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Planning after the Pandemic

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PLANNING AFTER THE PANDEMIC

With more than a billion people infected¹ and tens of millions of people dead² because of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), commonly known as COVID-19, the pandemic will likely change much about society, science, policymaking, and planning. It seems appropriate that this Festschrift issue begin with commentaries on planning after the pandemic.

It is also appropriate that the lead paper of this opening section is offered by Sir Malcolm Grant, immediate past chairman of the National Health Service, England, as well as immediate past president and provost of University College London. In “Land-use Planning and Urban Governance – Lessons from the Pandemic,” Grant observes that at least in the United Kingdom, and certainly many would agree in the United States, the tools of the last century, in healthcare and land-use planning, have been found wanting in the face of the global pandemic. He worries why these two countries would allow the pandemic to have disproportionate impacts on vulnerable populations. Grant asks: “Is it too much to hope that the coronavirus pandemic ... might be the starting point for the changes needed (in planning) for the twenty first century?” What is needed in both countries are more healthy and sustainable places and communities.

In “The Boldness of Healthy Cities: A Tricky Challenge,” Ann Forsyth seconds the need for creating healthy and sustainable places. This is not simple and in fact it is tricky, as she points out. It begins with making health a central element of planning, elevating it from its arguably peripheral position. Doing so will require long term collaborative commitments among professions and occupations, the public and civic sectors, businesses, and governments. It also needs to capture the imagination. Will the pandemic be the catalyst?

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated adoption technologies allowing millions of employees to work from home. Retailers also accelerated their pace of online sales and home deliveries by years if not decades. In effect, people have been decoupled from their workplaces, shopping, and other activities usually associated with density. After decades of urban revitalization, will the pandemic combined with new technologies facilitate a new era of urban sprawl? In their paper, “Is the

¹ Derived from, “Why the Pandemic Is 10 Times Worse Than You Think,” <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2021/02/06/964527835/why-the-pandemic-is-10-times-worse-than-you-think>

² “The pandemic’s true death toll.” <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/coronavirus-excess-deaths-estimates>

Pandemic Causing a Return to Urban Sprawl?”, Richard B. Peiser and Matt Hugel assess pandemic era migration literature in the context of prior studies of urban sprawl to derive a useful framework for planners, developers, and decision-makers to better understand the lasting impacts of COVID-19 on U.S. cities.

The pandemic would seem to have us rethink the purposes of planning. In “Envisioning Health, Safety, and Welfare for All: Retrospect and Prospect,” Fritz Steiner reflects on his evolution as a professional and academic as his fields of landscape architecture, urban design and planning have evolved. Steiner notes that, just like COVID-19, pandemics of the past led to the depopulation of cities as people sought to distance themselves from others. But pushing people into the countryside does lasting harm to the very landscapes we need to sustain our cities. As Steiner writes: “Our responsibility is to pass on productive soils, pure air and water, diverse forests and fields, and a just society to the next generation and their children and those who follow into the future.”

John Travis Marshall observes that “the ongoing pandemic should cause local governments to revisit and rework their plans for facilitating community recovery following a disaster.” In “Resilience Re-Examined: Thoughts on the COVID-19 Pandemic's Lessons for Communities Preparing for Disasters,” he examines several ways in which COVID-19 is reframing how communities must plan for disaster response and recovery.

In “Planning to a Larger Scale: Lessons from Trying to Save the World,” John Randolph advances the urgency of planning at larger and grander scales. The Covid-19 pandemic and climate change certainly head the list of global problems in need of action at large scales but many others loom. Randolph’s article focuses on climate change and the associated need to transition into other energy sources. The lessons learned at scaling climate change planning up to larger scales can be applied to many other global issues.

The pandemic laid bare that polarization of American society thwarts its ability to address such problems of major consequence as COVID-19. Refashioning how to achieve consensus is the subject of Dowell Myers’ and Karen Trapenberg Frick’s article, “Rebuilding Common Purpose for the 21st Century with New Civic Infrastructure.” In a sense, planners had it easy in the 20th century when most of society believed in the role of government to solve problems and improve social well-being. They argue that in the 21st century, planners need to rethink how to “restore belief in cooperation among members of the public.”