

# Post-pandemic Scenarios and Design Strategies for Public Space Transformation.

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Laura Galluzo, Ambra Borin

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**Abstract**

Almost two years after the onset of a global pandemic, one thing is clear: the pandemic will permanently change the world and its systems. Nowadays, reflection on public space is crucial within a more sustainable and inclusive development at the urban scale, also amplified by the ongoing experience of the pandemic that still persists. Public space offers a true opportunity to test new urban and social models, thus becoming a principal catalyst for positive changes in the entire urban context. It is therefore necessary to re-establish a relationship between public space and its inhabitants, providing a system of proximity by highlighting the human and non-human dimensions and consequently connecting services, relationships, and opportunities. Acting on public spaces is the first step in the development of innovative urban transformations, generated by collaborative phenomena working in the collective interest. The use of participatory practices within design processes favors a reconnection between people and territory, generating a shared sense of belonging that leads to taking care of one's own places. The reversibility of the intervention and its adaptability are key characteristics that allow experimentation with new ways of experiencing public spaces and responding to unforeseen experiences, thus accommodating the inevitable changes in society.

This scientific contribution aims to outline distinctive points of view on the planning strategies implemented in the pandemic and post-pandemic period to achieve intelligent transformations on small and large urban scales with an impact that range from the short to long-term, thus shaping future cities.

**Keywords:** post-pandemic scenarios, public spaces, resilience, short-term actions, long-term change

## Resumen

Casi dos años después del inicio de la pandemia, una cosa es evidente: la pandemia cambiará de forma permanente el mundo y sus sistemas. Hoy en día, la reflexión sobre el espacio público es crucial para un desarrollo más sostenible e inclusivo a escala urbana, que debe tener en cuenta la actual experiencia con la pandemia. El espacio público es una oportunidad real para testar nuevos conceptos urbanos y sociales, convirtiéndose así en el principal catalizador de transformaciones positivas en todo el contexto urbano. Por consiguiente, es necesario restablecer la relación entre el espacio público y sus habitantes y proporcionar un sistema de proximidad que ponga de relieve las dimensiones humanas y no-humanas y que, en consecuencia, vincule los servicios, las relaciones y las oportunidades. Actuar en el espacio público es el primer paso para el desarrollo de transformaciones urbanas innovadoras, generadas por fenómenos de colaboración que trabajan en aras del interés colectivo. El uso de prácticas participativas dentro de los procesos de diseño favorece la reconexión entre las personas y el territorio, generando un sentido de pertenencia compartido que lleva a cuidar de los propios lugares. La reversibilidad de la intervención y su adaptabilidad son características clave que permiten experimentar con nuevas formas de vivir los espacios públicos y responder a experiencias imprevistas, acomodándose así a los inevitables cambios de la sociedad.

Esta aportación científica pretende exponer puntos de vista distintivos sobre las estrategias de planificación aplicadas en el periodo pandémico y postpandémico para lograr transformaciones inteligentes a pequeña y gran escala urbana con un impacto de corto a largo plazo que darán forma a las ciudades del futuro.

**Palabras clave:** escenarios postpandémicos, espacios públicos, resiliencia, acciones temporales, transformaciones permanentes

## Framing Pandemic Challenges

Modern-day cities face a rising number of uncertainties and challenges. Reflections on the issue of public space, amplified by the current experience of the pandemic, are central to a more sustainable and inclusive urban development. Understood as the place where we learn to interact with others and to respect the environment that surrounds us, public space is now called upon to adapt to new lifestyles while representing a concrete opportunity to experiment with new urban and social models. Thus, it can become a catalyst for positive transformation throughout the entire urban framework.

The global crisis we are still living through, and which may soon intensify, poses several questions about what urban forms will be like once the pandemic ends. Further, what will the new social, person-to-person relations be and, more generally, what will life be like in the cities? This is a complex subject that deserves in-depth reflection. Covid-19 tragically reminded us that the strength of the community is our last line of defense, and that it must be developed for the protection of all. According to Manzini (2015), it is a matter of “(considering) the whole society as a huge laboratory for socio technical experimentation”. This practice is a remarkable example that could be used as a model on a large scale in a future in which designers must possess transdisciplinary knowledge, be able to manage complex and innovative processes, and synthesize them in their projects. Therefore, the solution lies in rethinking the city and its future developments from the city’s point of view as a common good that increases an ethic of active and community citizenship and, at the same time, can guarantee its inhabitants the fundamental rights enshrined in the constitution. Rethinking the city also reflects on society.

Pandemics have historically shaped cities, and Covid-19 is already doing so. From the Plague of Athens in 430 B.C., which brought about profound changes in the city’s laws and identity, to the Black Death in the Middle Ages, which transformed the balance of class power in European societies, to the recent wave of Ebola epidemics in South Africa, which underscored the growing interconnection of today’s hyper-globalized cities, public health crises rarely fail to leave their mark on a metropolis. Of course, in the wake of the Covid-19 pande-

mic, “the significant relation of health promotion and architectural design is highlighted more than in the past” (Dietz et al., 2019). On the other hand, “the mental effects of such isolation have compromised the mental health of the citizens, especially in cities” (Terziev, 2021). Therefore, architecture as the context for human activities plays an essential role in enhancing mental and physical health, controlling disease prevention, and providing a safe platform for society to return to everyday life. In an epidemic situation, people tend to feel safer in controlled places. It is unclear whether the impacts of Covid-19 on public space will be as profound as they have been in other aspects of our lives. According to Corbera (et al., 2020) “in the realm of public space and design, a key question concerns how long these impacts will be felt, and the degree to which they will be transformational (...) it may take years before we can ascertain how the global pandemic has changed the planning and design of public space”. The coronavirus epidemic and its immediate impacts, such as social distancing, have raised many questions about the role of public space in these times.

### **Exhibition of Relational Realms**

The city is a complex, ambiguous, and uncertain environment (Sennet, 2018) but it is often synonymous with opportunity. In cities, chance encounters that might open new doors, new possibilities, or simply introduce us to a new point of view can take place. The city is a place of experimentation and innovation: within it, ideas are fluid, they can flow and urban space becomes a laboratory for the generation of interactions and combinations that may cause new practices to emerge. Cities are poles of attraction for excellence: people have always moved around cities in search of a dynamic environment, new possibilities, and opportunities. This has inevitably led to a steady increase in density within the urban fabric, a phenomenon that has only slowed slightly in the most recent historical period, when the introduction of new work and distance learning dynamics have diminished some of cities’ gravitational pull. Public space is considered the entire combination of places in which the city acts and stages its activities. Public space is the connector between the buildings that make up the city and the life that takes place in its day-to-day. Therefore, it is the essence of the city: there can be no city without public space. If it had to be inscribed within a

definition, public space could be considered that “space delimited and recognized by the community as public, i.e., ideally open to all: therefore, it is a physical space with its extensions and limits, which defines the image of the formal city, but at the same time it is also a relational space, a shared place of urban living, usable and accessible to most people” (Torricelli, 2017).

Public space is “the privileged place of relationships, from social to economic and productive, from physical mobility to communication” (Mattogno, 2002). It is therefore impossible to talk about public space without asking who lives in it and experiences it every day. “Public” from the Latin *popolicus*, means that it belongs to all people: it therefore concerns what is felt by all, and this “all” stands for the entirety of actors responsible for the space in which they find themselves. The environment in which we live every day is the result of our actions, what we do and how we do it. A need emerges to rethink the relationship between the urban environment and those who inhabit it, creating a new way of considering and experiencing public space. For years, the aim of urban planners and designers has been to connect distant points. The translation of modernism on an urban scale has led us to consider public space as part of a system organized by functional rules: it is what connects buildings and urban areas. Monumental streets traveled by thousands of cars every day, connecting (but at the same time dividing) work, life and leisure.

As early as the 1960's, Jane Jacobs had theorized a complete reinterpretation of the urban planning model: transforming cities, particularly large American cities, through the concept of “living cities” (Jacobs, 1961). It consisted of a model of city developed on a human scale, far removed from that of the great infrastructures: it was considered necessary to re-appropriate public space to develop mixed societies and cancel the dependence of citizens on the machine, promoting the attitude of discovering the city, its squares and other settings for a new urban life. For example, no longer conceiving streets as spaces for transit, or simple means of connection built for cars, but as potential spaces for new public areas. In continuity with this research, Jan Gehl made his contribution in the 1970's, based on his observation of human behavior within public spaces, or more specifically, the spaces “between buildings” (Gehl, 1991). Gehl divides the activities that are possible

in the urban context into three general categories: necessary activities, i.e. indispensable or obligatory activities that we cannot do without (such as going to school or work, shopping, waiting for the bus, etc.), and are not particularly influenced by the characteristics of the space where they take place; voluntary activities, which we perform at will and if the place and the weather conditions permit (walking outdoors, sitting in the sun); and last, social activities. The latter category includes activities that depend on the presence of other people, such as playing (in the case of children), conversing, but also simply listening to or observing others. These activities are totally spontaneous and are largely facilitated by a better-quality public space. Unattractive, low-quality streets and urban spaces do not encourage any kind of activity, whereas hospitable, favorable environments stimulate a much wider range of human relationships. Therefore, the basic idea is that everyday life and ordinary situations must be the focus of attention of those who design or modify the environments we inhabit every day. If the designer is the facilitator and generator of a project, we imagine that he or she could become the programmer of the motor-city, the head-processor of urban evolutions in which projects and new scenarios “contribute to the full exercise of civil rights” (Settis, 2004) by weaving together spaces and times, *junkspace* and cultural heritage, countryside and homes, and people and feelings. Inhabitants should be ready to revitalize vibrations that were generated while being together in multiple and naturally democratic places, and that have now been damaged by a social, cultural and environmental crisis. The current crisis is the ideal context to force us to rethink the spaces that can be used for human needs. Unconstrained by social pressures and emptied by a worn-out capitalism, the needs that drive human nature and its claim on the city emerge purely, as *pilotis* for a free plan of potential actions. What else would we really like to do? And in its place, what have we recently rediscovered as essential in these Internet-addicted days that we would not be willing to give up?

### **Performing Systems of Proximity**

It is necessary to re-establish a relationship between the physical space of a territorial area and its inhabitants, to investigate the context in depth in accordance with proposed new models of proximity capable of placing the human dimension at the center of a system of services,

relations and opportunities. The spatial designer takes on the role of facilitator of transformative and regenerative processes: for the purpose of triggering inclusive urban development, it is essential to listen to the territory and give a voice to those who inhabit it daily. By working in direct contact and continuous dialogue with people through co-designing practices, the specific problems of the local context can be overcome, and citizens become the protagonists of new projects. This is a starting point for public space reactivation processes, creating new forms of community. The relational space is decisive for the performance of the activities, as a place of exchange and meeting of the inhabitants, who are no longer just the final users of the transformation but also and above all, active participants in this transformation. Their needs and requirements are the point of reference from which spontaneous reactions emerge, outlining and bringing to the surface urban and social issues: groups of citizens organize themselves to clean up uncultivated or abandoned areas, urban vegetable plots and community gardens are created, and gatherings of cyclists and skaters ride along roads usually besieged by traffic. This generates the need to re-establish a relationship between the physical space of a territory and those who inhabit it. The urban fabric becomes the scenario in which it is possible to experiment with new relationships between design and human behavior. Generating or re-generating a public space from interdisciplinary and participatory initiatives favors the creation of places where new forms of sociality can be born and mature, where citizens live space daily, are able to benefit from the improvements made and simultaneously be the creators of them. A relationship must be re-established between the physical space of a territorial area and its inhabitants, to investigate the context in depth with a view to propose new models of proximity capable of placing the human dimension at the center of a system of services, relations and opportunities. The spatial designer takes on the role of facilitator of transformational and regenerative processes: in order to trigger inclusive urban development, it is essential to listen to the territory and give a voice to those who inhabit it on a daily basis. By working in direct contact and in continuous dialogue with people through co-designing practices, the specific problems of the local context can be overcome and citizens become the protagonists of new projects, launching public space reactivation processes and creating new forms of community. The relational space, the place of exchange and meeting is decisive for the

performance of the activities by the inhabitants, who are no longer just the final users of the transformation but also, and above all, become active participants in the transformation. It is time to move from urban planning to designing urban life. This means transforming the space of the city, which is still highly mono-functional with its different specialized areas, into a polycentric reality, based on four main components—proximity, diversity, density and ubiquity—in order to offer, within a short distance, the six essential urban social functions: living, working, providing, caring, learning and enjoying” (Moreno & Breslin, 2020). At this point, it is worth introducing the “15-minute City” a concept that Carlos Moreno has been working to implement since 2016. The 15-minute city espouses the concept of a city, or a portion of it, built at human-scale, in which everything you need for everyday life is available and easily accessible, within a few minutes’ walk from your home. It is a territory to be lived in, an extended, habitable space in which private residences are connected with the public spaces of their surroundings and the services they offer. “Originally, the idea of the 15-minute city was motivated by ecological, social and economic reasons. Today, the Covid-19 catastrophe is teaching us that social resilience and urban regeneration must be based on a new idea of living and proximity. This is precisely what characterizes the city of 15 minutes” (Manzini, 2021). Everyday life becomes an opportunity for new neighborhood relations, but also for new values and practices that constitute a reaction to the current environmental and social crisis. In this connection, the idea of the 15-minute city was not developed specifically to overcome the constraints of the pandemic; they only accelerated its implementation. It is an adaptable model, that proposes a more sustainable city created on a human scale and, made up of interconnected neighborhoods in which the concept of proximity is not only understood as physical, featuring greater accessibility to everyday services, but also social: solidarity, inclusiveness and active participation of citizens become the tools for creating new realms of social cohesion. For many people, the lockdown caused by the Covid-19 restrictions has marked a discovery of the local dimension and the opportunities offered by neighborhood relations and micro-sociality. Neighborhood life has acquired a new meaning, and the principles of ‘proximity’ have become central to city planning. Carlos Moreno’s aforementioned 15-minute theory is just one of the many facets of this model. For example, in Melbourne, Australia, a 20-minute neighborhood model is being applied, thus slightly

widening the scale of proximity. San Francisco already achieved its 10-minute walk target in 2017, ensuring that 100% of its citizens have accessibility to a public park within 10 minutes on foot. Jeff Speck finds the key to creating urban spaces on a human scale in the concept of 'walkability' (2013): increasing the number of a city's walking areas is possible and can significantly improve citizens' quality of life in peripheral zones. Promoting walkability does not mean banning vehicle traffic but rather offering real alternatives that can have a positive impact on health and sustainability. Valuing neighborhood territories, which Speck recognizes as optimal in the 5-minute neighborhoods, therefore becomes a necessary strategy for the positive development of future cities. Urban-scale application of regenerative proximity-based strategies is another weapon in the fight against climate change (C40, 2020). Many cities in and outside Europe are adopting such strategies, implementing services in their more peripheral areas, and improving pedestrian and cycling infrastructures. Public space plays a fundamental role in these processes and represents a clear opportunity to experiment with light and temporary interventions, which respond well to cities' urgent and sometimes sudden needs.

### **Acting Strategies in Post-pandemic Frames**

As we have seen, cities are organisms in continuous transformation: molded by the societies that inhabit them, they develop new habits, new ways of living and even withstand unforeseen, uncalculated phenomena like a global pandemic. The pandemic and post-pandemic periods have shown how natural agents, and therefore the non-human world, began to reclaim their spaces. The roots of trees and plants continued to grow within the urban fabric as cities came to a standstill: in pots on balconies, in flower beds, but also in cracks in walls, and on pavements. New uncultivated spaces have grown in urban interstices, weeds and roots have made their way through asphalt streets, trailing plants have climbed on buildings and terraces. When confronted with a type of nature that we do not know how to define as clandestine or legitimate, we suddenly find ourselves without an instruction manual. All the usual ways of interpreting public space as ordered and controlled no longer hold. The city allows itself to be contaminated. Green space is no longer an obsession for control but an expression of

the unexpected, the uncertain, of possibility and encounter with the different. From this point of view, even wild and uncultivated places become intentional and an object of planning. “This forced interruption is an opportunity to reflect on the proximity between animals and humans, an opportunity to negotiate new forms of proximity and distance,” adds Giovanni Bellotti (2020). There is no longer an *outside*. We all live in a large planetary interior, with no space to isolate ourselves, or in which to isolate other species. Moving this threshold, even by a small amount, enables us to rediscover fauna and flora that can change in the blink of an eye, in the space between tides. This strange new normality should be cultivated to rediscover other types of beauty and behavior. Another realm of behavior that should definitely be studied and enhanced in the new post-pandemic scenarios and strategies is that of children. The perspective is that our cities will come back to life with children playing freely on their streets. But to open up city spaces to less alienating and destructive use, to make it more open and hospitable, we must first succeed at imagining it. Children are fundamental allies in imagining new uses for urban spaces, because they are not yet affected by the lazy realism that imagines the thought processes of too many adults. And enjoying with their own eyes the sight of a city without cars is an opportunity that cannot be wasted. Over the last few decades, a number of projects have been tried to free up streets and squares for children to play in, define specially designated pedestrian routes, or facilitate children and young people’s walking to school independently, without their parents. The “Children’s City” is a visionary project. Unfortunately, it has seen more success in other countries than in our own, despite the tenacity of its creator, Francesco Tonucci, who is convinced that “a city fit for children is a city fit for all” (2021). From an urban planning point of view, the city of Milan has changed a great deal. The difficulties in this historical moment are evident. One case in point is the need for businesses like bars and restaurants to expand their outdoor seating, inevitably altering the public space. In just two months, over 2,000 licenses have been granted for shops, bars and restaurants to expand their outdoor seating. This has helped support struggling businesses, but it has also improved citizens’ quality of life by offering them new services.

The first project strategy was “Piazze Aperte”, launched in 2018 and promoted by the Municipality of Milan. The project aims to achieve

the urban regeneration and sustainable mobility goals of the Piano di Governo del Territorio Milano 2030. “Piazze Aperte” is designed to enhance public space as a place of aggregation at the center of neighborhoods. The strategy promotes a “Tactical Urbanism” approach that envisages—as intended by the project’s call for tenders—the rezoning of areas through pedestrianization actions, the installation of urban furniture structures and the insertion of new elements of public green areas, all using low-cost materials. Some projects, such as Porta Genova and a new square called *Piazza Arcobalena* in Nolo, with “Piazze Aperte” initiative have been carried out, returning 10,000 new square meters of pedestrian areas to citizens, with peak activity occurring during the lockdown period. Milan also intends to enhance proximity by adopting the 15-minute city model. Starting from a territorial approach, the aim is to push proximity beyond the dimension of a single neighborhood, through the hybridization of spaces and a functional reorganization process. Citizens can propose interventions, and projects are carried out collectively by networks and local inhabitants: the “Patto di Collaborazione”, an agreement through which one or more active citizens and a public entity define the terms of collaboration for the care of tangible and intangible common goods, plays a fundamental role in this process, although it has not been used in all interventions.

The “Strategia di Adattamento Milano 2020” is based on five main themes: governance, rights and inclusion; economies, resources and values; work; sustainability; and time, space and services. As part of the strategy, the “Strade Aperte” project was launched. It focused on relevant changes made to the streets of Milan in recent times, especially in mobility. The project has brought about a revision of the city’s mobility for both pedestrians and cyclists and the reorganization of public space and neighborhoods. The aim is to provide safer and more livable streets to users, not just for the present, but as a permanent project that will enhance citizens’ quality of life. Therefore, the process is accelerating something that was already on Milan’s agenda: bringing about a change in the rhythms of the city and moving closer to the 15-minute concept. Among the results are new cycle paths and an overhaul of roadways to facilitate bicycle traffic. Other examples include the so-called “zone 30”, refurbished residential streets, new pedestrian city blocks, and a general reorganization of public spaces, all built with a bottom-up approach in conjunction with economic operators who have

presented specific proposals. This new strategy averted a long-standing reaction of local businesses opposing any attempt by the municipal administration to enlarge public spaces. In the new scenario, much of the demand for change actually came from the private sector, as they grasped the enormous opportunity it entailed. The POLIMI Desis Lab research group of the Design Department at Politecnico di Milano is still partially involved in this project. From June 2020 to the present, their role has been to carry out strategy and project feasibility support for some 20 shops in the Nolo district of north-east Milan. Other actions carried out in the post-pandemic scenario by this research group have been used in joint design activities with international students of the School of Design of Politecnico di Milano. In April 2020, 30 international students participated in *Cultural Resiliency Experiments*, the core part of an elective course called Temporary Urban Solutions (TUS). This course, taught during the first lockdown, consisted of bringing the concepts of city, public space, personal relationships, collective and performative activities into the private dimension of people's homes. The goal was to develop new artistic and interpretive forms starting from disciplines like dance, art, music, theatre, cinema, literature and culture. This attached value to the act of using (as temporary urban stages) the semi-public spaces of people's own condominiums: balconies, windows, stairs, terraces, courtyards, elevators, neighboring streets, etc. For example, the "In-Between" project is a result of the course that consists of a digital-analogue spatial installation for people living in apartment buildings. Its main goal is the creation of a collection of opinions and suggestions about cinema by connecting different individuals and places. In-Between project is designed to interact with people of all ages. The approach is mainly analogical, although the people involved are also invited to share their experiences on the project's Facebook page. There they can meet other participants and even discover cinema content. In addition, In-Between is an evolving project which aims to enable people and spaces to grow along with it. In Spring 2021, another 15 international students worked on another TUS course called Inclusive Neighborhoods. It was based on the construction of hypothetical future scenarios for the city of Milan, starting from the concept of neighborhoods as hospitable districts inclusive for all. The results of this research open various reflections on the processes that need to be implemented to propose these scenarios as feasible in the not-too-distant future, and not just interesting ideas.

Moreover, one of the determining factors in this design research and teaching experience is time. This means time understood as now, an agent to design opportunities for social redemption, but also understood as later, which introduces the concept of legacy. This period's legacy can have multiple characteristics: material, social, or even experiential memory. As it concerns spaces, a legacy can be composed of discarded materials, or reusable structures, but also by memories of the experiences that were had in a space and in the enjoyment of the project itself. This is especially true for temporary installations.

### **Potential Futures**

The ability to resist and be resilient to these transformations, which despite being foreseen found us unprepared, are giving new meanings to ideas, concepts, and expectations we once thought were clear. In this unprecedented pandemic scenario, anyone involved in design is called upon to act, with the intention of envisioning potential solutions from the short-term to a long-term legacy. Many research and system experiments are already reflecting on possible future scenarios, developing solutions that could allow a transition to the new post-pandemic world. Through this contribution, in which we focus our attention on the different points of view related to the topic through historical, scientific, and literary insights and with the opinion of experts in specific disciplines, we wish to address the possibility of starting ongoing processes of design, strategies and interpretative approaches to create both potential small-scale solutions as well as major transformations in future city scenarios.

This is only a starting point for the nearest future, and not only an objective vision but a reasonable action landscape for our present. When it comes to public and private spaces, we must design relationships with others, and intercultural connections. It is essential to attach importance to the time factor, thinking of short-term actions and models to long-term impacts in the different realms of everyday life. Even amidst unpredictability, it will be about changing from a fragile present to a mutable future thanks to a capacity for acting in new socially resilient systems of spaces.

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**Laura Galluzzo** PhD in Design, Assistant  
Professor at Design Department, Politecnico  
di Milano [laura.galluzzo@polimi.it](mailto:laura.galluzzo@polimi.it)

**Ambra Borin** PhD Candidate in Design at  
Design Department, Politecnico di Milano /  
[ambra.borin@polimi.it](mailto:ambra.borin@polimi.it)

Instituion Design Department, Politecnico  
di Milano Via Giovanni Durando, 10, 20158  
Milan - Italy