

What will our cities look like after COVID-19?

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The past few months have been a highly unusual time as people sheltered in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Schools, streets and stadiums fell silent, tourist hot spots became ghost towns, and sidewalk

traffic largely consisted of grocery and food deliveries.

In an article published this week in *Cities & Health*, UBC planning experts Jordi Honey-Rosés and Erick Villagomez analyzed the implications of these changes on [city planning](#) and space design. Alongside other scholars from Chile, China, Mexico, India and Spain, they looked at the measures taken by [major cities](#) to cope with the pandemic, and how those efforts transformed and continue to transform urban life.

The researchers say the pandemic is transforming [city](#) building, design, energy flows, mobility patterns, housing preferences, green spaces and transportation systems. Many of these changes may be temporary, while others may be permanent.

"In some cases, cities are accelerating the implementation of changes they had in the works already, such as rolling out planned bicycle infrastructure, street calming projects or sidewalk re-designs. In other cases, planners and neighbors are making things up as they go along, experimenting, testing and relying on low-cost interventions," said Honey-Rosés, an associate professor in the School of Community and Regional Planning at UBC.

Erick Villagomez, a part-time lecturer at the school, noted the drop in pedestrian traffic associated with commercial activity during COVID-19. According to the most recent Google Mobility Report, mobility associated with retail and recreation across Canada still sits at about 17 per cent below January-February median levels.

"Although this rate continues to rise slowly, the reduced [pedestrian traffic](#) to-date has already had strong effects on many [local businesses](#), many of which have had to close their doors indefinitely. This trend will likely continue until a viable solution to the pandemic is found," said

Villagomez.

Over the longer term, the researchers see further changes taking place, with cities likely looking to implement low-cost and temporary street calming and pedestrianization projects. "Streets might need to be re-designed. With [online shopping](#) and home food delivery having taken off, there is huge demand for curbside street parking, not only to meet new delivery needs, but also to free space for pedestrians," said Honey-Rosés.

They add that the look and feel of cities that rely on tourism will change, both in negative and positive ways. Businesses may continue to struggle, but there is an increased interest in building a stronger pedestrian-friendly environment. In Toronto, for example, the City accelerated plans to install cycling infrastructure along the popular Danforth Avenue as a part of COVID-19 relief plans.

As well, there is now a greater appreciation of the importance of providing easily accessible opportunities for the enjoyment of nature and a diversity of recreation activities. Cities may revisit the potential of unused spaces such as brownfield sites and building rooftops, citing the staggering amount of rooftops that are underused in many cities and could be converted into rooftop gardens.

Over time, the researchers say our sense of place and space may be permanently transformed. "Public space might still be a place for social interaction, but it may be more difficult for the spontaneous and informal. The pandemic may limit our ability to develop new relationships, especially among strangers," said Honey-Rosés.

On the positive side, the pandemic has given us an unprecedented opportunity to examine the links between urban planning, public space and wellbeing, he added. "Our future city is not preordained, but will be

the result of specific decisions about public space. We hope citizens will talk to their leaders and come together with planning and policy professionals to build healthier cities during this crisis and beyond."

Villagomez, who has written extensively about the implications of transforming cities to meet the standard six-foot social distancing protocols, notes that the everyday spaces we inhabit have been shaped by millennia based on dimensions that are much smaller—three to four feet being the most common.

"Right now, people are attempting to adapt systems, behaviors and built spaces based on three-to-four-foot distances to the larger social-distancing dimensions. The results have been very interesting, showing a lot of creativity and innovation. But it's also already evident that cities cannot and will not fully change in every respect to allow six-foot distancing. This will continue to evolve as restrictions change," Villagomez added.

More information: Jordi Honey-Rosés et al, The impact of COVID-19 on public space: an early review of the emerging questions – design, perceptions and inequities, *Cities & Health* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/23748834.2020.1780074](https://doi.org/10.1080/23748834.2020.1780074)

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