

SHIFTING PARADIGMS IN URBANISM

A contribution to UEF 2020

By Daniel Biau

The Covid-19 pandemic, an urban disease, has accelerated a long-overdue phase of technological and social experimentation, it has enlarged a number of problems and brought them to the forefront of urban debates. It seems that many paradigms may change or evolve between business as usual and radical transformation, including in urbanism. The current era holds promise but also brings threats. In fact Covid-19 has provided a magnifying glass which highlighted the fragility of our urban systems and suggested new ways to address the related challenges.

1. Digital Revolution

For three decades the urban transition has been impacted by a Digital Revolution marked by a growing number of technological innovations which affect urban life and urban policies. From internet's instant on-line communications to mobile phones, from drones to ground level video-surveillance, from social media to teleworking, from Amazon, Alibaba or Jumia home delivery to Internet finance such as M-Pesa or cryptocurrencies, from increasingly sophisticated robots to expanding artificial intelligence and telemedicine, the world is changing very rapidly and policy-makers should exploit the benefits of the Digital Revolution, while minimizing its negative or disruptive impact.

In the urban field **teleworking has been the first winner of the Covid-19 pandemic**. It received a major boost and is likely to expand among white-collar workers in the future, with important consequences in term of urban set-ups.

Shifting paradigm: office work will cease to mean concentration in huge office blocks and become more spread out or decentralized, including under full or part-time Working from Home (WFH) and co-working spatial arrangements. Some office blocks will have to be re-qualified as housing units or shopping and leisure facilities.

2. Transport and Mobility

The pandemic has revealed how much cities depend on essential workers and how much these workers depend on public transport (essentially buses and mini-buses in Africa) to reach their jobs. Use of traditional public transport unfortunately presents high transmission risks for urban workers.

Increasing mobility (local, national and international) is a feature of economic globalization. Is it possible to go back to a more local form of economic development – and if so, how? The digital revolution should enable a new form of “soft mobility.” Governments and companies could reduce the distances between workplaces and residences, encourage teleworking whenever possible, and strongly promote commuting by biking and walking. Substantial changes in land use and zoning regulations would allow a spread of working units into residential areas, shorten commuting times, and reduce the need for public transport.

As several Western cities (such as Copenhagen, Amsterdam, London, and Seattle) are already doing, cities can create or enlarge walkways for pedestrians and designated lanes for two-wheelers (bikes, electric bikes, scooters, etc.), separated from motor traffic. The current crisis has offered a golden opportunity to promote these autonomous, healthy, and non-polluting means of transportation. Hopefully such measures will remain in place and be generalized in the post-COVID-19 era. For the time being, **biking has been the second winner of the Covid-19 pandemic.**

In term of public transport, new modes of financing, mobilizing in particular employers' contributions, have to be put in place. Some cities (such as Tallinn in Estonia, or Dunkerque and Montpellier in France) already provide free public transportation for some categories of citizens. This option should be more widely considered.

Shifting paradigm: biking and two-wheelers will have to receive much better treatment in the urban space and public transport will need to undergo a radical revolution (including in funding or even in the design of vehicles) to discourage utilization of private vehicles in large cities.

3. Energy and climate

Cities are the main generators of GHG due to the concentration of industries, vehicles and other sources of air and water pollution. Cities account for more than 75 per cent of global GHG emissions and this percentage is rising. Green buildings, improved insulation of existing ones, are common recommendations as the above-mentioned options on urban mobility. The promotion of a lower-carbon economy cannot remain at the stage of non-binding agreements and rhetorical declarations, it has to be marked by concrete and ambitious measures, duly monitored.

Cities are vulnerable. To reduce the impact of climate change, particularly **floods** on exposed settlements, major infrastructure (new dykes, drains and climate-resilient infrastructure) are necessary in coastal areas and river basins and should also receive adequate funding. Spatial sustainability requires to forbid constructions in flood-prone areas or to displace those already there. This could be costly in human and financial terms. Vulnerability assessments and contingency plans should be generalized, with citizens' participation.

Shifting paradigm: civil societies, youth in particular, are becoming increasingly aware of the climate and energy crisis. National and local governments will be more and more evaluated and judged by their actions in this field. This will have an impact on democratic processes as electoral short-termism will have to give way to longer term planning and state voluntarism.

4. The changing density paradigm

For many years urban density has been advocated by most urbanists. Adequate density and compactness are a commitment of UN member states as higher density minimizes costs of urban infrastructure and prevents urban sprawl. However urban densification increases housing prices and

health risks. Therefore an acceptable trade-off has to be found – particularly at a time of increasing transmissible diseases. It may be necessary to **reconsider the management of urban growth**, to address differently the urban sprawl and renew our view of the suburbs.

Reducing overcrowding means promoting more adequate housing solutions, more efficient services, broader streets and larger public spaces. This would require pro-active urban policies and well-targeted public subsidies supporting the kind of projects initiated by several African countries in the 1980s, that focused on “sites and services” and slum upgrading. It may be time to revisit these approaches.

Shifting paradigm: urban expansion will no longer respond to land markets which result in high-rise buildings in city centres and lower densities at the periphery, following a gradient price curve. Suburbs may evolve towards satellite towns, relatively autonomous, as envisaged during the New Town Development era. Garden cities may be back soon on the urban expansion agenda.

5. Recycling and re-localizing challenges

Thanks to the worldwide ecological movement, re-cycling and re-localizing have become shared concern in many societies. Re-cycling is not only about waste but also about changing the use of land, transforming buildings, and even re-cycling people by training and new skill development. In a rapidly changing economy it is already a shared leitmotiv which has a direct impact on production and consumption patterns. The impact could be found in new building materials, in innovative housing and building design, in water management, in energy production etc.

Re-localizing is the other facet of the same concern. It means promoting **local supply chains** rather than global production and distribution mechanisms with low production costs but high energy consumption in transport and high dependence and vulnerability at the receiving end of the chain. An urban consequence will be the need for reorganizing logistic platforms and processes in urban fabrics, calling for introducing more intelligence into the management of cities and towns.

Shifting paradigm: sustainable urban development will require a new set of actions aiming at optimizing resources, minimizing waste, localizing the production of strategic goods and modifying consumption patterns. Recycling and re-localizing should be able to demonstrate their competitiveness by going beyond short-term financial benefits and factoring social, environmental and sanitary parameters into economic analysis.

6. Poverty and equity

Our time is marked by the division of cities between poor and posh neighborhoods, the proliferation of gated communities and of under-equipped and dangerous areas which are features common to many cities, in the North as in the South. Ensuring urban equity probably constitutes the major challenge that public authorities have to face. Affirmative actions are required to improve slum settlements, to develop and support social housing, to provide basic services (water, sanitation, electricity, communication) and to ensure human safety. Unfortunately during the pandemic cities have become more divided between white and blue collars, between office workers and essential workers, and urban poverty has increased in many countries.

A housing policy should promote diversity in housing supply both in terms of standards and status. It could review and adjust building codes to ensure affordability and promote energy-efficient options. Above all, it should establish appropriate **housing finance systems** which mobilize household savings and public subsidies, and support the development of adequate housing with proper access to basic services and employment opportunities. Many governments still ignore the reality and potential of rental housing, which can be a major option for the urban poor and allow labour mobility.

Shifting paradigm: In view of the financial and social importance of housing for low-income families it is advisable for governments to focus on land for housing development as a major component of land-use planning and on financial incentives targeted to the rental sector (on both the supply and demand sides). In these two areas there is room for country-specific innovations which could leverage more private and individual investments in housing and basic services.

7. Increasing migration

According to the latest IOM report, in 2019 the world counted 272 million international migrants (i.e. persons living in a country other than their country of birth), or about 3.5% of the global population. This ratio is increasing slowly (it was 2.8% in 2000). Much larger numbers migrate within countries (probably more than 1 billion “internal migrants” in 2019). It is estimated that the world counts between 25 and 30 million of irregular migrants, meaning that roughly 10% of all international migrants are undocumented, a figure comparable to the number of refugees (26 million in 2018). In fact all over the world, mobility is increasing and **labour migration constitutes a powerful driver of development**. The economic benefits of international migration for both countries of origin and host countries have been demonstrated by many studies, particularly from the OECD and the World Bank.

Accommodating migrants, providing them with land, housing and services is becoming a challenge for policy-makers and urban planners. Nearly all migrants, whether international or internal, are destined for cities, for it is in the city that their human capital is most rewarded.

Shifting paradigm: in view of economic globalization and demographic changes, cities will have to host more new comers, in sometimes unpredictable flows. This implies that land reserves and flexible housing programmes should be envisaged in urban and territorial plans. Increasing nomadism, including of office workers, should also be taken into account.

8. Revisiting governance

8.a State vs Markets

In all developed countries the pandemic has brought back the role of the State as primary manager of the economy. Public interventions in the health sector and stimulus packages have been the new norm. States have sealed people indoors and have injected billions in the economy. Governments have rapidly mobilized enormous resources. Contrary to what liberal economists argue, this increase in state power should not be temporary.

Governments should play a greater role in the provision and maintenance of economic and social infrastructure to ensure sustainability and prosperity. **Long term planning should be back** on the agenda, based on UN-Habitat Guidelines on Urban and Territorial Planning (2015).

Infrastructure development requires significant public investment, close coordination between government spheres, careful phasing and continuity of interventions. Many developing countries could draw inspiration from successful emerging economies whose progress in recent decades is closely linked to strategic investments in roads, railways, subways, ports, airports.

Shifting paradigm: in light of the Covid experience, economic and spatial planning should be re-activated at all governmental levels and markets, including land markets, should be more regulated. Neo-liberal policies based on uncontrolled competition and extravagant consumerism should remain as a short parenthesis in the history of capitalism. Planners wake up, your time has arrived!

8.b Medium-size cities vs Megacities

It has been advocated for decades that governments should encourage the development of balanced networks of cities, and of “mega-regions” combining cities and towns of all sizes and agricultural areas. However most private investments remain concentrated in the largest agglomerations. More public investments (including in health facilities) and fiscal incentives to bring in the private sector are required in medium-size cities.

National policies should prioritize the promotion of smarter cities. These cities could be **relatively small** as many new jobs don’t need to be concentrated in dense areas. Urban corridors, Silicon Valley-type, will probably replace mega-agglomerations as a dominant urbanization pattern in the coming decades. Already, during the Covid pandemic, a number of office workers have migrated to small towns thanks to teleworking facilities and they are keen to stay there, at commuting time from large agglomerations (see above section 4).

Shifting paradigm: in view of the evolution of office work and the development of the digital economy, large cities are losing their comparative advantages in term of job creation and may be abandoned because of their well-known disadvantages (traffic congestion, housing prices, overcrowded public and green spaces). In Western countries medium-size cities, replete with all social, commercial, sanitary and cultural services, will become new magnets of internal migration and may represent the future of our urban world.

8.c Local autonomy vs. Regional management

In spite of UN-Habitat Guidelines on Decentralization (2007), participatory local democracy is still in its infancy. Besides most local authorities remain under-staffed and under-funded. As urban corridors and city-regions become a major pattern of urbanization, **regional governments** (state governments in federal countries) appear more and more as the most efficient and relevant level of territorial management. Regional governments should build and strengthen inter-municipal cooperation and rely on a variety of financial resources (land and business taxes, own investments, borrowing, etc).

Territorial planning should take place at all levels, municipal, inter-municipal and regional. It must associate infrastructure planning with land-use planning and link physical development with financial planning. A prerequisite for sustained economic growth is better connectivity and the integration of technology into infrastructure planning at all territorial levels.

Shifting paradigm: national governments are becoming less effective in a globalized economy and local authorities often don't have the necessary size and resources to perform autonomously. The management of the urban transition will have to be directed by regional authorities, in cooperation with lower and upper spheres of government.

9. Beyond SDGs, redefining Sustainable Urbanization

Sustainable Development Goal 11, "Sustainable Cities and Communities", is rather fuzzy and a bit outdated. It could be re-formulated to guide policy makers. In fact the complexity of cities and the above-mentioned evolving paradigms imply that sustainable urban development should rest on more interconnected "pillars" than in the usual definition of sustainability.

Shifting paradigm: a multidimensional definition of urban and territorial sustainability, valid for all countries, would thus combine the following paradigmatic elements:

1. Institutional sustainability that requires a clear and solid institutional framework as well as enabling laws and regulations;
2. Economic sustainability that requires re-localizing strategic industries and providing adequate infrastructure, including for transport, communication and climate change adaptation;
3. Financial sustainability that requires that regional authorities are able to mobilize sufficient and predictable resources, managed and controlled locally;
4. Spatial sustainability that requires re-activating territorial planning, re-organizing urban sprawl, reducing inequalities within territories and promoting soft mobility;
5. Social sustainability that requires a policy of housing and basic services for all, including by improving informal neighborhoods and helping the urban poor;
6. Environmental sustainability that requires reducing energy consumption and air and water pollution and encouraging recycling;
7. Finally, cultural sustainability to be ensured by promoting diversity, tolerance and living together.

To reach these objectives by 2030, methods will have to vary according to the level of development of countries and the evolution of their cities. Most important challenges would be, on the one hand, that governments implement **national policies** aimed at contextualizing and achieving these objectives and, on the other hand, that monitoring indicators are put in place allowing each country, each region, to assess their own progress.

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Daniel Biau is a civil engineer, urbanist, and sociologist. Born in France, he has been living in Nairobi, Kenya, since 1988. He has worked during 23 years for the United Nations, including as Deputy Executive Director of UN-Habitat. He is now an international consultant specialized in housing and urban development policies. His articles can be found on danielbiau.webnode.com.