

Urban Lessons Learnt from the Pandemic

New Year's photo-essay by Iván Tosics

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2020 will remain in our memory as the year of a sudden, world-wide crisis. Although the pandemic is far from being over, with the arrival of the vaccines we can now see some light at the end of the tunnel.

My photo essay is about cities. How did cities act with emergency measures in the spring and what could they preserve from their progressive interventions by late summer, when life seemed to go back to normal? And, more importantly, what did they learn from the crisis and how do they try to improve urban life in the long run?

'Never let a good crisis go to waste' – this famous sentence is thought to be said by Winston Churchill as he was working on the establishment of the United Nations after WWII. If we accept that a crisis is a good opportunity to make changes, cities should address those aspects of urban life which were drastically wrong and contributed to the crisis. How are cities doing that and what are the conditions for long lasting results – this is what I write about in my essay, showing also many examples.

The sudden shock

The pandemic has turned the world upside down within a few weeks. The fight against the virus has made European nation-states stronger, both in relation to the EU and against their own regions and cities. Since February, national borders have been closed, and key decisions were taken in single centralised power centres in each country.

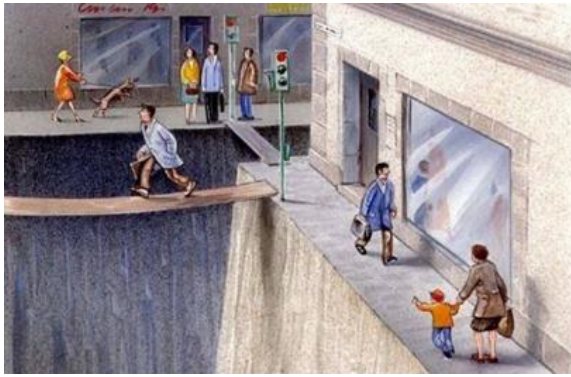
Local municipalities have suddenly found themselves in a peculiar and difficult situation. On the one hand, they have become ever more subordinated to the higher levels of their national administration and political power. On the other, they faced unprecedented levels and new forms of social and economic problems which they had to react to.

Besides the direct health impacts, the economic and social consequences of the pandemic have also been extensive. Many sectors of the economy came to a standstill, as a result of which unemployment increased dramatically. The different types of confinement policies, introduced to slow the spread of the virus, radically changed the livelihood of citizens, thus exacerbating pre-existing social problems while also creating new ones.

Although 'everyone is affected' by the lockdown policies, it is clear that people are withstanding the difficulties from vastly different positions. The most affected individuals are those who were already at risk of poverty and social exclusion. Types of employment and housing conditions are key determinants of the ability to maintain income, health and quality of life during the quarantine. While most white-collar workers are able to survive in remote employment or home office, a large share of blue-collar workers either lost their job or face the risk of getting infected at work.

The immediate reactions of cities

Concerning the constrained competencies of municipalities under the crisis, the most visible interventions were implemented in the use of public spaces. It was clear that the rules of social distancing could not be implemented in the car-dominated open spaces (left picture).



The enforcement of social distancing necessitated the reorganisation of public spaces, with the aim of “democratizing” the access to streets, terminating the dominance of car use. It has become a common practice of cities to designate new cycle paths, first on a temporary basis, but with the potential to keep them permanently. In **Budapest**, for example, one of the larger-scale interventions was the temporary closure of one of the banks of the Danube for the weekends, handing over the otherwise busy road to bikers and pedestrians.

An interesting initiative took place in **Berlin**, called the „play streets”: if requested by at least seven residents of a street, the district municipality considered the closure of the street for through-traffic, turning it into a temporary playground. The city also supplied logistical assistance, provided that residents committed to undertake day-care for their children.



Budapest, Danube embankment, closed for cars.

Source: Mónus Márton / MTI

Temporary play-streets in Berlin.

Source: www.berlin.de

Milan decided to undertake radical interventions to extend its cycling and pedestrian infrastructure. Streets in the total length of 35 kilometres have been redesigned to reduce car traffic by widening sidewalks and creating new cycle lanes. In parallel, a 30 km/h speed limit was introduced for safety considerations. On the short run, city officials hope this will prevent a resurgence of car use once residents return to work. The first aim was, therefore, to manage the short-term crisis of 2020, and only later would the urban management start thinking about how the provisions can be prolonged and eventually incorporated into longer-term plans.



Plans for Corso Buenos Aires before and after the Strade Aperte project. Composite: PR

Source: The Guardian.

Brussels was taking similarly radical steps, opening all roads in the entire city centre to pedestrians and cyclists, facilitating the compliance with social distancing regulations. In the new traffic order, all vehicles are subject to a speed limit of 20 km/h, while pedestrians and cyclists get the priority in the city centre. According to the municipal administration, the aim of this measure is not to ban cars from downtown, but to distribute the available public space more rationally.

Besides the very visible reorganizing of public spaces cities introduced many other interventions to tackle the problems of the worst affected population groups. Just to mention a few:

Housing: many cities have introduced measures such as a moratorium on evictions, limits on rent increases (while supporting tenants and landlords), help for mortgage holders, preventing cuts to amenities. See [examples](#) were collected by 'Arena for Journalism in Europe'.

Homelessness: cities' efforts focus on increasing the capacities and safety of shelters, and also offering alternative accommodation, even hotel rooms for the poorest. Examples have been highlighted e.g. by the [Economist](#), [EU Observer](#), and [El Pais](#).

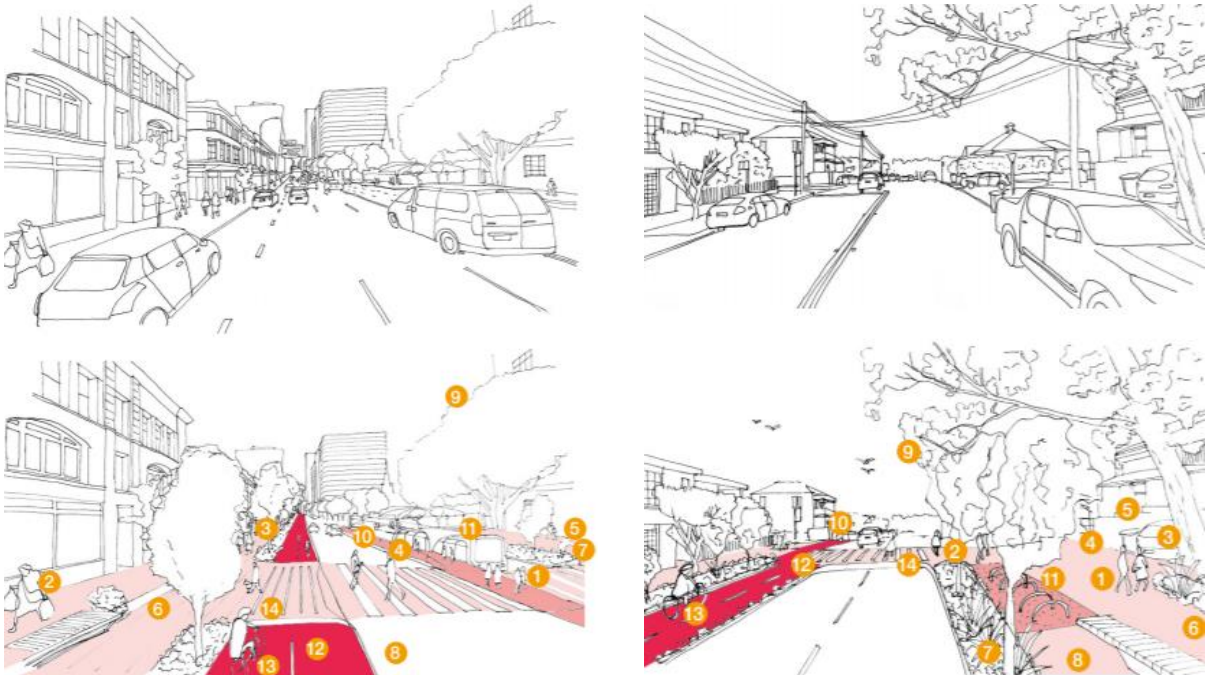
Food: among others, there are many [URBACT cases](#) of cities responding to support food production, home delivery services and/or emergency interventions to prevent hunger amongst the poorest.

Inclusive education: cities could improve the quality and inclusiveness of online education by improving services and giving access to digital tools. Examples were collected by [Eurocities](#) and also the [School at Home!](#) platform.

Elderly care: many cities are battling to fight the health risks faced by elderly people in care settings (where large numbers are a major risk factor) and in their own homes (where the contrasting challenge is often isolation). For example, [Bilbao](#) is collaborating with citizens to protect vulnerable members of the community, especially the elderly.

Tactical interventions: quick decisions about complex issues

The spring changes have been introduced under exceptional conditions in extraordinary ways, labelled in many cases as 'pop-up' or temporary measures. The methods of municipal decision-making were closer to tactical urbanism as to the usual way of municipal planning. However, the ambitions were quite high, in the drawings about the future cars almost completely disappeared from the streets – as in the pictures below.



Source: Tactical urbanism. Making it happen. ARUP, July 2020

To achieve such dramatic changes would take in the usual way of municipal decision-making a lot of efforts and time, as lengthy planning processes have to be accomplished with extensive public participation. This can be illustrated on the case of the centrally located Mariahilfer Strasse in **Vienna**.



The left picture, taken around 2010, shows the street dominated by the 12 thousand cars using it daily. Then came the vision of the car-free street, followed by 2 years of intensive public consultation process, during which the city knocked on 31 thousand doors to connect people. The final decision has been taken on the basis of a local referendum. 53% voted for the change, and since 2015, the completion of the project (right picture), the share of satisfied people is much higher.

During the spring 2020 emergency this way of decision-making in cities was not possible, due to two reasons: changes had to be introduced very quickly (the patience of people locked down in their flats was quickly evaporating), and the normal governance mechanisms were not functioning, it was not possible to organize lengthy council debates, neither to ask the opinion of larger groups of residents.

For example, in the case of the **Budapest** Danube embankments, the discussions started with the new mayor after the October 2019 elections. In January the opening the embankment was still negotiated slowly, but the virus speeded up the process, and in May the embankment became car-free for all weekends.

The fate of tactical interventions in the longer run

The spring emergency seemed to relieve by June and the situation became relatively normal during the summer. Discussions about the tactical urbanist interventions sharpened by late summer when the return to 'normal life', with people going to their workplaces and kids going to schools, seemed to be possible. August-September brought huge discussions in most cities: on the one hand car drivers wanted to terminate all interventions which limited their freedom to use the roads, on the other hand the increasing number of people biking and walking wanted to preserve their freshly gained opportunities. The hotly debated question was which of the 'pop-up' tactical urbanism interventions can be 'regularized' for longer time?

Besides the obviously contrary interests there were new facts of urban life observed by the end of the summer. Due to the increasing share of people working in home-office, everyday mobility needs decreased. On the other hand, the general fear from using public transport has pushed many people towards using their cars. The outbreak of the second wave of the pandemic has strengthened these trends.

So what happened in European cities in the autumn?

In **Athens** the mayor has taken the bold step of re-allocating around 50,000 square metres of space to walking and cycling as a 'once in a lifetime opportunity' to clean up the city from the effects of space-consuming, polluting cars. At the heart of the scheme was the long planned four-mile long 'Great Walk of Athens', uniting archaeological sites in the historic centre.



In the spring there was a political consensus around the bike lanes. But the implementation of the project was ad-hoc, disconnected, haphazardly done, without having comprehensive ideas behind the implemented plan. Moreover not many people biked in the summer in 40 degrees. Thus by autumn both large parties and the media turned against the project and also public opinion became increasingly ironic. Late autumn the local government promised to make more planned interventions. The future of the great walk is unclear – the bike lane is still there, although faded...

In **Budapest** the municipal government introduced in May bike lanes in the busy Grand Boulevard, reducing on this main road the lanes for cars from 2*2 to 2*1 lanes (left picture).



Photo: <https://cyclechic.blog.hu/>



Photo: Iván Tosics

By autumn this bike lane became the second busiest used by cyclists among all the Budapest bike lanes. Even so, car drivers were furious about it and also a central government politician issued a public statement that 'the oppositional Budapest mayor should stop chasing car drivers'. Finally, the city had to make changes, giving back one part of the Grand Boulevard fully to car drivers, redirecting the bike lane to the busy pavement (right picture).

Without having detailed proof, it seems that **Milan**, **Vienna** and **London** have better chances that the temporary projects introduced in the spring might survive in the long run.

Different views about the future of urban life

The changing use of car-dominated public spaces is only one, though the most visible, of the consequences of the pandemic. In a broader sense also the non-spatial interventions, the housing, homelessness, food, etc related urgency measures are debated and questions arise, to what extent can cities defend these for the longer term?

It is clear that the urgency measures were not (could not be) decided in the normal way, based on broad participation processes. Even so, progressive city leaders consider the new situation as an opportunity to achieve changes which were unthinkable before the pandemic.

In **Paris**, as part of her successful reelection campaign, Mayor Anne Hidalgo rolled out ambitious plans to make city life more local and slow-paced. Paris also introduced new bike schemes and reclaimed streets to allow for people to move around without crowding. Besides, also the „15 minutes city” idea is further developed, assuming that skilled workers will go to the office only twice per week, or a few days per month. The idea is that with less traffic and pollution, cities can actually become even more attractive. Furthermore the cheaper rents for office space can attract new startups and other types of users.

Barcelona aims to assert “digital sovereignty” of its citizens by emphasising civic participation, social impact and public return. Decidim, an online platform, is of central importance, enabling citizens to participate in decision-making. The data of the city remains the property of the citizens themselves, while opening up the data sets helps to stimulate local businesses and civic initiatives.

In **Budapest**, the local government aimed to open several vacant properties to host homeless people, including even some properties within the city hall – this has been, however, prohibited by the representative of the central government.

In **UK cities** and in many other European cities street homelessness virtually disappeared with the opening of new places, even hotel rooms, for them.

On the example of many European cities (including also Vienna, Berlin, Amsterdam, just to name a few) new opportunities seem to develop with the changes in the real estate dynamic – empty shops or even whole office buildings could theoretically be turned into different uses, better serving the interest of the whole society.

Many analysts, however, remain sceptical about the chances of such a social turn of urban development, arguing that market actors will regain power and will keep their dominance over the valuable inner city real estate stock.

What chances for a more equitable urban development after the pandemic?

The pandemic highlighted the huge contradictions and crises of the present economic model. Following the model of tactical urbanism, new efforts are needed also for tactical economic and social interventions, and later for the regularization of these. This means that cities should use much braver their rights what they have: zoning, taxation, determining the conditions for public procurement, etc. They should find ways to favour local businesses over multinationals via public space management, smart zoning and planning policies. They should also do much more to solve local social problems which are not handled under the normal market conditions.

The exceptional conditions of the COVID crisis might contribute to the development of new, progressive municipal policies. These have to be – after the initial, experimental phase – participative and inclusive, in alliance with the residents, on the basis of active communication. Cities experimenting such new policies should also be in alliance with their neighbouring settlements, expanding the new policies to the metropolitan level.

The examples shown in this essay prove that cities can do a lot. However, long-lasting changes can finally only be achieved if cities develop a cooperative, multi-level government framework with their own national administration. The case of Budapest shows, how limited the chances of a city are if crippled financially and politically by the national government.

In order to achieve success, progressive cities have to develop close links with each other, launching international cooperation. The Alliance of Free Cities, launched by the Visegrad 4 capital cities, has developed by now to a much broader circle of large European cities, aiming to convince the EU to support their efforts towards new types of urban policies.

In this essay I have used some ideas I have heard from Oleg Golubchikov (Cardiff), Thomas Maloutas (Athens), Ramon Marrades (Valencia), Corrado Topi (Stockholm), Levente Polyak and Cili Lohasz (Budapest). Besides I have used quotes of some of my recent publications.