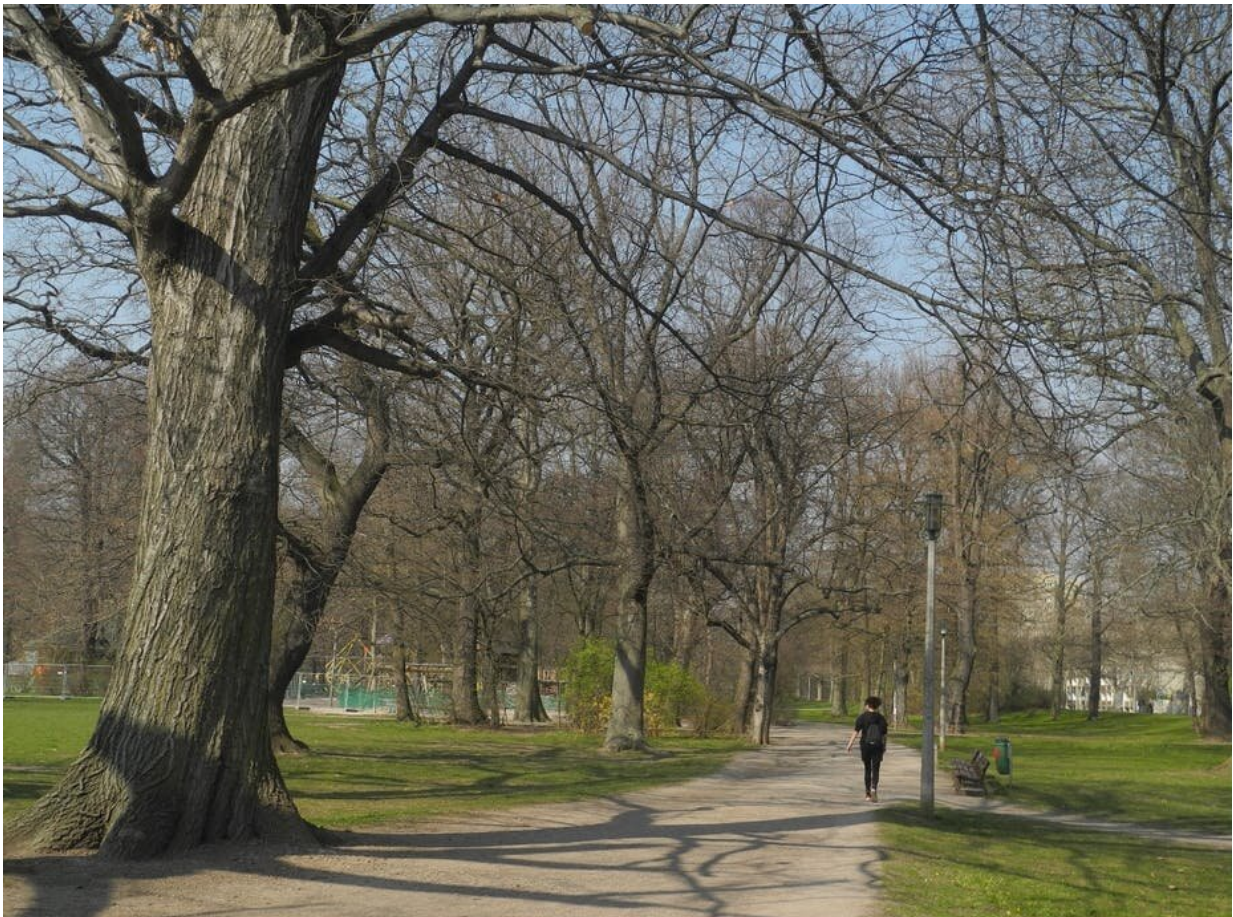


Ten talismans for a new understanding of cities in post-pandemic times

July 2 2021, by Dagmar Haase



Urban green spaces are essential for the well-being of both human and non-human residents of a city. Credit: Fourni par l'auteur

For more than a year and a half, the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has kept

the world locked down. Schools, universities, cafés and restaurants, cultural institutions and stores have been closed for long stretches of 2020 and 2021. In many parts of the world, travel has slowed to a crawl and sometimes stopped completely. While the number of flights is climbing as some restrictions are lifted, they remain [significantly lower](#). Even 18 months later, it feels as if life itself has come to a relative standstill.

Mandatory social distancing and movement restrictions have profoundly changed what we could do, particularly for those living in cities across the globe. At the same time, [green spaces within urban areas](#) allowed [city dwellers](#) to get some air and compensate for the absence of holiday and travel options. As car travel fell, flora and fauna were even able to (temporarily) make a [surprise return to urban centers](#).

Reflections from urban scholars

During the last year, urban scholars—be they planners, ecologists, social geographers, or risk researchers—have had the opportunity reflect upon the following issues:

- The process, form, density and extent of [urbanization](#) and the related loss or regeneration of ecosystems inside and around cities.
- The extent and accessibility of [green spaces](#) in cities for recreation, [public health](#) and refuge.
- How nature and humans are [co-habiting](#) and what we can do to prevent [future zoonoses](#).
- The role that science-based facts, expert knowledge and [social media](#) have in shaping the public discourse about cities, and their material and immaterial matter.

Here are 10 premises—I call them "talismans" to emphasize that they're

opportunities—that can act as a guide to reflecting about the above issues.

1. Co-habitational distancing, not social distancing

Humans and nature should go for a new kind of [co-habitational distancing](#) based on mutual respect. During the pandemic, we have learned what social distancing is—to keep distance to safeguard the others. This was a good and a successful strategy, but we applied this strategy exclusively to the [human society](#). Following the idea of One Health, we should extend the idea of distancing to all living creatures on our planet. This would help preserve ecosystems and safeguard their health, and in so doing, safeguard ours.

Mutual respect means distancing as humans and animals spheres overlap and let them interact, but not in most cases and not everywhere. Co-habitational distancing means sharing land for common needs as well as spare land for individual interests and needs.

2. Encourage co-habitation of nature and humans in cities

Diverse cities must be exactly that. They require a respectful attitude for all human beings as well as nonhuman beings. In a [superdiverse city](#), space is required. This is what we learned for humans—Setha Low's "[Public space and diversity](#)" is a key text—and the same is true for the other creatures with whom we share this planet.

In cities we already have excellent forms that enable us to realize different intensities of [human-nature co-habitation](#)—gardens, urban parks, zoological gardens, brownfields and nature reserves are all spaces that allow for either cohabitation or distancing.

3. Guaranteeing rights not only for city dwellers, but also for nature

The pandemic clearly revealed the double standards we have about humans (societies) and nature (ecosystems). We must drop this double standard and work to [ensure rights for both humans and nature](#). We must also invest the time and effort required to explore what are rights of nature not only in the establishment of reserves and national parks but also in daily co-habitation.

4. Cities can show how we can reduce land, material and food consumption

Getting healthier and happier while demanding less from nature is essential for us keep more core habitats intact. For decades, urban ecologists have dealt with core habitats and buffer zones. We have the theoretical knowledge, but we betray this knowledge with misguided ideas of endless growth and higher and higher per-capita living.

But there is hope: In cities such as New York, land prices have soared and per-capita living space has dramatically declined. In such dense [urban areas](#), can we find approaches that will enable us to preserve space for nature? All organisms need space, after all—humans for housing and animals for hunting and nesting. Significant undisturbed ecosystems would be the best strategy for preserving the quality of life as well as reducing the chance of future pandemics.

5. Learning from what the arrival of COVID-19 is telling us

Rethinking the ability to access basic resources, wealth and education is

essential. Urban societies can enable all their residents have better health and escape poverty. This in turn will reduce susceptibility to the pandemics and root out the inequalities in our societies that lead to overproduction, food waste, malnutrition and obesity and extreme urbanization, all at once. Here too, Setha Low's [three-dimensional concept](#) is essential.

6. Reasoning from what happened and concluding from factual evidence

In pandemic and post-pandemic times, it is worth asking questions as a way to provokes deeper learning. In similar times, what did our ancestors do? What can we see in the shape and morphology of cities that were witnesses to past pandemics? What can urban history and [city](#) regulations and planning literature tell us about earlier solutions to pandemic situations? What worked and what did not? Are there tipping points? Are there points of return?

7. Make evidence the base of policy advice and decisions

[Green cities](#) could be a sustainable, space-saving way for humans to settle at this planet, including green roofs, rooftop gardens and "living walls." But unless developed in a smart and comprehensive way, they won't be enough to compensate for global ecosystems loss—the decline of Brazilian tropical rain forests' for soybean fields or the clear-cutting in South East Asia for palm-oil plantations, for example. The levels of both impacts—global and local—do not fit, and nor do the benefits and burdens hit the global urban and rural populations in a similar/equal way (*Haase, 2020*).

8. Social media data can build awareness our urban

social-ecological systems

Data gathered by citizen scientists and shared through social media can provide a wealth of information ([Ilieva and McPhearson, 2014](#)). What new plants and insects have arrived? Where do animals show irregular behavior? What species have disappeared? The direct, almost real-time input that local administrations can obtain has the potential to establish more meaningful connections between citizens and institutions, as well as between citizens and the nature around them. This will bring new synergies to the management of urban ecosystems and the vital services it provides to humans and other living organisms in the city.

9. Use traits to expand our understanding of environmental changes

Through their direct relation to ecosystem services such as cooling and fresh air, easy-to-understand [traits](#) can be an entry point for awareness of nature. To do so, it is vital for us to understand the diverse characteristics of urban society, including cultural background, physical mobility, gender, age, education levels, access to information, purchasing power and political influence. All these factors affect the needs, preferences, and values of individuals and groups, and the way each interpret human-nature relationships.

Large-scale monitoring needs to be coupled with [in-depth understanding of response mechanisms and their impact on ecosystem functions](#). Only by taking all these factors into account can we create more inclusive urban systems that foster multiple benefits for both people and biodiversity.

10. Understand cities as complex systems at all scales

Cities are complex systems from their smallest unit up to the largest. This includes:

- Individuals: personal perceptions, behavior and activism.
- Local areas: neighborhood greening initiatives, urban gardening, [nature stewardship](#)
- Districts : environmental justice, access to public green spaces
- Cities: periurbanization and cities' involvement in [urban telecouplings](#) and [teleconnections](#), politicians and parties that promote nature-destroying policies, investors funding the heedless exploitation of nature.

Taken together, these 10 "talismans" can guide us when reflecting about the challenging times in which we're all living. In particular, they can help us understand how the form, density and extent of urbanization interact with ecosystems at every level, driving positive or negative change. We think too rarely about [feedback loops](#), too often we ignore the cognitive gap, too often we follow linear thinking schemes despite the fact that we know better—and must do better.

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