Towards Better Urban Life in Post-Covid Cities

New Year's photo-essay by Iván Tosics, 31 December 2021

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One more year has been passed and the COVID shock is still not over. Everyone has been affected, but in very different ways.

Some people survived well the difficulties in their large homes or moving from city centres to more distant places and more spacious buildings, enjoying more intense family life, while working largely from home office. The rise of the suburbs and the slump of the city centre can be seen e.g. on US real estate data, as a kind of 'doughnut effect' driven by a fear of crowds and the growth of working from home.

Others, on the other hand, who could not change their cramped housing conditions and could not use the advantages of distance working, suffered much more under the pandemic. In ghetto areas, such as in Mumbai, without access to toilet and water in the flats, the strict lockdown situation led to disastrous consequences. But even in more developed places large problems occurred, e.g. in Rome 61% of kids were not able to join digital teaching due to inadequate housing and bad ICT conditions. Problems emerged even in Vienna, where non-profit housing providers received increased number of complaints during the pandemic from lonely tenants.

For the long term destiny of our cities the opportunities and behaviour of both groups are equally important. On the one hand, the choices of the better-off have to be influenced, to avoid the extremes of the doughnut, the emptying out of city centres and the swelling of remote areas which are only accessible by cars. On the other, the opportunities of the worse-off have to be improved, regarding housing conditions, access to public and green spaces and community life. All this should be achieved with intervetions which fit to the basic rules of sustainable and circular development.

When rethinking the opportunities, housing has to get increased attention. Under the extraordinary conditions of the pandemic housing units became the space not only of living and relaxing but also of working, learning, caring. Although centuries ago the separation of bread-winning, paid working activities from 'living' and reproductive activities was not sharp (in many cases housing also included workshops), by today this separation became dominant and most housing units are unsuitable for the other functions.

The rest of the essay concentrates on housing, exploring different ways how housing conditions can be improved, as an essential element to strenghten resiliency against the pandemic and other types of crises.

Improving housing conditions

Due to the important aspects of sustainable and circular development, the improving of existing buildings should get priority over the building of new ones. There can interesting examples be found on 'value increasing' regeneration of buildings, in the course of which the original residents of housing units get additional space and improved services and might become in that way more resilient against the problems of the pandemic.

Value increasing renovation of public housing: Bordeaux, Grand Parc project

In France the usual destiny of large prefabricated blocks of flats, built in the 1960s and 1970s, is demolition. In Bordeaux another solution has been found: innovative renovation of three large buildings of social housing with 530 dwellings, located in a high-rise area. The renovation was done for the original residents, whose rents did not increase and could even stay in their flats during the works. The housing units were extended with 4 m wide addendum on the facade, consisting of prefab elements, added on the top of each other for the whole height of the building. This addition of wintergardens and balconies ensures more space and natural light for each apartment, while also contributing to substantial energy saving.

Source of the pictures: http://lacatonvassal.com/index.php?idp=80#

The cost of this publicly financed project was €50 th per flat (including also the renovation of bathrooms and installation of new lifts), which is four times cheaper as demolition and new build. With this renovation not only the housing situation of the residents improved radically but also the image of the social housing estate.

As far as I know, the project of Bordeaux remained a pilot – I have no information about similar extensive value-increasing urban regeneration interventions in France. The reason is simple: such projects depend exclusively on public financing and the beneficiaries are 'only' the existing tenants. The following case shows a different approach where these limits are overcome.

Value increasing renovation of private housing: the Israeli TAMA38 programme

TAMA38 is an innovative program for upgrading, strengthening and densifying existing housing in Israeli cities. The program entitles local governments to provide additional building rights to apartment owners in multi-family buildings: the right to add spaces to the existing apartments, up to additional 25 sqm and the right to build additional max. 2,5 floors with new housing units on the roof of the building. The group of apartment owners of a building, with at least 80% majority decision,

select a developer, who, in exchange for the right to sell the added housing units, will enlarge the existing apartments. This includes typically adding a balcony and one room, renew its electricity and water installation, add parking and downstairs storage spaces, and refurbish the exterior of the building, the yard and the staircase – all with no cost to the owners of the existing housing units.

Before

After (rendering)

Source of the pictures: Nava Kainer Persov and Naomi Carmon

The plan has to be approved by the local municipal planning committee, which has to maintain the balance between the need to strengthen the building and wider urban considerations. Local committees may prepare a city plan that regulates he different construction rights to different city areas. By the middle of the 2010s 123 projects were completed, and 2100 projects were in process, mainly located in the larger cities of Israel, mostly in the metropolitan area of Tel Aviv.

The research of Nava Kainer Persov and Naomi Carmon shows many advantages of the model: improving the resilience of existing residential buildings, renewing old housing areas before they deteriorate, providing additional housing units in large cities, where there is a strong demand and very little or no free land to build on. There are also important societal benefits: improving the living conditions of long-term residents with the expansion of the flats, creation of new elevator, renovated entrance, staircase, lobby. The additional apartments offer urban residents the opportunity for social mobility without geographical mobility and support social renovation and social mix in old residential areas.

On the other hand, there are also problematic aspects of the program: it is being implemented only in areas with high land values, it provides many benefits to the more wealthy part of the population, to developers and home owners in the central cities thus, it increases social disparities; it applies only to home-owners, while almost all the renters were displaced. Finally, there are serious consequences on the urban fabric: in TAMA-renovated areas the large increase in the number of residents (+60%) has come about with no increase in infrastructure – roads, open spaces, schools, clinics etc. This is possible up to a point, above which, however, it might lead to the deterioration of the quality of life in the city.

The innovative Israeli program is a thoughtfully further elaborated version of individual efforts to improve buildings by selling additional development rights to investors. A few of such cases could be found in the early phase of the Moscow khrushchevki renovation – quoted in my 2019 photo essay – based on investments by developers, totally renovating the buildings and constructing elevator, financed by adding two additional floors to the buildings and selling the new apartments on the market. These models solve the problem of financing the value increasing renovation by involving developer financing through densification of the existing urban structure.

This kind of incremental 'soft densification' – as opposed to hard densification through large-scale policy-driven developments, involving the redevelopment of existing urban structures – is an important model for increasing the resilience of existing urban neighbourhoods and their residents, up to the point that existing reserves in infrastructure bear the additional burdens. The many advantages most probably exceed the prejudices of the urban population against the increase of density in their neighbourhoods.

Conversion of offices into housing: a Brussels case

While many of the European (growing) cities face the problem of lack of affordable housing, millions of sqm-s of office space stay empty. This tendency started before the pandemic and has accelerated since then due to the widening home-office phenomena during COVID. According to a recent analysis it is very unlikely that full occupancy in business districts will return for the foreseeable future. For example in Paris 33% of available office space has been empty for more than 4 years. Under such circumstances the alternative uses for existing office spaces might become economically attractive for developers. This is potentially a win-win situation: investors are interested in rebalancing their portfolios in favour of residential property, which is less correlated to economic crises and the shock caused by the pandemic, while for the cities the adaptive reuse of office buildings opens up the possibility of bringing back housing to city centres, enabling the implementation of the 15-minute city vision.

Despite the potential advantages, there are also many obstacles regarding such conversions. Besides the rigid zoning regulations and the specific morphology of office buildings there are also unfavourable financial considerations, insofar the balance sheet value of real estate is decreasing when transforming into housing use, thus in the books it looks better if empty as turned to housing (Alessandro Gess). All these justify public support for conversions. A leading example is the French ELAN law for the evolution of housing, which facilitates developers with a 30% bonus on allowed building density if converting obsolete offices into housing. There are also German (land prioritization in Munich) and Belgian support systems for such conversions.

As a general rule older office buildings are more suitable for conversion into housing than newer ones. In the case of office buildings built in the 60s and 70s, facing huge costs of energy efficiency improvements, elevator and other upgrades, the usual free market outcome is demolition. Compared to that, and taking a full lifecycle view, conversion into housing might become a better solution, especially if supported by the public sector in some form. Large European cities (such as Paris, London, Brussels) established special entities for mapping the office buildings for potential conversion and have plans about the number of housing units they want to get in this way.

As an illustration below the Cosmopolitan building can be seen, which is an adaptive re-use of a former office building into 156 dwellings and 2 levels of offices in the center of Brussels.

Source of the pictures: https://www.bogdanvanbroeck.com/projects/cosmopolitan/

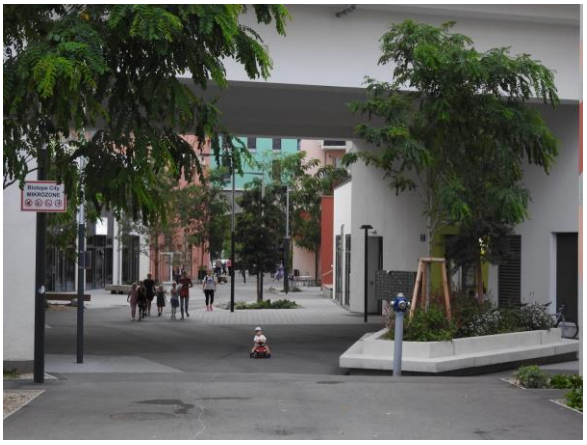
The '60s high-rise slab was a rare modernist insertion into the former Brussels' trading port composed of late XIXth-century warehouses. Originally built as an office block, it suffered years of neglect. The proximity of Brussel's Canal Zone and North railway station provided the impetus for redeveloping the building's office spaces into 130 comfortable housing units ranging from compact studio flats to generous three-bedroom apartments higher up. The project relies on a soft mobility concept, significantly reducing the number of parking spaces from over 150 to 50, while creating in the underground parking 170 cycle parking spaces.

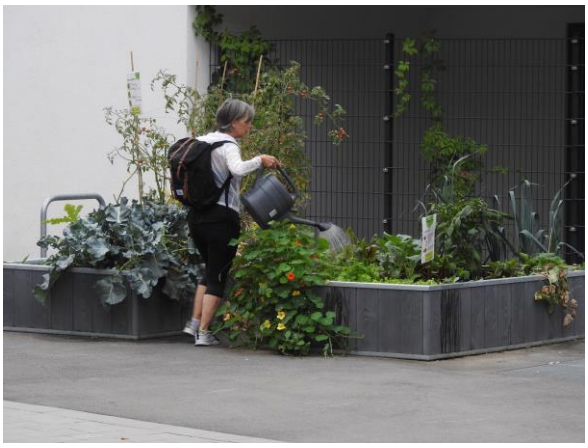
To close the topic of conversion it is important to note that not only office buildings can be converted into housing. Another opportunity arises with hotels, most of which were standing empty during the pandemic. There are many examples in European cities using hotels as temporary housing for the homeless. The more radical solution, turning hotels into housing, seems to be more frequent in some of the States of the US than in Europe.

New housing with strong green and social aspects: Biotope city, Vienna

On the former Coca-Cola industrial site in Vienna-Favoriten very recently a socio-ecological model-city has been built, including 980 apartments, office space, a school, a kindergarten, shops, common free space, and a wide range of outdoor spaces as playgrounds for different ages, open watercourses, areas for tenants gardens and community urban gardening. Ecological innovations include many forms of greening (vertical, large-crowned trees, plants, troughs in the open spaces), creating a totally car-free area in the inner part of the estate. The heterogeneous mix of subsidized rental apartments and privately financed condominiums ensures a mixed structure of residents (not the poorest, people have to pay 50 th eur for entry and then rent). For intensive community life 1,600 sqm of multi-site common rooms have been built, the use of which is supported by the district management office, setting impulses and formats for co-creation, participation and joint decision-making on a broad basis, and supporting the establishment of sustainable neighborhood structures.

Source of the pictures: globalbau.at; biotope-city.net





Source of the pictures: Iván Tosics, September 2021

As part of a developer competition the master plan was created in a collaborative process, involving three architectural offices, planners from various disciplines, various municipal departments, the Foundation Biotope City, investors and representatives of the district. Then 7 architects took over planning for 8 investors, most of them social housing cooperations. There were long dicussions with the developers and also with the families (many of them middle class), before they moved in. Huge debates were about underground parking, and finally more places were built as planned. There were also debates about the use of public spaces (groundfloor areas with special keys) which were handled by the district management office.

During a short visit to Biotope city I have got the impression that residents like and care about the extensive green areas, and also the community life seemed to be intensive on the car-free inner areas, playgrounds and in the various community rooms.

Discussion

The four cases illustrated very different types of innovations in housing, addressing the various challenges posed by the pandemic. In all of the cases the outcomes, the renovated, converted or newly built housing units created better circumstances for the residents to cope with the special difficulties caused by the virus crisis, as becoming able to accomodate many functions in the flat, getting access to open air and green areas, becoming part of a community.

These innovative architectural and design approaches are very important to strengthen resilience against the pandemic. It would be a mistake, however, to think that such interventions can solve the

problems for everyone. We have to take into account, for example, that according to a JRC-Eurofound report almost 2/3 of the jobs can not be done from home. For people employed in 'not teleworkable' jobs (among them the essential workers) not the renovation of the home might be the most important, but other aspects, such as the organization of work, the restructuring of urban mobility (pedestrianization and support for public transport and active obility modes), the improvement and extension of green areas, the regeneration of public spaces, etc.

The innovative regeneration of the home, the house and the neighbourhood is essential, but can not be done in itself, just as part of the redevelopment of the whole city, where living and work is organized. Not only COVID, but the complexity of shock and chronic types of crises has to be addressed. In the postpandemic radical rethinking of urban life the public sector has to play the leading role. Cities are key players, with the ability to make radical public interventions towards more resilient and equitable development.

In a recent webinar Jörg Knieling emphasized the importance of experimental governance. In his view tactical urbanism is not only an activist approach, it can also be used by the public sector to innovate – and not only in public space but also regarding economic and social issues. An important element of the new thinking is to involve self-organizing urban societies, to ensure that civil society takes a larger role in the changes.

COVID provided a window of opportunity towards agonistic planning, where conflicts are legitimate and open debates can lead to better results. Under the new circumstances 'urban testbeds' could be created at almost every corner and the earlier fantastic, but exceptional innovations (such as the London BedZED, or the Freiburg Vauban district cases) could become the new normal.

It is not easy, however, to keep the momentum – COVID might disappear as suddenly as it came, and the window of opportunity might close soon. Planners have to play an important role in creating and disseminating innovation, also as advocates for the civil society, fostering the experimental approaches at local municipalities. Jörg Knieling mentioned German examples on coalition building between progressive planners inside the administration with civil society organizations. Especially Berlin is strong in that, achieving a legislative support for such experiments (e.g. playing street). In Hamburg the new coalition established a Ministry of Mobility, having in the coalition treaty an agreement to have at least one experiment per year.

Let us 2022 bring more cases of such innovative, experimenting coalitions between politicians, planners and the civil society – in housing and also in other areas of urban life!

This essay is largely based on the presentations and discussions at the Vienna workshop Postpandemic Social Housing: Managing hybridity at home and in the city (IBA ResearchLab / International Summer School 2021), organized by Simon Güntner, Michael Obrist, Christoph Reinprecht, Rudolf Scheuvens. BIG THANKS to them to organize this extraordinary event in September 2021! I have used ideas and information from – amongst others – Rahul Bhandare, Julia Girardi-Hoog, Christiane Feuerstein, Alessandro Gess. Besides, ideas have been borrowed from other meetings, e.g. from Tobias Zevi, Naomi Carmon, Jörg Knieling.