

After coronavirus: how seasonal migration and empty centres might change our cities

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Credit: Mike Bird from Pexels

The changes to urban space brought by the coronavirus have many people asking what the post-pandemic city [might look like](#).

For example, as people may continue to avoid crowds for fear of becoming ill and more are able to work from home, will more people [leave high-density cities](#) for peripheral or [rural areas](#)? After all, research shows that the [spread of COVID-19](#) has been [linked to urban density](#).

On the other hand, [high density](#) may not necessarily be a public health issue. The cities of Singapore and Hong Kong have higher densities than New York and London, but have managed to control the virus spread through aggressive management actions. These include early testing and extensive tracing of cases rather than full isolation or quarantining.

The long-term pattern of increasing urbanisation, existing high [urban density](#) and the [economic](#) and cultural benefits of urban life suggests that we will not see a large-scale exodus from cities to rural areas. However, the pandemic may trigger patterns of relocation to lower [density](#) areas within the [city](#) or its peripheries.

The post-pandemic city will need to [employ urban solutions](#) that enable people to socialise, work and live without extremely high densities, while balancing urban compactness and urban sprawling.

Personal space

Current social distancing measures, which ask us to stay one-to-two metres apart, can be considered in the light of what we have learned from [anthropologists](#) and [architects](#) about the idea of personal distance. Their research suggests that we each have an invisible but protective bubble around us, an area that we consider ours alone that shrinks and expands as our activities and engagement with others change.

There is no doubt that the pandemic will have an impact on the way in which comfortable social distances are perceived, and that impact could be permanent. If pandemics become annual or seasonal events, personal

distance might naturally become stretchy. Our personal bubble would shrink during safe periods, and expand during outbreaks.

This pandemic will stay in our memory for several generations. And as pandemics and our responses to them more generally become part of the collective psyche of society, new behavioural patterns will emerge.



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

If we do see a succession of safe periods and outbreaks, this might result in patterns of seasonal migration from the city to its peripheries or to rural areas where closely interacting with others is not the norm. However, this would be limited to those with the financial means to leave the city.

Another possibility is that continued social distancing, encouraging less association with others in urban settings, may lead to people permanently leaving the urban cores of cities and moving to the peripheries.

The centre of the city could then become reserved for business and economic activity only. However, this will raise questions about transportation and the impact of increased daily commuting.

A large-scale move to suburbs may increase challenges that some cities have struggled with for decades: an empty city centre after working hours, and the associated problems of crimes, anonymity, detachment, segregation, isolation, and fear.

Nature and design

Another possible outcome is a change in how we design our cities. [Biophilic design](#), which focuses on creating [healing environments](#) and places that support health and wellbeing, had seen a surge of interest even before the pandemic. It aims to eliminate stress and anxiety from the built environment and encourage mindful [engagement with nature](#).

[Biophilic design](#) involves embracing a visual connection with nature through well considered interaction with the outdoors. This can range from adding planted spaces and water features, to installing green walls on building facades, to simply positioning furniture to engage with views. But architects and planners need to consider how much is enough and would have a positive impact on people.

Engaging with nature, even just [visually](#), has a [positive impact](#) on mental health. Given that there could be a growing preference for proximity to nature, because we see it as healthier or less of a health risk, it is likely that people will tend to favour environments that integrate the natural into the built environment.

Future city living seems to have arrived at our doorsteps. Where and how we live in cities will change after coronavirus. New norms of social encounters and a growing interest in biophilic design are just a few examples of this change. A successful post-pandemic city will effectively manage urban density and the needs of the people who inhabit it.

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