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BRIEFING

We must not let short-term thinking dictate our long-term future

By Tim Gledstone | 28 May 2020



While we are having to adapt on our feet, it's important to start planning with hope, writes Tim Gledstone



Source: Gareth Gardner

Architects and designers have found themselves creating public and private spaces within the rapidly evolving limits of a global pandemic. It's crucial that we seize this once-in-a-generation moment to shift city planning towards people and wellbeing, and reduce our reliance on cars, unnecessary commutes and using residential suburbs as corridors to urban centres.

The government paper issued this month on [Safer Public Spaces](#) has some sound practical advice for designers, and we should duly take note of temporary social distancing and increased sanitation measures to control the spread of covid-19. The risk to our communities is real and we have a professional and moral responsibility to respond.

There is a danger, however, that some temporary solutions will become permanent, or that much of what is taken away will not be reinstated, particularly with inevitable strains on budgets.

We should not fundamentally curtail human interaction and enjoyment of our urban spaces for a once-in-a-century event. We just need to know that cities can adapt when required.

A holistic view on shared road and pavement space will be needed in time, as temporarily widened pavements eat into road space used by buses, cars, vans and HGVs as well as motorbikes and cycles. We should take this moment to reduce the emphasis on cars and give over streets – for some if not all of the week – to pedestrians and sustainable commuting (walking, running, cycling, electric scooters). This is an opportunity to increase cycle networks across the UK, positively shaping our cities around cycling as seen in Denmark and the Netherlands.

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We should not fundamentally curtail human interaction and enjoyment of our urban spaces for a once-in-a-century event. We just need to know that cities can adapt when required

The Safer Public Space document recommends that pavement obstacles such as planters be removed. For me this is a moment to amplify public open spaces rather than reduce them to regimented channels of pedestrian flow. Trees and planters should stay or be relocated to allow for accessibility. They provide important connections to nature and enhance wellbeing, both in air quality and human terms.

Additional shared road space could benefit hard-hit businesses by giving them access to more outdoor space for tables or stock. Ailing high streets could be thrown a lifeline with the introduction of public events in these new streetscapes, with weekly markets and community gatherings drawing people together – albeit at a safe distance in the immediate future. Well-designed public seating could be created to adapt according to the level of risk, while still allowing social interaction to occur. At my daughter's school there is a bench allocated to children who feel alone and want company. Shouldn't these exist in the adult world too, where loneliness has reached worrying levels?

We should take a long view, too, over pavement and wall markings. There are opportunities for appealing neighbourhood-specific graphics using colour and pattern to enliven streets rather than just zone them. The Eley Kishimoto Flash crossings in Brixton or Camille Walala's Colourful Crossings in Bankside are great examples of this.

We must look to the movement of pop-up initiatives such as Kerb or Street Feast which have grown exponentially in recent years. Open-air eating will become more popular in the short term as restaurants struggle with social distancing. This is a positive trend which could continue if surrounding roads were less polluted and noisy.

We are planning our return to work with minimal reliance on technology to manage contagion

We are interested in the growth of self-sufficient neighbourhood communities, and how this can translate into our towns and cities to support micro economies across the UK. Working close to where you live has obvious benefits, reducing commute times and thereby making more time for exercise and wellbeing activities. Paris mayor Anne Hidalgo's idea of the 15-Minute City – informed by the work of Professor Carlos Moreno – proposes that we phase out car travel and long commutes to promote neighbourhoods where people can work, socialise, shop, exercise and relax. This model would support local businesses, entrepreneurs and kitchen table industries.

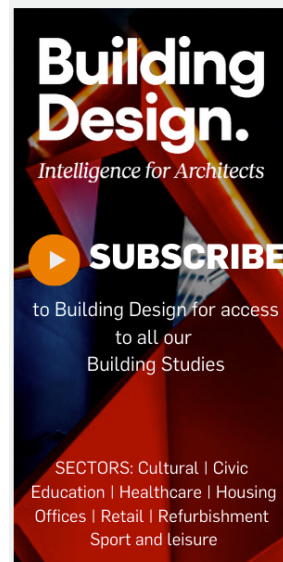
Since our move to the Department Store in Brixton three years ago we have experienced the immense benefits of neighbourhood working first hand. It's been incredibly rewarding to engage with, learn from and invest in our community. We believe in it so strongly that we're launching a new local co-working development later this year – the Department Store Studios – next door to our office. Investing professional and personal energy close to home can be positive for all aspects of society: children, young people, the elderly and vulnerable.



Advice from government also suggests the use of public stewards to ensure people adhere to social distancing rules. While no one wants to be herded along the streets by an overzealous steward, we do believe that a people-centric approach is a positive model for the future. One of the most heart-warming responses during lockdown has been people supporting people. This is something we should continue to encourage as the pandemic runs its course and beyond.

A human-centred approach could positively impact our towns and cities, with community rangers building on village mentality and providing a point of contact for lonely and vulnerable people. This personal interaction is also relevant to private spaces and businesses. At our Brixton office we are planning our return to work with minimal reliance on technology to manage contagion. Our working culture has always been based on collaboration, support and social interaction and we will adapt to keep these elements alive.

The pandemic is probably the most significant event of our lifetimes, a



collective global tragedy with far-reaching effects. The virus itself will recede in time, and we must make sure our response to the short-term difficulties leads to a much-needed reboot around social and environmental pace of life and consumption.

If we get it right, we will create a positive legacy for future generations to enjoy a healthier way of life.

Postscript

Tim Gledstone is a partner at Squire & Partners

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