the two most famous European cities, London and Paris share something else in common: both were drastically remade in response to health and safety crises. The Great Fire of London in 1666 finally brought an end to wood as a building material for facades, while Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte in the 1850s delivered much delayed urban reforms that addressed overcrowding and disease in the centre of Paris. In the latter it led to Paris's famous wide boulevards that cut through the city in all directions.

Fast forward to 2021 and COVID-19 poses challenges for policymakers and governments in planning and governing the post-pandemic city, explains **Shenjing He**, Professor of Urban Studies at The University of Hong Kong. Specifically, these pertain to:

- Mobility
- Livability
- Security
- Sociability

Speaking at a recent SMU Office of Core Curriculum workshop, "New Cities in the New Normal", Professor He highlighted plans to tackle these concerns via the modernist approach that brought about upgraded sewer systems and expanded green spaces. She argues it would be inadequate, and that the four challenges should be addressed by viewing them within the [Territory, Place, Scale and Network \(TPSN\)](#) framework of socio-spatial relations.

"Mobility refers to the physical as well as social mobility," she explains, linking it to 'Territory' and pointing to widespread domestic and international travel restrictions. In the post-pandemic city where movement restrictions might remain in place in some form, "this suggests selective mobility which is available only to particular countries or groups of people, or the privileged few."

Livability is linked to 'Place' where the home and neighbourhood has become the central node of urban life in the era of movement restriction and social distancing, and therefore most infrastructure and amenities should be built within a 15-minute walk or a bicycle ride.

In a discussion panel, Professor **Stephen Cairns** of the Futures Cities Lab Singapore-ETH expanded on livability post-pandemic:

"Livability has a history based on historical technology such as good plumbing, access to clean water, pollution-free space, privacy. All of those things are emerging from a technological condition – it's a 20th century city. More and more, ecosystem services, green space, access to animals and pets and nature are starting to be added to livability indices around the world.

But if you look at changing indicators are what constitutes livability, that's a shifting field. At this point, I wouldn't be surprised that 'access to zoom' and the digital divide and so on and so forth to be part of livability indices in the next decade."

Socialbility is linked to 'Network' where "social proximity rather than physical distance is the key maintaining and sustaining our social networks", and efforts should be made to facilitate social support from families, the workplace and the wider community despite physical separation".

SECURITY FOR WHOM?

But it is the Security dimension that raises the biggest question. Professor He notes discussion among experts to make key infrastructure such as airports, shopping malls and schools "pandemic-proof" to keep life going during a pandemic. "To develop pandemic-proof infrastructure, surveillance technology would be key," she elaborates, citing Singapore's TraceTogether contact tracing system as an example of that. Privacy issues are an obvious concern, as are possible racial and class divides that would be exacerbated by the digital divide that existed pre-pandemic.

In the discussion panel, **Hallam Stevens**, Associate Professor of History at Nanyang Technological University noted that "there's been an intensification of what we might call the smart city with an intensification of data collection, monitoring, and surveillance". Add to that vaccination and travel passports, and the increased use of sensors in public spaces, there is a lot of data being collected.

"It leads to a rollout of more and more sensors and the collection of more and more data with the justification that they would protect us in some way, or save us from the pandemic," Professor Stevens observes while asking if the smart city is necessarily a surveillance city. But the fact that widespread surveillance could be accepted as part of 'new normal' is cause for concern, he warns.

"The question of the 'new normal' is also an acquiescence of a political choice here," he elaborates. "It's equivalent to saying, 'We're ok to be continuously surveilled. We're ok with having our mobility restricted. We're ok with these new arrangements.' To call all this the new normal is a political statement about where we are and what we are willing to accept."

PRIVATE GOVERNANCE VS PUBLIC SAFETY?

As people retreat into their domestic and neighbourhood space, Professor He was asked if this might exacerbate the neoliberal norms of private governance where people believe in the 'sovereignty' of their space, which in turn might undermine pandemic management.

"This is related to my other project in Beijing which is about people's perception of gated communities," she elaborates while providing the context of the central government's decision in 2017 to discourage the building of gated communities which highlighted issues of segregation and income inequalities. "People started understanding the negative effects of gated communities and private governance.

"But during and after the pandemic, people valued the gated community. They think that access control is excellent in safeguarding personal safety and security. They are willing to pay higher prices to live in a gated community, especially in smaller communities because people believe they are able to implement more effective control on outsiders gaining entry to their community.

"There is a danger of reinforcing these neoliberal norms of private governance. They might perceive that they have sovereignty over their home and community, and thereby create a more segregated and exclusionary urban landscape in the post-pandemic world."

She concludes: "We need to introduce policy intervention in terms of not compromising the security at the community level, but also mitigate the reinforced segregation because of the perception of the effectiveness of private governance and grassroots strategies that have been over-promoted during the pandemic."

The "New Cities in the New Normal" workshop took place on 22 January 2021 and was organised by the [Cities Research Cluster](#) at the SMU School of Social Sciences.

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