

Our Cities Will Look After the Coronavirus Pandemic

The pandemic will change urban life forever. We asked 11 leading global experts in urban policy, planning, history, and health for their predictions.

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BRIAN STAUFFER ILLUSTRATION FOR FOREIGN POLICY

Cities are at the center of this pandemic, as they have been during so many plagues in history. The virus originated in a crowded city in central China. It spread between cities and has taken the most lives in cities. New York has become the world's saddest, most dismal viral hotspot.

Hunkered down at home, rarely venturing into hauntingly empty streets, most of us are still at a loss at how urban life will look afterwards. Will restaurants survive and jobs come back? Will people still travel in crowded subways? Do we even need office towers when everyone is on Zoom? Come to think of it, the idea of living on a farm seems suddenly attractive.

Cities thrive on the opportunities for work and play, and on the endless variety of available goods and services. If fear of disease becomes the new normal, cities could be in for a bland and antiseptic future, perhaps even a dystopian one. But if the world's cities find ways to adjust, as they always have in the past, their greatest era may yet lie before them.

To help us make sense of urban life after the pandemic, *Foreign Policy* asked 11 leading thinkers from around the world to weigh in with their predictions.

Cities Will Survive the Coronavirus

by [Richard Florida](#)

Great cities will survive the coronavirus. Cities have been the epicenters of infectious disease since the time of Gilgamesh, and they have always bounced back—often stronger than before. The Black Death decimated cities in Europe during the Middle Ages, and in Asia all the way up

to the start of the 20th century. The Spanish Flu of 1918 killed as many as 50 million people worldwide, and yet New York, London, and Paris all boomed in its wake. In fact, history shows that people often moved to cities after pandemics because of the better job opportunities and the higher wages they offered after the sudden drop in population. **The crisis may provide a short window for our unaffordable, hypergentrified cities to reset and to reenergize their creative scenes.**

Some aspects of our cities and metropolitan areas will be reshaped, depending on how long the current pandemic lasts. Fear of density, and of subways and trains in particular, plus a desire for safer, more private surroundings may pull some toward the suburbs and rural areas. Families with children and the vulnerable, in particular, may trade their city apartments for a house with a backyard. But other forces will push people back toward the great urban centers. Ambitious young people will continue to flock to cities in search of personal and professional opportunities. Artists and musicians may be drawn back by lower rents, thanks to the economic fallout from the virus. The crisis may provide a short window for our unaffordable, hypergentrified cities to reset and to reenergize their creative scenes.

Predictions of the death of cities always follow shocks like this one. But urbanization has always been a greater force than infectious disease.

Looking Beyond the Urban Jobs Armageddon

by [*Edward Glaeser*](#)

Before the coronavirus pandemic, I trusted urban entrepreneurs to create enough service jobs to belie dystopian visions of a robotized economy. The ability to provide pleasure by serving a latte with a smile has long provided a safe haven where the unemployed could find work. But if pandemics become routine, then human interactions will create more fear than joy, and those jobs will vanish. **If pandemics become the new normal, then tens of millions of urban service jobs will disappear.**

For a blessed century, Western cities have been healthy. We forgot that contagious disease has shaped urban fortunes since the plague of Athens slew Pericles. That safe century saw jobs move from farms to factories to the service sectors that now employ 80 percent of U.S. workers.

In the United States alone, 32 million jobs are in retail, leisure, and hospitality. They are on the front lines of the pandemic. One recent [survey](#) found that 70 percent of smaller restaurants expect to be permanently closed if the COVID-19 crisis lasts four months or more. If pandemics become the new normal, then tens of millions of urban service jobs will disappear. The only chance to prevent this labor market Armageddon is to invest billions of dollars intelligently in anti-pandemic health care infrastructure so that this terrible outbreak can remain a one-time aberration.

An Opportunity to Build Back Better

by *[Robert Muggah](#)*

The coronavirus pandemic is transforming city life. It is overwhelming hospitals, demolishing commerce, restricting access to public spaces, straining digital infrastructure, intensifying mental health challenges, and forcing people indoors. In the absence of a vaccine, many of these disruptions could become permanent. Cities were already facing chronic revenue shortfalls and budget deficits before the pandemic. The priority now is to save lives, deliver essential services, and maintain law and order. This is especially important in developing-world cities and informal settlements where rising food prices increase the risk of hunger and social unrest.

City mayors are already revisiting urban plans to prevent the next pandemic. In the short term, many will introduce mass testing and digital contact tracing, retrofit buildings and public spaces for social distancing, and bolster health systems to deal with future threats. The pandemic is also accelerating deeper, longer-term trends affecting cities, such as the digitalization of retail, the move to a cashless economy, the shift to remote work and virtual delivery of services, and the pedestrianization of streets. Public transit will struggle to retain ridership without social distancing adjustments. Driverless cars and micro-mobility schemes may become increasingly vital.

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The pandemic is exposing the quality of governance and scale of inequalities in our global cities. It is also providing an opportunity for urban planners and entrepreneurs to build back better. Some of them are exploring ways to upgrade their zoning and procurement policies to promote smart density and greener investment. Cities are the perfect test beds for new innovations. First movers such as Amsterdam; Bristol, England; and Melbourne, Australia, are already developing plans that prioritize circular economics, climate resilience, and a radical intolerance of inequality.

Hungry for the Simple Joys of City Life

by *[Thomas J. Campanella](#)*

Cities have endured terrible pandemics throughout history, yet they flourished to grow ever larger and denser. The feared contraction of urban life after COVID-19 will be temporary at best, even in the United States with its long tradition of anti-urbanism. Cities were often considered corrupting and immoral compared to the countryside—a creed that ultimately gave us suburbia. Even the United States' first great planned city, Philadelphia, kept the hazards of Old World

density at bay with its unusually large original lots. The city's founder, William Penn, had survived the plague and fire of 1660s London and wanted neither in his city.

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The current pandemic is just the latest historical pivot to have pundits predicting the death of the city. During the atomic age, cities suddenly became hot, glowing targets, prompting an urban decentralization movement during the Cold War. To futurists such as Marshall McLuhan, George Gilder, and Alvin Toffler, it was digital communications that would kill the city and lead to a return to rural life by what they called “ultrahigh-abstraction workers”—the very demographic that instead has flocked to San Francisco, New York, and London. The 9/11 attacks prompted obituaries for the skyscraper and Lower Manhattan, neither of which shows any signs of going away.

What will our cities look like after COVID-19? Many of our favorite bars, restaurants, and cafes will be gone, but others will take their place. Elders and the immunocompromised may avoid urban spaces for a time, yielding a temporarily younger, fitter, more risk-tolerant downtown population. And the inevitable lingering fear of infection will be countered by a quarantine rebound effect: People will strain to get out from lockdown, hungry for the simple joys of being in fearless proximity with one another on a busy city street.

Cities Will Excel at Disease Prevention and Response

by *Rebecca Katz*

The world over, young people have flocked to urban environments in search of work and education, opportunities to interact with others their age, and new experiences in culture and the arts. With the ongoing transmission of the coronavirus—and given our new awareness of the risks of infectious disease—population density has suddenly become less attractive. Shared apartments, which are an affordable launching point for newcomers to experience the breadth of cities, have become claustrophobic under quarantine. At the same time, we have seen the urban rich, who have gentrified city after city, escape to their summer homes. Many of them may recalculate their preferences permanently. **While it is impossible to predict what the new normal will be, it may well be reverse urbanization.**

Now that so many of us have created new routines working remotely via countless Zoom teleconferences, we may start to see an exodus from the city to more rural environments. While it is impossible to predict what the new normal will be, it may well be reverse urbanization.

Yet we also fully expect that municipal leaders will excel at disease preparedness and response. What was once an underfunded, understaffed area of health departments will become more robust. We will develop best practices for protecting population health in cities, which will help keep urban environments attractive.

We Can Create a Better Urban Future Where No One Is Left Behind

by *[Maimunah Mohd Sharif](#)*

Around 95 percent of people with COVID-19 live in urban areas. This has brought into sharp relief some of the fundamental inequalities at the heart of our towns and cities. COVID-19 will hit the most vulnerable the hardest, including the 1 billion residents of the world's densely populated informal settlements and slums, as well as other people lacking access to adequate, affordable, and secure housing. Without a house, it is impossible to heed the call to stay at home. Without safe shelter and access to basic services, the order to shelter in place has no meaning. **Without safe shelter and access to basic services, the order to shelter in place has no meaning.**

This pandemic is already exacerbating the urban divide that has resulted from a long-term failure to address fundamental inequalities and guarantee basic human rights. The post-COVID-19 response will require these failures to be addressed and all urban residents provided with basic services—especially health care and housing—to ensure everyone can live with dignity and be prepared for the next global crisis. Local authorities will have to be the driving force in reducing inequality, supported by national government policies that increase the resilience of cities and their residents. The eternal optimist in me aspires to, and firmly believes in, a better urban future in which no one and no place is left behind.

Create the Safe and Resilient City We've Needed All Along

by *[Janette Sadik-Khan](#)*

The road to recovery from this pandemic runs along our streets. We can bring back cities without bringing back the traffic, the congestion, the pollution, and the 1.3 million people who die in traffic crashes every year. We can reclaim and reset our streets to move people by foot, bike, or public transportation—and do it safely, affordably, and easily, no matter where they live in the city. And we have an opportunity to give city residents around the world true transportation independence—real choices for getting around and the freedom not to have to own a car. **The pandemic reveals just how much cities depend on essential workers—and how much essential workers depend on public transport.**

The pandemic reveals just how much cities depend on essential workers—and how much essential workers depend on public trains and buses to reach jobs at hospitals, grocery stores, and other links in the supply chain. Our ability to endure this pandemic relies on new safety protocols

to keep passengers and public transport workers safe, and on investing in extensive service expansions to make the next crisis easier to manage.

This challenge we're faced with isn't whether cities will survive as we know them. The question is whether we will have the imagination and vision to transform streets and bring about the safer, more accessible, and more resilient cities we've needed all along.

New Institutions Will Bring Back Cities

by *[Bruce Katz](#)*

History teaches us that crises usually bring about new government agencies and institutions. The United States created the Department of Homeland Security after the 9/11 attacks and the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau following the 2008-2009 housing crash. The coronavirus pandemic is therefore likely to drive institutional change in cities, where new capacities will have to emerge to address economic devastation.

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The unprecedented collapse of small businesses, particularly those along commercial corridors in disadvantaged communities and those owned by people of color, will require new public or nonprofit intermediaries to provide services to financially impaired firms and sophisticated training to new entrepreneurs. We already have business incubators and accelerators—what we need now are regenerators. These should ensure access to equity-driven financial products, rather than simply providing more debt. At the same time, public land banks and nonprofit development corporations—which allow land to be pooled and revitalization to be accelerated—will grow in significance. Models such as Copenhagen's City and Port Development Corporation or Cincinnati's Center City Development Corporation, long admired but rarely replicated, will be fundamental to urban recovery. Without radical institutional change, the inclusive recovery of cities will be a very long time in coming.

Urban Housing Will Get Cheaper

by *[Joel Kotkin](#)*

Cities will remain critical to human society, but they need to change. The coronavirus and high-density living have gone together from the start—from the pandemic's genesis in crowded, unsanitary urban China to the much higher rates of hospitalization and death in large cities around the world. The contrast to the less dense hinterland couldn't be starker, especially in the

United States, where New York City has borne the brunt of the pandemic. **Answers may include developing personal, autonomous transport systems instead of forcing people into crowded subways.**

Answers may include allowing more growth in the periphery, which would require substantial changes in land use and zoning regulations; encouraging remote work where possible; and developing personal, eventually autonomous transport systems instead of forcing people into crowded subways. When cities were afflicted with pandemics in the early 20th century, society responded with de-densification. Manhattan went from a population of nearly 2.5 million in 1920 to 1.5 million in 1970. A similar process occurred in central London and Paris. As more people moved to the periphery, cities got safer and more sanitary. A similar strategy will help us in the future. Some dispersion of the population might also allow jobs to spread out and reduce urban housing costs. The next generation of suburbs, however, will have to be designed for lower emissions, more home-based work, and shorter commutes.

A Wake-Up Call for Cities to Rethink Their Economic Model

by *[Chan Heng Chee](#)*

The coronavirus pandemic has been a wake-up call for cities around the world to rethink urban planning with health security as a top priority. In Singapore, the health system was already reorganized in the wake of the 2003 SARS epidemic, but this coronavirus is different. There are many aspects to health security that pose special challenges for a city lacking a rural hinterland, especially those involving the vulnerability of medical and food supply chains. **Many aspects to health security pose special challenges for cities, especially those involving the vulnerability of medical and food supply chains.**

Another aspect in a city like Singapore is securing the health of the large population of migrant foreign workers who have helped build and sustain the city. Singapore's total population is 5.7 million, of which almost 1 million are semi-skilled and unskilled workers, including foreign domestic workers and roughly 300,000 migrant workers, mostly working in construction. Most are housed in mega-sized dormitories. This close communal living, as well as crowded worksites, facilitated the infection of many workers in this pandemic. Post-coronavirus, the design of the dormitories will certainly be revisited and protocols strengthened.

And it is almost certain that the current economic model—one that relies heavily on migrant workers for growth and development—will be rethought. The promotion of technology to increase productivity, long advocated by the government, will be stepped up with a greater urgency to reduce the reliance on manpower for productivity.

We Must Restore Confidence in the Safety of Dense Living

by [*Dan Doctoroff*](#)

Cities will come back stronger than ever after the pandemic. But when they do, it will be driven by a new model of growth that emphasizes inclusivity, sustainability, and economic opportunity. Even before the crisis, urban communities around the world were demanding lower costs of living and stronger plans to tackle climate change. Some unaffordable cities, such as New York, were even seeing residents leave town.

Cities will come back stronger than ever after the pandemic.

Reviving urban population growth after the pandemic will start with restoring confidence in urban public health and in the safety of dense living. But when people do return to cities—as they always have in the past—we must leverage new policies and technologies to make urban life more affordable and sustainable for more people.

Cheaper, more flexible building methods such as tall timber construction can lower the cost of housing and dramatically reduce the carbon footprint of new buildings. New mobility options and public transit extensions can help residents reach jobs without needing to own a car. Energy innovations can enable all-electric neighborhoods that reduce their climate impact without utility bills that break the bank.

If we take this opportunity to build better, cities will not just recover but provide greater opportunities than they did before the coronavirus struck.

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How the World Will Look After the Coronavirus Pandemic

How the Economy Will Look After the Coronavirus Pandemic

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