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The DPU (post)COVID Lexicon

Editors: Haim Yacobi, Jordana Ramalho, Adriana Allen, Colin Marx, with El Anoud Majali, Harshavardhan Jatkar

dpu Development Planning Unit

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Introduction

Haim Yacobi,
Jordana Ramalho, Adriana Allen

During the last year, the global pandemic has affected teaching, research and public engagement at the DPU. It has required our staff, students and partners to think creatively about how to continue with their work and commitments both locally and globally. In this special issue - The DPU (post)COVID Lexicon - we reflect on selected key terms at the core of the DPU's work, and share some thoughts on the related issues, challenges and opportunities that COVID-19 has brought to the fore in our academic and professional lives. The pandemic presents an opportunity to critically revisit policies and planning approaches, as well as processes fundamental to understanding current urban conditions. Generally, the last few decades of urban development have been characterised by the domination of private (capital) interests versus common good in cities, and the related privatisation (of space, services and infrastructure) versus the provision of means for collective consumption. In parallel to the policy-driven commodification of urban spaces and emerging social diversity in cities, we have also witnessed rising levels of socio-spatial inequality, hyper-segregation, poverty and homelessness. As many of the discussions in this special issue attest, COVID-19 has exposed and reinforced (rather than necessarily created) these social gaps, and uncovered the weaknesses of this form of urbanity, especially when we talk of a 'return to normality'.

The accelerated urbanization processes of recent decades - as most of the world's population now live in cities - requires consideration and planning for the wellbeing of urban residents beyond the current health crisis. With widening social and economic gaps within and between cities, such questions of environmental and social justice increasingly shape the everyday lives of urban dwellers. It is now clear that premature deaths and diseases resulting from poor environmental conditions are disproportionately concentrated in areas where residents of certain ethnic and racial groups are concentrated. In recent decades, there have also been voices in research and practice that emphasize the need to move away from an exclusively clinical approach to health towards one that encompasses an understanding of the broader interconnected social and spatial aspects of the city that affect public health. In this context, the definitions and approaches of urban development planning addressing some of the issues highlighted in this special issue (relating to land, housing, open spaces, transport and mobility, among others) directly and indirectly impact the health of urban populations. As discussed in this special issue, a significant turnaround can be seen in the role of development planning in responding to immediate challenges. The diagnosis of a link between poor environmental conditions in the industrial city and epidemic outbreaks has harnessed planning for the regulation of space, addressing aspects of sanitation and hygiene which are the basis of urban life.

With the hope of returning to a 'new normality', we should work towards the flattening of the already existing curve of spatial injustice in cities. What we see from the last year is that the effects of COVID-19 vary depending on the strength of the welfare system, including health, education and housing. The response to the aggressive neoliberal policies of the last few decades is to develop urban planning that will ensure greater accessibility, better quality care and solidarity; and more diverse housing, open spaces, infrastructure and services.

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Distance

Signal in Cmbridge. Photo Credit: Haim Yacobi

Paroj Banerjee, Haim Yacobi

Distance is a geographical concept, a measure of separation between two locations. Predominantly expressed in quantitative terms, distance provides crucial insight into the understanding of the world's spatial and social organisation. In social terms distance underscores the relation between people. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, social distance has acquired central importance in our response. If not total inoculation, social distance has nevertheless been perceived to be the antidote that protects the population. Coronavirus has ripped through distanced geographies across the globe. While mainstream media, in alignment with policy directions from global health organisations, circulated the idea of social distancing, an alternative narrative that met with severe criticism was also in circulation: building herd immunity. In a press briefing during the early phases of the pandemic, Boris Johnson echoed the need for 60% of the population to be impacted by the virus to gain herd immunity. Herd immunity, it was suggested, would be achieved not through social distancing, but social consumption. Schemes like 'Eat Out to Help Out', meant to support the flailing economy, encouraged the public to consume in retail. The biopolitical logic of maintaining and mediating distance thus formed an important tool for governing the pandemic. This pandemic has served as a reminder of how systemic distances have had differential impacts on people. While social distancing has been an important measure for containing the spread of the virus, the ability to social distance has been a matter of privilege. 'Stay home, stay safe', the slogan for the pandemic of most governments, reinforced the dominant stereotype that conflates home as a safe space. Home was thus meant to be a sanitised sphere distant from a potentially polluting sphere, the street or the outside. Social distance was directly proportional to the size of one's home, the number of people living in it and its access to services. In other words, the bigger the size of the house, the lesser the number of people, the more effective it was to social distance. This narrow vision of distance invariably excluded populations who did not inhabit conventional homes. Street dwellers, homeless people and those living in informal settlements were particularly impacted. COVID-19 disproportionately harms vulnerable individuals and communities including people of colour, the poor, undocumented migrants, refugees and indigenous communities. The WHO recommends that people all over the world self-isolate, wash their hands frequently and keep a safe social distance. However, can one take these precautionary measures in cities, which are the most crowded places on earth? Social distancing in cities assumes some control over density, distances and spatial regulations. Yet for those who are living in temporary shelters without basic services, distance is a highly politicised idea. Distance is not neutral. Rather it is political and social as we learn from the exponential increase in domestic violence. Taking cognizance of the emergence of this 'shadow pandemic', as UN Women calls it, the UK government's regulations regarding staying home have seen a shift. Subsequent lockdowns have made provisions for people to seek distance from their homes to avoid violence. While policy and interventions regarding home-based violence have considerable distances to cover, this policy shift made a significant acknowledgment, that home is not necessarily safe, and that often physical distance from the oppression of home is emancipatory.

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Editor: Haim Yacobi, Jordana Ramalho,
Adriana Allen, Colin Marx, with El Anoud Majali
Harshavardhan Jatkar
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Cover Photo: A rainbow appears over the
Saramandaia neighbourhood after a
downpour in Salvador, Brazil,
during the MSc SDP filedtrip.
Photo Credit: Alexander Macfarlane, 2018

The Bartlett
Development Planning Unit
University College London
34 Tavistock Square
London WC1H 9EZ
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)20 7679 1111
Fax: +44 (0)20 7679 1112
dpu@ucl.ac.uk
www.bartlett.ucl.ac.uk/dpu