

FUTURE CITIES SERIES - URBAN CITIZENS IN A POST-COVID WORLD

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- By **Matthew White**

The cornerstones of city life: proximity, interaction, convenience and vitality have been challenged by the pandemic. What happens now?

“Almost everything in social life is produced by rare but consequential shocks and jumps; all the while almost everything studied about social life focuses on the ‘normal’.” — Nassim Nicholas Taleb

This article is part of our Future Cities Series where our experts explore the pressures facing our cities in the post-Covid era and map out the key issues and industry themes in re-thinking urban life.

Since the end of the Second World War, the growth of cities has been relentless. In 1950, less than a third of the world’s population lived in towns and cities. According to UN estimates, 2007 marked the first year in history that more people in the world lived in urban than in rural areas. The urban population was predicted to reach 68% by 2050 – more than doubling in the space of a century.

This trend towards ever-greater urbanisation was believed to be perpetual and irreversible. That is, until the Covid-19 pandemic.

Now, urban lockdowns and social distancing have called into question some of the cornerstones of city life: proximity, interaction, convenience and vitality among them.

Metropolitan areas have been worst-hit by Covid-19, with the virus spreading fastest in densely populated areas. In March, the New York Times asked “Can City Life Survive Coronavirus?” as affluent New Yorkers with second homes fled to the countryside. A headline in the UK’s Daily Mail newspaper read: “LOCK UP Londoners for spreading coronavirus”. The near-shutdown of the world’s greatest cities has been construed as evidence that this is an urban disease. Suddenly, unthinkably, could cities be in decline?

The pandemic has been described as a black swan: an event that is entirely unexpected. Black swans have an extreme impact but, with the benefit of hindsight, are subsequently rationalised as being predictable. Economies are particularly vulnerable to black swans because of the abrupt and far-reaching disruption that they cause. With many countries having now overcome the initial peak of the pandemic, thoughts are turning to what part this particular black swan will play in history.

Covid-19 is not the first disease to have a radical effect on urban life. Plague, sweating sickness and Ebola all shaped the evolution of cities. Modern water supply and sewage systems were developed in response to cholera outbreaks in the nineteenth century. More recently, SARS prompted a re-evaluation of air travel and saw one of the first uses of contact-tracing to prevent transmission.

After each of those outbreaks, despite the severe effects on urban populations, cities recovered and went on to thrive. There is every reason to expect the same to happen now. We are not witnessing the demise of the metropolis. Normal life will return, but not everything will be the same. The question is: what will change? And what do we need to do now to ensure we are ready for that change?

“... as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don't know we don't know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones.” — Donald Rumsfeld

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