

How to avoid zombie cities

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Pity the city planner. Post-covid, they have to make cities less dense to stop to spread of disease, but more dense to reduce carbon emissions. They must provide socially-distanced travel, yet funnel people onto public transport to reduce traffic. And that must all be planned around people who will have staggered work schedules, but more flexibility to work from home.

In short, the pandemic has thrown down an impossible challenge for those charged with rebuilding our cities. But rebuild we must. The pandemic has caused permanent change to our urban habits: shops are closing, offices are downsizing, people are leaving for the country.

Of course, the world's great cities have survived many disease outbreaks over the millennia, but this one is different. It is the first in which internet technology has allowed many people to live and work while disconnecting themselves from face-to-face society. Support for the unemployed is also far more generous than it was during previous pandemics. In short, many people do not need cities.

Hence, the serious risk of zombie cities, where large urban areas lead a lifeless or one-dimensional existence. It is no coincidence that during the height of the lockdowns in March and April, many city centres were described as "post-apocalyptic".

There are some early signs of how cities will reinvigorate themselves post-covid. In London, there are plans for start-up hubs, affordable workplaces, and more spaces for community. Initial estimates are that a fifth of office tenants will be new ones by 2025, and that there will be a 50 per cent increase in weekend and evening visitors.

Plans like this are nowhere near enough. Radical solutions are needed and they require channelling the past.

Consider the most interesting parts of the world's most interesting cities. They are frequently not the great planned spaces. Rather, they are the areas with small laneways inside which nestle a random assortment of shops, apartments, and local restaurants. These are the intriguing, quirky places where many different people have lived, shopped, worked, and died. These are areas that tell personal stories of life and love. They are the settings of great novels. They create a mythology around great cities. And they attract generation after generation of those

who wish to add their own fingerprint to the millions of others.

These areas are the product of 'bottom up' city building. In other words, they are places that the inhabitants have designed and built themselves, largely free of the planning constraints of local councils or central government. They are the basis of almost all great historical cities and this is exactly what our cities need in a post-covid age.

Here is how it can work today. First, we have to accept that many city retail stores and offices will be vacated. The government should, sadly, let these tenants leave. As they do, all these premises should be zoned residential with very few rules attached. But here is the catch. In these areas, the government should remove the exclusion on people running businesses from their homes. In essence, we should let people loose on our urban areas.

Cue an influx of people. Cue the artists, craftspeople, and anyone who wants to live where they work on their passion. Indeed, the City of London has already said that unused office space may be used as artists' residencies or galleries. Old office and retail stores will never be the same. We know that people are very good at redesigning random spaces into homes and, with these reforms in place, vacated city centres will quickly become magnets for the sort of people who ignite urban culture. To assist further, local councils can pedestrianise many city centre streets to facilitate community. This will not be hard – the pedestrianisation movement is already in full swing across many European cities.

As people move in, their entrepreneurial spirit will take hold. In turn, the necessary cultural and economic infrastructure will organically pop up to support the new usage patterns. Voila! City centre jobs reappear, just in a different form. As they do, city centres will begin to rediscover the vibrancy that made them so popular to begin with. Tourists will finally return.

Some call this radical urbanism, others call it mixed-use urbanism, still others may call it a 'Wild West' occupation of cities. Regardless, there are many benefits to 'bottom up' planning. First, it is honest and admits that we simply do not know how our cities will be used post-covid. Rather than try to predict the impossible, we should allow people to create their own spaces in small iterations as they respond to the evolution

of the post-covid world.

This style of 'bottom up' planning is a dramatic reversal of post-war city planning norms. This period has been dominated by legacy-seeking politicians who have obsessed over massive projects built by developers with no cultural or economic stake in the final result. These have not worked as intended. Even in the mid-1980s, renowned British architect Norman Foster argued that mass housing was simply "about political statistics" and had been naively promoted as "a stereotype into which everyone fits".

To illustrate, consider the large public, or formerly public, housing estates in London, Paris, Berlin, and many others. Built post-war, many are today foreboding and run down. It is clear the occupiers (whether owners or renters) feel little responsibility for them. This is not their fault. Rather, responsibility lies with the politicians and architects who prioritised their 'grand vision' over the many varied desires and lifestyles of the end users. Too much planned beauty has led to a loss of spontaneity and freedom. What is left is a desolate feeling of anonymity and monotony.

Beyond removing the 'enforced culture' aspect of 'top-down' planning, there are other benefits to allowing individuals to create their own 'bottom up' post-covid cities. For starters, it will cushion the boom-bust cycles of real estate and finance. That is because society will reduce its reliance on the large property developers who can be financially dependent on a single large project. In addition, the burden on government will also be reduced. 'Bottom up' city building reduces bureaucracy, requires fewer feasibility studies and multi-year master plans, and shrinks urban planning departments. Negotiations with the necessary developers will also be shortened and simplified in line with the smaller projects on which they will work.

'Bottom up' planning will also help reduce inequality. Consider the way residential areas currently operate where people are forbidden from running face-to-face businesses from their homes. Yet, the rise of the service and internet economy means that people can start many other types of businesses from their homes. This is not a dynamic that was envisioned when the original no-business rules were introduced and it gives a massive advantage to knowledge workers (who tend to be better off) at the

expense of people who want to run a face-to-face business. Empowering the latter group to be entrepreneurial will open up a new realm of economic possibilities.

Some may argue that face-to-face businesses can never exist in converted office buildings without ground-floor frontage. But consider Japan, where spatial necessity drove people to establish bars, shops, and more within plain, multi-level buildings. At first, the concept seems bizarre to foreigners but they quickly adapt.

The biggest obstacle to 'bottom up' planning will be residents worried about change (otherwise known as nimbys). But change has been needed for some time and the pandemic is the perfect opportunity for central government to take charge and overhaul our approach to city building. In any case, as most of these reforms are most relevant to city centres, the impact on existing residents will be lower than it would be in suburban areas. And as city centres are already developed, these new rules will not dissuade developers from building appropriate high rise accommodation in cities, nor deny industry of necessary space.

Of course, there should be common sense rules. You would not allow, for example, a mortuary or heavy industry in a mixed-use area. Also, these ideas are best suited to city centres and similar areas that are already urbanised to avoid replicating the poverty stricken areas of cities, such as Johannesburg and Rio de Janeiro. But the rules should be refreshingly light compared with those that exist today.

We must avoid the mistakes made after we rebuilt from the Second World War. People should not be told how to live in a space thumped down upon them by politicians with a re-election agenda. Rather, they should be empowered to determine the future of their urban area. They should be allowed to create homes, start businesses, and fashion their environment in their own individual style.

The price is homogeneity – some will detest the development of a 'hodgepodge city'. But iterative, individualised improvements have created the most interesting parts of the world's most interesting cities. The things some deem 'ugly' today are frequently those that people realise over time have agglomerated into a city of immense cultural value.