

Reset City: A Response to COVID-19

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“The fact that it is patients and people living in low-income neighbourhoods or from racialized populations that have borne the brunt of the pandemic shouldn't be a surprise to anybody.”

— Dr. Andrew Boozary, Executive Director of Health and Social Policy at Toronto's University Health Network

Even pre-COVID-19 pandemic, homelessness, child poverty, and substandard housing meant that the attributes of good city design were not apparent to the average citizen. As the pandemic sweeps through cities across the globe, it reveals the legacy of power and segregation, and exposes inequities in our cities.

According to data from APM Research Lab, Black Americans are dying of Covid-19 at three times the rate of white people. Both Montreal and Toronto's poorest and most racially diverse neighborhoods have been hit hardest by COVID-19 (CBC). Internationally, people living in informal settlements are especially vulnerable. For a place such as Nairobi, this means at least 60% of its residents.

Globally, ninety-five percent of COVID-19 cases originate in urban areas. Just as city planning of the Industrial Revolution dealt with policies to address spread of diseases such typhoid and cholera, city planners today must resolve to make our cities more prepared and resilient in the face of pandemics. The intentional creation of public spaces, transportation, housing, and play areas needs to be rethought with a pandemic in mind.

We must reimagine city form and design and reset community planning through a lens that considers not only principles of 'good design' but social equity, healthy communities, and sustainability. Strategic thinking is required to reduce the impact of outbreaks of the future. It's time to plan proactively and long-term.

Some cities have already begun closing roads or lanes to cars to create room for bicyclists and socially distanced pedestrians, or building additional hospitals and

homeless shelters. Though urban planners have been working to make cities more walkable for a long time, the pandemic has accelerated the prioritization of pedestrians in unprecedented ways. The New York City Department of Transportation installed temporary protected bike lanes along two busy bike corridors that currently lack protected infrastructure.

Ironically, many of the initiatives called for by climate and social change activists are happening at lightning speed in British Columbia as a result of the pandemic:

- Slow streets or streets for people and bikes
- Overnight housing of homeless in modular or repurposed hotel housing
- Less commuting and more telecommuting
- Emergence of new outdoor public spaces, through the extension of restaurant patios into parking lots
- Awareness of the need for better care and protection of our elders
- On-line educational systems allowing less commuting
- Food systems that are smaller-scale and more localized

In regions such as the Fraser Valley and Metro Vancouver, the idea of a dense urban core may be replaced by more complete satellite communities with implications for the way we work, interact, and recreate. Housing will require design that addresses its use as both work/school space and domestic residence. The meaning of 'home' begins to change and evolve.

An initiative that integrates resilient planning, climate change, and the impacts of the pandemic is a small and more complete community initiative happening in some cities:

- Paris, France is creating the “15-minute city” initiative meaning residents can meet their essential needs within a short walk or bike ride¹

- Portland, Oregon aims to cover 90 percent of the city in so-called “20-minute neighbourhoods”— where all basic needs can be reached within a 20-minutes walking time.
- Melbourne, Australia also launched the “20-minute neighbourhood” (see figure 1)

Transition Design: Way of Being

“When we have to think strategically, we also have to accept our complicity. If we are not exterior to the problem under investigation, we too are the problem under investigation. Diversity work is messy, even dirty, work.”

— Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*

Cities as we have known them are of the past. As cities transition, there needs to be an opportunity for inclusionary design that respects current realities. We will need resiliency-planning which demands an understanding of integrated and complex cities amidst the triple threat of climate change, pandemics, and social inequity.

Good design must not only be inclusive but also address systemic biases and support positive change. Planners can build on the reclaiming of city streets for public spaces, the need for policy that protects the health of our most vulnerable (including elders and racialized populations), truly affordable and accessible housing for all, and a redistribution of density and accessibility throughout our communities.

Border closures, travel restrictions, and prohibitions on arrivals from certain areas were among leading policy responses in the early days to keep the coronavirus from becoming a full-blown global pandemic. But are politicians in some countries using the pandemic to advance migration policy agendas they could not by other means?

In Canada, population growth has halted as immigration declined dramatically in the 2nd quarter of 2020.² We as planners need to lead the narrative and provide a new framework for the design of welcoming and spatially-just cities, localized work, and connected education.

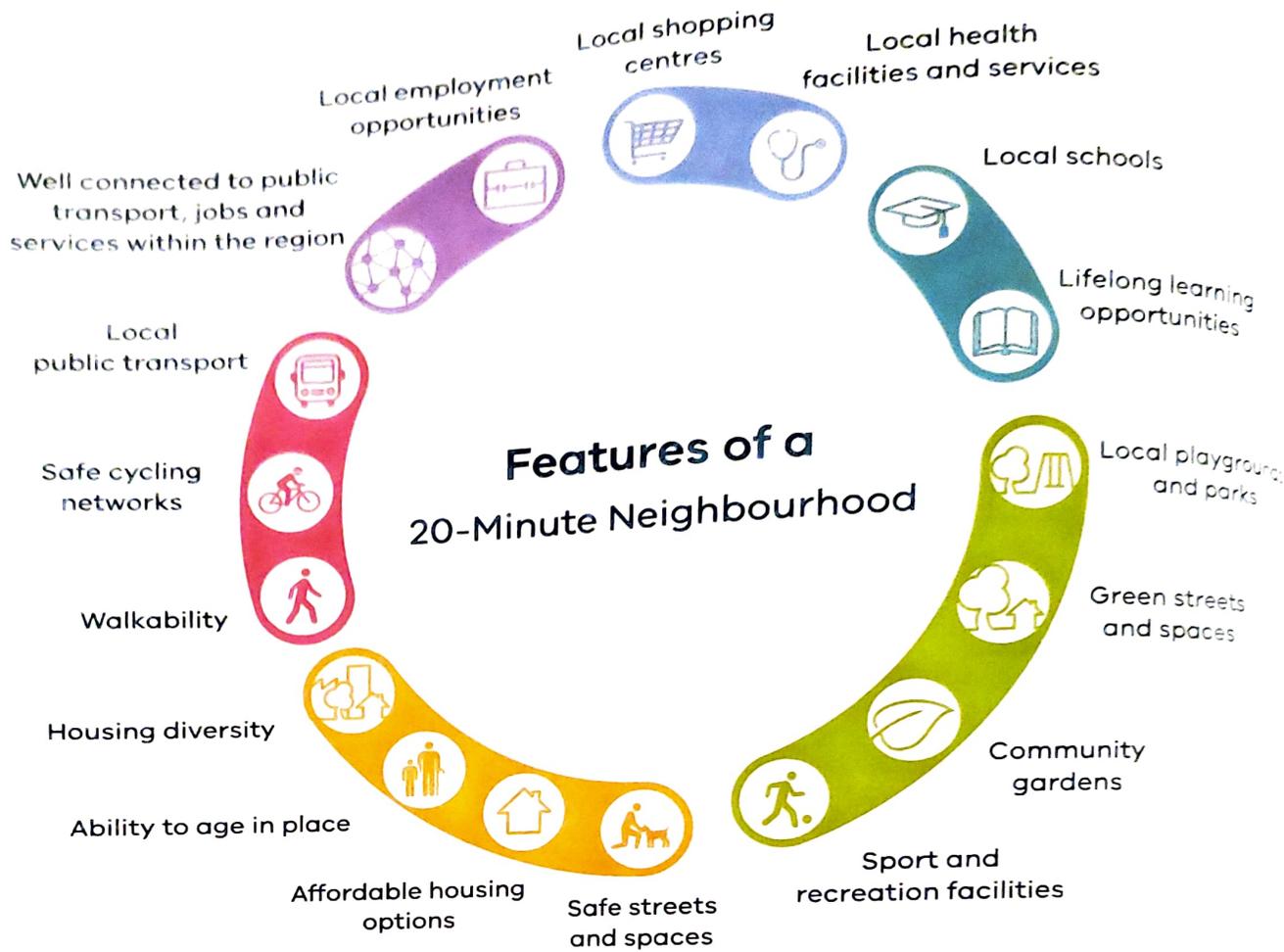


Figure 1: Melbourne's 20-minute neighbourhood

“The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city.”

— David Harvey, Economic Geographer, City University of New York

With people and bikes replacing cars in city streets, restaurant patios extending onto parking lots, those once busy streets are becoming quiet as people work and study from home. This is an opportunity to rethink policy and planning design.

Is it possible to regain a more equitable community and world and retain environmental gains as a result of the pandemic?

Planners need to voice how to make our cities healthier, more spatially just, and more sustainable. In the end, as we reset all city systems, we must recognize that we are ultimately the city we become. ■

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¹ O'Sullivan, F. (2020, February 18). Paris Mayor Pledges a Greener 15-Minute City. Retrieved June 17, 2020, from <http://www.citylab.com/environment/2020/02/paris-election-anne-hidalgo-city-planning-walkable-parks/606325/>

² <https://montreal.ctvnews.ca/canada-s-population-growth-waltered-by-covid-19-crisis-due-to-immigration-restrictions-study-1.4992775>