

FUTURE CITIES SERIES: HOW PLANNING AND ZONING RULES CAN DRIVE POST-COVID DEVELOPMENT

18 June 2020 | Insight

The evolution of cities has long been defined by threats and crisis. Covid-19 will be no exception.

The Covid-19 pandemic has spread rapidly in densely populated cities, with typically only three to four weeks between the first fatality and the initial peak of infections. Like all unwanted guests, it will depart more slowly. As the health crisis begins to recede, we are facing months of continued restrictions on the way we live and work.

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.

Cities are adapting in very different ways across the world to allow people to return to work, with attitudes to data tracking, social distancing and the wearing of face masks proving more culturally distinctive than the lockdowns that preceded them.

What is universal, however, is that the economic consequences of the pandemic are likely to be with us for a decade or more. How can urban planning and zoning systems help cities to recover? And can cities be redesigned to help prevent and mitigate the effects of future pandemics?

Planning policy will need to be more flexible, for several reasons:

- To enable buildings and spaces to be reorganised to enable people to return to work safely while Covid-19 is still present
- To allow uses to be repurposed more easily in response to sectoral impacts caused by the pandemic (eg changing depreciated retail centres to new residential uses)
- To encourage the development of multi-use buildings and areas in order to reduce the need to travel between traditional single use districts (eg introducing more residential and leisure uses into central business districts)
- To reduce investment risk in order to re-incentivise new development projects
- To facilitate the delivery of robust social, energy and transport infrastructure that is fit for purpose in the event of future outbreaks or new pandemic threats
- To deliver confidence and trust in cities and their brand value in the global investment market

Cities that can provide the greatest flexibility will be the most successful in the future and will attract the strongest demand from real estate investment funds, tenants, employers and citizens.

Cities have inherent advantages in terms of population density, energy efficiency, economic prosperity and quality of life. These benefits need to be recognised and encouraged by zoning regulations in order to avert the risk of cities entering a period of decline. This could, for example, include the adoption of a simple zoning category of “City Use” which permits either accommodation, business or community uses. There would be total flexibility within each of these uses without the need for regulatory approvals; and a streamlined procedure to change uses across and between the uses. *See table.*

CITY USE: ABC ZONING			
	ACCOMMODATION	BUSINESS	COMMUNITY
Consent not required for uses within each class	Residential	Office	Healthcare
	Hotel	Retail	Education
	Co-living	Food and beverage	Open space
	Apart-hotel	Leisure	Places of worship
	Student	Sport	Social infrastructure
	Build to Rent	Cultural	Emergency services
	Simplified consent process for changes between classes		

In order to qualify for this zoning category and the clear advantages that the flexibility would provide, developers would have to commit to delivering minimum standards of design and infrastructure. These would be formulated to ensure that all new buildings are properly equipped to be ready to for future pandemic outbreaks. *See table.*

CITY USE: MINIMUM DEVELOPMENT REQUIREMENTS	
5G and high speed fibre broadband	Low carbon energy generation / usage
Access to nearby open / green spaces	Extended opening for staggered commute
Kerb space for autonomous vehicles	Thermal entry screening
Consolidated delivery systems	Track and trace monitoring
Enhanced cyclist facilities	Hands free access / payments
Increased space standards	Visitor sanitising facilities
Payment of annual healthcare levy	Real time information dissemination

Throughout history and across the world, cities have been planned and redeveloped to deal with threats such as revolution, fire, flood, earthquake and terrorism. Now city planners, politicians and architects must rise to the challenge of shaping our future cities so that we can continue to thrive in a world transformed by Covid-19 and its urban legacy.

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