

## **Guerrilla Urbanism, Guerrilla Governance: Governing neighbourhoods in “with-COVID” times**

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A few months into a new COVID-19 reality, anecdotal evidence suggests that in some parts of the world, as in the UK and the U.S., some wealthier city residents are pondering an exodus to smaller towns and rural areas or to their second homes (Fisher et al., 2020; Jones, 2020). The move seems primed by the strictures of lockdown in big city areas and a search for more space – larger residences with home offices, private gardens, or access to less crowded open public spaces. In other parts of the world, as in India, exiting the city was seemingly the only solution available to millions of migrant workers who had to content with lockdown-enforced job loss (Singh et al., 2020). It is unclear whether these informal labourers will find much sustenance in their distant villages, but at least the move may facilitate an escape from living in cramped and insalubrious city slums. If we ever had any doubts, both responses cast a shadow on triumphalist narratives about city living (Glaeser, 2011) as much as on idyllic notions of a rural renaissance (Jones, 2020). They raise a much more pressing (if evident) point, one which bears repeating: that the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic is not just uneven the world over – it is also experienced differently among different segments of the population.

In this Viewpoint we offer some preliminary reflections on this uneven experience and how urban planning can engage with it. We begin by teasing out two underlying assumptions of urban perspectives on the COVID-19 experience: its white-collar/middle-classness and its global North thinking. We argue that these assumptions have prevented us from examining interventions at the neighbourhood scale to support those most in need. We then explore what neighbourhood-scale interventions may look like and suggest some forms of guerrilla urbanism. We examine how many of these Do-It-Yourself interventions are frequent in global South contexts and how those living in the global North can learn from them. We then propose that guerrilla urbanism is best served by a counterpart, guerrilla governance. We suggest local governments should prioritise creative, small-scale solutions, pooling resources and increasing coordination across public entities and community initiatives. We conclude our Viewpoint with a reflexion on social justice dilemmas going forward.

## Two Assumptions

At the heart of most governments' fight against COVID-19 has been an inarguable desire to save human lives. Lockdown measures disrupted our settled ways of life and, in doing so, threw into sharp relief its underlying features: the separation between public and private space; family and work dynamics; unequal gender, class, and age experiences; or the role of the state, to name just a few. As lockdown measures begin to ease up amidst uncertainty, hopes for a post-COVID-19 world are slowly giving way to the realisation the virus may be with us for a while. We may be living in a "with-COVID" world for longer than we anticipated even a few weeks ago. In this context, what kind of cities and urban lives are going to be possible in a "with-COVID" world? To answer this pressing question, we argue, there must be first a reckoning with how we have been thinking about the urban experience under lockdown. We suggest that our thinking has been coloured by two underlying assumptions: white-collar/middle-classness and a pervasive global North thinking. Let us examine each in turn.

Discussions about lockdown fatigue, the physical and mental challenges of remote working, home schooling, and job uncertainty under furlough are, if undeniably real, also largely drawn from a white-collar/middle-class experience. Many 'essential workers', those who have kept our city lives going under precarious employment conditions, have had to continue commuting to work using public transport, where available. The unequal distribution of hardship between those who can work remotely and those who cannot is largely obscured by dominant discussions about how to implement social distancing measures going forward – whether it concerns spatial layouts in office spaces or the hospitality sector, or about what to do to accommodate holiday makers back into cities or other vacation destinations. Middle-class concerns are also revealed in discussions around public transport. Growing concerns that social distancing will prompt a shift back to the car are at the heart of ideas for growing soft mobility alternatives such as walking, cycling, and e-scooters. However, these solutions are predicated on commuters living in short distance of their places of work – an assumption not attuned to the realities of significant segments of urban populations. As a result, we have not taken into full consideration how to intervene in cities to support those most in need.

Additionally, many of these solutions have an underlying 'global North' thinking attached to them. Lockdown is justifiable on public health and ethical grounds, but it has dire consequences for those who cannot satisfy their most basic needs locally or who do not rely on formal employment. The case of Indian migrant workers is a case in point. Another is that of residents in South African townships who are struggling to feed their families under strict lockdown measures (see Burke, 2020). The challenge for populations living in underserved, job-less neighbourhoods is far greater than for the

segments of the population who can satisfy their needs through a digitalized economy. The world may have momentarily shrunk to the neighbourhood scale for the latter; but for the former a city on lockdown is an even more difficult city to live in. They have limited (if any) disposable income and thus need to continue working. They are also highly dependent on collective forms of transport and thus cannot conform to desired social distancing.

In this context, we suggest scholarly analysis and policy interventions have much to gain from a renewed focus on the neighbourhood scale as mixed-used and mixed-income spaces, as well as places of shared purpose and solidarity able to serve the needs of its residents and to evolve into growing equitable forms of living.

## **Guerrilla Urbanism**

Before COVID-19, many neighbourhoods were being made a crucial site for value extraction through place-making strategies. This involved the careful curation of space catering for the interests of the booming tourism industry and other consumers. In that context, measures of successful place-making included footfall, consumer spend, and mentions in international rankings appealing to hedonistic audiences on the lookout for emersion in 'unique' place-based experiences (Canelas, 2019). Place-making has been instrumentalised to prop up cities for competition in the global market, arguably extracting value instead of creating use value in place (Mazzucato, 2018).

The pandemic has emptied out cities of tourists and has forced us to rethink the importance of place in catering for the needs of residents. This pandemic offers a real possibility to re-think the neighbourhood scale and to look for ways to improve and create places that require limited travel for work and enable social distancing without social isolation. One way to do this is to rethink the old-fashioned idea of mixed-use, mixed-income, intergenerational places at the neighbourhood scale (see Jacobs, 1961/1992). Living with COVID-19 offers a unique opportunity to conjure ways of creating value at – and that stays in – the neighbourhood scale. But with cash-strapped local governments, how are we to incentivise these initiatives?

One alternative could be to call upon forms of guerrilla urbanism, also called do-it-yourself (DIY) or tactical urbanism. Guerrilla urbanism consists of citizen-led, low-budget initiatives that seek to create use value from underused spaces. In many cases, these initiatives are led by residents who are unable to satisfy their needs through formalised channels. Initiatives range from somewhat institutionalised approaches to more radical interventions and may include the occupation of vacant land for: growing

food; new pocket parks and leisure spaces; outdoor living rooms; *ad hoc* markets; or the installation of artwork (Talen, 2015). Together these sorts of tweaks in the neighbourhood enable residents to take advantage of the things these places can give us as part of a substantive foundation for urban livelihoods (Schafran et al., 2018).

Guerrilla or tactical urbanism has been accused of being a Euro-American fad with middle-class flavour (see Mould, 2014). However, localized, creative, and makeshift solutions are the bread and butter of urban communities in the global South, where most lower income residents have long relied on heterogeneous networks of enterprise and support to eke out their everyday existence (Simone, 2004). These solutions are often deployed at the local level where state entities are unable or fail to address communities' pressing needs. These can range from solutions for water and electricity provision, to waste collection or community toilettes, street markets or informal places of leisure and consumption.

Guerrilla urbanism solutions do have their limitations. They are localized and context-specific and often difficult to scale up. They also cannot alter defining neighbourhood characteristics, such as affordability and inclusiveness. But they can serve as processes through which individuals in the community break social isolation, and develop stronger bonds and forms of solidarity that enable neighbourhoods to cope with the absence (or impossibility) of sustained support from government entities. These community-based initiatives are not a panacea, but they can offer much needed relief where the state cannot intervene.

## **Guerrilla Governance**

Global South contexts are no strangers to limited state involvement in governing public affairs. In many countries, local governments have long suffered from limited resources, expertise, and capacity to intervene in urban space. This is why some scholars have argued for the need to consider the engagement of state-society in co-production for the provision of basic urban services and improvements in urban environments in southern cities (Mitlin, 2008). Co-production takes place in conditions of limited resources and significant poverty and thus offers an interesting corrective to usually idealistic notions of participatory planning in global North contexts (Watson, 2014). They can also serve as a basis for action to communities in the global North where local governments are too overwhelmed by the pandemics to address the pressing needs of vulnerable populations. We see co-production as being at the heart of guerrilla governance, a pandemic-style approach to governing

neighbourhoods and places. It focuses on joined-up action across city departments and communities with a view to pool available resources to respond to the most pressing needs of communities.

Various examples of guerrilla governance are already underway around the globe. This includes the provision of shelter for quarantine in hotels in Delhi and other Indian cities, food vouchers in Madrid (Spain), a platform for paying for neighbours' basic services bills in Izmir (Turkey), or mental health community support in Viladecans (Spain) (C40, 2020; Euro Cities, 2020). While some local governments might continue pursuing a business as usual approach and facilitating value extraction and accumulation, the examples above are testament to the creativity of many local governments in responding to the needs of communities at the neighbourhood scale. They are proof the public sector can engage in fast and efficient joined-up action, even if once it was discredited for slow and fragmented responses (Mazzucato, 2018).

### **Social justice dilemmas going forward**

Therefore, a positive outcome of living with COVID-19 might be a renewed and improved reputation for the local state. Community and/or local government action geared towards those most in need are likely to gather broad popular legitimacy. However, guerrilla urbanism and guerrilla governance expose an underlying tension between rapid responses in time of crises and legitimate community and state action. Despite the evident need for swift action to protect public health and keep cities going, we might need to consider a balance between rapid responses and transparency, accountability, and participation going forward. As the COVID-19 city settles in, local needs may overtake available resources, emergency response budgets may grow overstretched, and volunteer commitment is likely to fade. We might find that, if not properly nurtured, continued commitment to guerrilla urbanism and governance initiatives as those mentioned above might become unrealistic. We may revert back to investing only in neighbourhoods from which value can be extracted, not where value must be created. To prevent the post-COVID-19 city from returning back to a socially unjust space, we must continue investing in mixed-used, mixed-income, intergenerational neighbourhoods that place those most in need at the centre of policy intervention.

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