



Challenges, conflicts and opportunities for the City in the time of COVID-19

Faced with the challenges presented by COVID-19, URBinLAB believes it is fundamental to put forward a set of reflections under the perspective that, in the times of uncertainty and urgency we are living in, Territory and Cities are powerful resources and instruments for response, adaptation and inclusion, as well as for revival in post-pandemic times.

Instead of returning to an exurban, isolated, self-centred and anti-urban life, going back to a paradigm that has clearly proven to be exhausted and unsustainable, we consider that the answer must come from a capacity to innovate. The challenge is to find compromise solutions between the imminent need to ensure physical distancing between people and the underlying opportunity to seize this moment to build better territories and cities, with greater sustainability and an improved quality of life, both for now and for the future.

Cities are constructions of extraordinary resilience and creativity. Throughout human history, cities have shown a great capacity to reinvent and reorganize themselves at times of crises, while making use of technology and of grand ideas and projects to outline new scenarios for the future.

Once again, and during these times, the pivotal role that Urbanism has held since its establishment as a discipline is brought forward – in finding solutions for public health, in linking them to the quality of life and in integrating them in a more ambitious framework of responding to the needs and expectations of society.

In today's global and humanized landscape, cities and territories are shaped by dynamics of great complexity and diversity. These require that attention is given to each context and situation, while recognising the great asymmetries that are, and will continue to be, an insurmountable challenge.

In this context, the great urban global challenges of our days gain new relevance and importance. It therefore becomes essential that they are strongly linked to the specific efforts in the design of adaptive responses to COVID19. Notwithstanding, COVID19 related issues, tensions and opportunities are emerging with their own specificities and require the attention and socio-political contribution of the research community.

The urban dynamics experienced in countries around the world show that pre-pandemic issues and tensions are to become even more critical and pertinent in the post-pandemic times (inequalities and asymmetries, climate change, sustainable mobility and energy transition, accessible and decent housing).

On the other hand, there is a wealth of pre-COVID19 knowledge, ideas and perspectives in adaptation and response, that remains updated and relevant.

In this new impetus, URBinLAB remains aware and committed to keeping up with the emerging societal challenges, strengthening its trans-disciplinarity, the relationship between academia and society and to continuously update teaching practices and arrangements.

To this end, nothing is more important than continuing to ask questions!

Which new challenges for urbanism ?

- Providing conditions for greater distancing between people in public spaces and in their urban mobility.
- Organizing forms of mobility that ensure safety conditions while avoiding trends that promote the use of cars and punish public transport.
- Adjusting residential conditions so that all can access decent and comfortable housing, particularly in times of confinement at home.
- Ensuring provision of essential food supply in the context of confinement and at times of possible disruption to the conventional logistic chains, particularly those that may have a greater impact on vulnerable groups and those under economic stress.
- Adjusting responses to changing product supply and commercialization logistics and to new service provision channels.
- Promoting adaptation to emerging forms of professional, educational and cultural interaction.
- Responding to the uncertainties and changes to the current planning and land management paradigm.

Which tensions and conflicts with existing models and practices, have become more evident?

- Difficulties in keeping access to housing in contexts of significant income loss.
- Vulnerability of the tourism-dependent urban and economic development models, in relation to housing access and to urban rehabilitation dynamics.
- Problematic situations in urban areas with limited urban facilities and poor housing, sanitary, public space and accessibility conditions.
- Global loss of biodiversity as a result of predatory urbanization and exploitation of resources rationales, and its impact in the emergence of new pathogens.
- Limitations in network coverage, frequency and capacity of public transport systems and cycling networks, particularly in the most marginalised socio-territorial areas.
- Dependence of the global economy organization based on the division of production and consumption cycles and complex logistics detached from local control capacity.
- Imbalances and tensions relating to the urban density and intensity, in its trade-off with environmental and sanitary conditions.

Which opportunities for a multi-dimensional adaptation ?

[COVID19 + sustainable mobility + response to climate change + response to housing needs + territorial and urban cohesion + dynamics of proximity]

- Increase of outdoor public areas for leisure, enjoyment and socialization, linked to improvements in mobility networks and environmental conditions.
- Revitalization of local businesses and improvement of outdoor commercial spaces (e.g., esplanades, customer service areas, protected outdoor waiting areas), coordinated with public spaces improvement rationales.
- Promotion of new commercial, cultural and leisure activities in outdoor spaces (e.g., temporary, mobile and adaptable features), particularly in the proximity of residential spaces.
- Development of architectural solutions that promote the contact between housing spaces and the outdoors (e.g., larger balconies, outdoor individual or collective spaces within residential estates).
- Structuring and strengthening of local agri-food production areas, integrated in the urban space, namely through the temporary use of vacant spaces.
- Promotion of biodiversity in the urban territory in conjunction with strategies to strengthen ecosystem services and the integration of natural cycles in the urban environment.
- Increasing pedestrian circulation space, together with the adjustment of traffic and carparks space, along with improved conditions for bicycles use and safekeeping.
- Promotion investment in public mobility networks linked to active modes and to an inclusive, broader and integrated cycle network, at the urban and metropolitan level.
- Development and democratization of access to digital networks (free wi-fi in parks, gardens and public spaces), with particular attention to access by those with economic needs.
- Introduction and exploration of new and different democratic participation processes and strengthening of territorial governance, involving people in urban planning and land management processes, while strengthening different forms of cooperation and integrated territorial approaches.

May 2020

