City & Society

Thoughts about Public Space During Covid-19 Pandemic

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For the generations of urban anthropologists since the pioneering group who lived through World War II, the Covid-19 pandemic is likely to be the formative event of their lives, even more than 9-11 or the 2008 financial crisis. Our world, and our cities, will be fundamentally transformed by the virus, the economic crisis, and governmental responses to these twin crises. Possibilities are now being seriously pondered that seemed unlikely a year ago, such as universal basic incomes. In the interim, we live in cities that are temporarily transformed in remarkable and disturbing ways. We decided to address this by thinking about a keyword that seemed relevant to our changed everyday lives: public space.

Setha was interviewed by public radio in Boston about the public space implications of the ongoing Covid-9 pandemic. The reporter was interested in what people will do without their "third spaces," the places people frequent every day and that give structure to daily life. It seems like a reasonable question and one that urban anthropologists should be able to address. Third spaces are commercial establishments such as bars, restaurants, gyms, malls, barbershops and other places frequented between work and home. They are called "third" in that they are not home or work, but are semi-private (or

semi-public if you prefer) where community ties are reinforced and associations forged.

We are experiencing a shrinking sense of the world and focusing more on our own families, neighborhoods and cities as we translate the numbers of Covid-19 patients and increasing numbers of deaths into risks we are facing individually. This isolation exposes how dependent we are on one another for our well-being and happiness and how interconnected our networks are in our local communities. Our third spaces (Setha's coffee shop or Alan's public library) provide important locations for feeling as if we are part of a social world and belong within it. We expect that these associational and commercial ties will remain intact regardless of how long this persists as we are actively "missing them" in a palpable and visible way.

Public spaces such as parks, sidewalks, playgrounds and beaches however, that are fully public in terms of access, facilities and programming, however, might not survive as easily. These are the places where we encounter other people who we may not necessarily know and where contact and connection occurs in a more open, democratic, inclusive and yet unpredictable way.

Rather than worrying about third spaces, we are more concerned about the impact on public spaces that are now deemed dangerous because of the possibility of coming into contact with those who might be infected. Similar to people who live in a gated community, each time we walk outside we are reminded by the media not only to wash our hands but to exercise social distancing and avoidance. While this is certainly prudent advice, we need to ask what the long- term impact will be on the fragile ties that weave a complex society together.

Public space offers the daily glue by which we come into contact with diverse and different people who make up our social world. Gated community residents, once inside their "safe and secure" enclosures, begin to shun other people even when outside the gates. Just the daily separation of us and them (or "people like us" and "others") becomes a pattern that is expanded into increased segregation and with it less tolerance, more fear and greater prejudice. What then might be the consequence of fearing that others may be contagious and unknowingly cause us harm? We expect that social distancing could be a new norm, recruited for other purposes and feed into already festering class and racial anxiety, now in a "medicalized" form.

One objection to this point of view might be that the social response to Covid-19 demonstrates that we can have sociality without public space. Physical distance doesn't have to mean social distance, and the latter is increasingly seen as communicating the wrong message. We have the technology to allow us to be closely connected, not only to our family, intimates and acquaintances, but also to create a stronger sense of community, perhaps even a global village, as we collectively respond to the greatest crisis of our generation. But will it allow for the unpredictability and inclusiveness that public space represents?

This joint communique is itself an example. Reaching out to see how the other was doing, we decided to compare our experiences and think about what they mean from an urban studies perspective where the centrality of public space and interaction is being, at least temporarily, displaced and allegedly replaced.

There is clearly some truth in the role of technology—look at the number of us having cocktails by zoom--but we would be forgetting the profound critiques of the oligopoly of

the tech giants and the telecommunications companies that have been emerging in the last few years. Bringing us together without physical presence requires the technological mediators, who have been extracting rates of return on equity among the highest in history (for large companies): 32% for the seven largest tech companies in 2019. These compare closely to historical cases of corporate dominance in terms of profits as a share of GDP: the East India Company, Standard Oil, US Steel, IBM, AT&T, and Microsoft (The Economist, 2018: 56).   While the tech giants' share prices have dropped, they and the telcoms are almost certain to be the big beneficiaries of the crisis, as we binge on Netflix, upgrade our internet plans, and work from home.

We need to seriously think about the kind of economy and society that we will have when we have recovered from this pandemic. We should certainly have governments that are convinced to be better prepared for the next time, just as 9/11 produced continuing regimes of intensified security. We should not forget the critiques of the economic domination of the tech giants that were widespread before this crisis. Since the tech giants are likely to be in an even stronger relative position afterward, the debates about how to handle their economic dominance will be even more crucial.

The social spaces that are so important to societies and creativity will come back weaker, at least initially. Many who have moved away from physical stores to online delivery of groceries and cooked meals will stay with e-commerce. This appears to be more than a short-term shift in China, where food delivery is now a $46 billion-dollar business, that is estimated to employ about one million delivery people each day, despite the ending of lockdowns. Covid-19 spurred contactless deliveries, such as lockers outside buildings, so that face to face interaction with deliverers "once a near-daily feature of city life, ceased. It may never be fully restored" (The Economist 2020: 33).

Our reliance on tele-mediated interaction will have ratcheted up a number of notches. We need to think about what is filling those virtual third spaces. Will it be intensified inequality and oligopolies? Or, in China and other illiberal societies, will it be a perfected technological surveillance, a coronopticon? Can we instead find ways to leverage them to help create a caring economy that can prepare us for the inevitable disasters of the future? And if we do so, will it make for even more vibrant public spaces in a future where we don't blame and shame, but care and share?

Economist, The (2018) History's biggest companies, 7 July, 56.

Economist, The (2020). Visible and vocal: The gig economy. April 4, 32-33.