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TIME FOR CHANGE. OR BUSINESS AS USUAL?

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The COVID-19 pandemic has had an enormous impact on cities and towns across the world. Physical distancing requirements and limits placed on indoor gatherings have resulted in a range of planning and design responses. In many places, streets and asphalt have been repurposed to create space for outdoor dining, new bike lanes, and wider sidewalks. And people everywhere are rediscovering the value of parks and public spaces.

Our UMass research team spent much of summer 2020 collecting examples of the ways cities and towns deployed design interventions to address the pandemic. Our work includes a wide range of case studies that provide important lessons for planners, stakeholders, and the general public.

Research in Real-Time

When the pandemic struck, our team had already been studying the role that “social infrastructure” (social gathering spaces including public spaces, libraries, and cafes) plays in building healthier, more equitable cities. The work is informed by “Third Places” research by Ray Oldenberg (The Great Good Place) and more recent work by Eric Klinenberg (Palaces for the People) linking the availability of social infrastructure with resilient communities. We were able to redirect our work with funding from UMass Extension/Center for Agriculture, Food and the Environment, to focus on the pandemic and its impact on cities.

We paid particular attention to the effect COVID-19 is having on social infrastructure. The opportunity to study this in “real-time” was exciting. Each day brought new examples to study, new dimensions to our work.

We began by reviewing databases that had been created for hundreds of cities worldwide. By the end of the summer, we had gathered 60 examples from 51 different cities and towns, including 39 American cities. This group includes

Westfield, Holyoke, and Springfield in the western part of Massachusetts.

In contrast to most of the existing databases that mainly reported the “what and where” of design interventions, our team paid special attention to how projects were developed, for what reasons, and who benefitted from them. We looked at how information was conveyed to residents and stakeholders. And importantly, we looked for recurring themes and ways the projects could be the impetus for cities and towns to reimagine their streets, outdoor spaces, and vacant lots.

This is what we found:

1. By far, most interventions were installed to benefit restaurants, and then businesses, more generally. More than half of the examples studied were motivated primarily as a way to allow businesses to meet physical distancing requirements in order to stay open. Boosting the local economy was deemed the main reason these cities were reducing vehicle traffic, converting parking lanes and allowing restaurants to expand their footprint.

2. Although less common, 41% of cities made changes to infrastructure that did not directly benefit businesses. For example, additional bike lanes were made for essential workers who did not want to use public transportation. Other cities appropriated street space to create more room for bicyclists and pedestrians on sidewalks and walking trails.

3. Lack of community engagement. Only one-third of the cities and towns we looked at engaged the community in some way. Of these cities, only a small number organized a process before they implemented changes to streets. Some cities took a “better late than never” approach, communicating with residents, but only after the changes had been made.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON PUBLIC SPACES AND THE PROMISE OF SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

4. The research shows that almost all interventions were planned as temporary measures at the time of our data collection. From all the cities in our database, only 3 cities planned to make changes permanent.

In general, COVID-19 has led to a reevaluation of public spaces and their importance for the future of cities. The temporary interventions have also called attention to the planning process, tactical urbanism, and how local decisions are made. Some cities and towns were criticized for pushing aside planning rules in the rush to respond to COVID-19. And while many projects are deemed successful, they might not be addressing the needs of a broader cross-section of the community. These messages resonate with our research findings. A combination of temporary measures enacted without a sound process of community engagement might lead to rapid change, but does it lead to the best outcome for everyone? Most interventions we studied are located in downtown districts. Pedestrian and bicycle-friendly efforts in residential neighborhoods that might reach a more diverse group of residents comprised a smaller portion of our database. Some of our data in combination with anecdotal evidence suggests this may be especially the case in Massachusetts Gateway Cities (the state’s former manufacturing centers) where some residents felt the changes made to the streets did not benefit them, were inconvenient, or even harmful.

Lessons Learned as a Guide for the Future

As winter approaches, the question of permanency and how to turn temporary projects into long-lasting community benefits becomes more urgent. What will it take to keep these streets and spaces open? How can they continue to function as social infrastructure instead of reverting to parking lots (with or without snow piles), vacant lots, and traffic thoroughfares?

There are some promising signs. Mayor de Blasio of New York City recently announced that his city’s Open Restaurant program would become permanent. In September 2020, Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker announced a doubling of the Shared Streets and Spaces grant program from \$5 million to \$10 million. The program is helping cities and towns rework curbs, sidewalks, streets, and parking spots to create areas for physically distanced walking, commerce, dining, and other outdoor activities. Proposals earn extra credit by showing the potential of making permanent improvements.

But the availability of funding is no guarantee for success. The challenge to moving away from “business as usual” approaches was brought home in our own backyard. Although much of the “Picture Main Street” effort in Northampton predates COVID-19, the rollout and reaction to the recent tactical interventions/protected bike lanes on Upper Main Street (funded in part by the grant program) highlight many of the issues in our research. The Northampton situation, a combination of physical distancing and road diet, was a creative way to demonstrate a reimagined public realm. But businesses felt ignored. The project was suspended, with perhaps the worst outcome possible: more division and less trust.

What to do? The pandemic is an enormous public health disaster. But it’s also a call to action. Now would seem to be a good time to imagine new approaches for a post-COVID world. The pandemic provides us a chance to reconfigure cities with less asphalt and more space for pedestrians and bicyclists (and physical distancing). Architects, designers, and planners can play an important role here.

As precarious as the future may be, it could also be very exciting. The examples in our research help us remember that real change is possible and that the promise of better, more resilient cities embedded with social infrastructure can be fulfilled.

