

And what comes next....

An Essay on the impact of COVID - 19 on cities and towns

Episode 2 - Resilience

In the previous article twelve topics relating to the impact of COVID were discussed. These included the realisation that we are fallible and the neo-liberal prescription of the accumulation of more wealth as the objective of human existence has been seriously challenged. In response to lockdown countries are using range of economic stimulus but the combination of the contraction in the economies coupled with paying for the stimulus means that money will be far tighter and there will be much less disposable income. At an operational level we will be seeing a mix of increasing online living, coupled with a stronger desire for smaller, more local and authentic communities.

The future word will be “Resilience” - which like justice, democracy, and sustainability evokes a feeling of uniform and wholesome aspirations, however translating these aspirations into actions can be challenging.

Resilience as a concept is varyingly defined as a response to natural disasters - immediate high impact unforeseen event e.g. earthquake or fire; climate change - long term and strategic responses, economic disruption - GFC; or political upheaval. Working from these definitions however has its risks. In the same way that the sustainability discourse was marginalised by framing it as an “environmental thing”, there is a very real danger that resilience will be framed as a “disaster thing”, rather than a different way of doing our collective lives.

A more useful framing is to see community and city resilience as the ability to respond quickly and positively to any kind of perturbation, and to maintain a significant degree of independence from global and local structural interlocking systems.

COVID has had such a big impact because the neo-liberal economic and societal models dictated a highly interconnected local and global trade of goods and services focusing on economic efficiency, niche and specialist suppliers, small inventories and just-in-time delivery.

When a perturbation such as COVID occurs and key points in this interconnected web get knocked out, the system collapses and restarting is challenging. When the means of production and supply of services is separated from connection to and engagement with civil society leaves our communities and cities as being vulnerable. As has been noted above as bad as COVID is, it is far from the worst that could happen.

Across the writing on resilience is the idea that resilience is about civic processes . Mehmood states “Urban resilience therefore can be defined in evolutionary terms as a proactive rather than reactive view to planning, policy-making and strategic steering in which communities play a vital role for resilient place shaping through their capacity for active learning, robustness, ability to innovate and adaptability to change.”¹ Unfortunately the ability and capacity of governments and citizens to deliver this sophistication of action is generally lost in the minutiae of the bureaucratic inefficiency and corporate and individual selfishness.

Some of the characteristics of resilient towns, cities and communities are framed as the capacity to shape their own destiny through a process of transformation, adaptation, preparation and

¹ Of resilient places: planning for urban resilience

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persistence². At a more detailed level the Rockefeller Institute's 100 Resilient Cities identify seven key criteria³ for a resilient city:

- Reflective - using past experience to inform future decisions
- Resourceful - recognising alternative ways to use resources
- Inclusive - prioritise broad consultation to create a sense of shared ownership in decision making
- Integrated - bring together a range of distinct systems and institutions
- Robust - well-conceived, constructed, and managed systems
- Redundant - spare capacity purposefully created to accommodate disruption
- Flexible - willingness, ability to adopt alternative strategies in response to changing circumstances

While the above emphasis on process is good and vastly different from the current Business As Usual approaches, the resilience discussion needs strengthening around outcomes. While there are number of diagnostic tools such as the City Resilience Index, these are largely fairly high level and academic and ultimately it will be up to local communities, cities and regions to decide what sort of future they want to create, understand how and where they are vulnerable, and determine the type of actions that are needed to create this future.

A further factor to be considered is that in epidemics and the poor and marginalised are impacted the most. However COVID is indiscriminate and anybody, whether they are privileged or marginalised can be vectors of the disease. Consequently it is important that the marginalised have access to good housing, food and medical care. This is integral to resilience even if, for the privileged, there is no other reason other than the self interest. Preferable however is that we do this because it is what good societies and humans do. As Mahatma Ghandi said "A nation's greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members."

Despite this I am somewhat pessimistic about whether even COVID will be sufficient to shift this focus. Pre-COVID there were no shortage of red flags being waved about a host of existential risks such as climate change however the neo-liberal offering of "individual accumulation of stuff as the road to happiness" was sufficiently alluring to distract most people from paying attention to the issues or finding creative, exciting and generative ways to respond.

If COVID has had a significant enough impact then there is still a whole host of work to be done at the implementation level working out how to create resilient communities and cities. Determining City and community resilience is now core business. The following final section in this essay explores how cities and town centres will have to reconfigure into the future.

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² Davoudi, S., Brooks, E. & Mehmood, A. (2013) Evolutionary resilience and strategies for climate adaptation, *Planning Practice and Research*, 28(3), pp. 307–322. doi:10.1080/02697459.2013.787695

³ <http://www.100resilientcities.org/resources/>