City Planners' Challenges in Post Covid Era

VIDYADHAR PHATAK
- Invited for the theme of 'Reimagining the Post-Covid-19 City'

Covid-19 is neither the first nor the last pandemic. The course of urbanisation and growth of cities have survived all the pandemics in the past and have continued to proceed unabated. This is quite likely to be the case with Covid-19 too. All the debates about the post-pandemic city are at best speculative or at worst efforts at pushing preconceived agenda.

With that qualification, let me also indulge in some speculations over the medium and long term.

Cities exist and grow because of the 'economies of scale' and 'economies of agglomeration'. Economies of scale in a manufacturing plant are technology-driven and may continue to be significant. However, increasing automation and robotics may reduce the required manpower. Economies of agglomeration, however, takes many forms. Competition for customers leads to the concentration of retail in a particular commodity. In most cities, we find jewellers or Sarafa, cloth markets, or even electronic markets concentrated in certain streets. During the pandemic, online shopping has become popular. In the long run, this would continue and replace the retail as we have known so far. Agglomeration offers opportunities for interaction through face-to-face contacts. This then leads to an exchange of ideas and innovations. Many formal and informal institutions have emerged that facilitate such interaction. MICE (meetings, incentives, conferencing and exhibition) tourism has emerged as an industry that operates internationally. However, in future, this

LOCAL TRAIN AT DIVA RAILWAY STATION
IMAGE CREDIT: SHRUTI VANNE

is likely to be replaced by zoom, google meet or Jio meet. In that case, the MICE industry may suffer.

Similarly, clubs, gymkhanas, swimming pools, restaurants, apart from their avowed function, also facilitate interaction. It used to be said that important business decisions are taken not in board rooms but clubs. It is by now almost folklore that a poolside conversation caused the acceptance of Navi Mumbai and an institution for its planning and development.

Agglomeration in large cities has been conducive to the growth of art and culture in all forms. The excitement of visiting art galleries and theatres may become history. Virtual art galleries, online theatres might have replaced them. The flood of webinars that have replaced the old fashioned seminars is the sign of what is likely in the post-Covid era.

If physical interaction is replaced by electronic media, the entire urban economy – investment and labour – may face obsolescence. Apart from the elite institutions, more informal Chai Ki Tapri, Pan ka Thela and street corner adda may also face extinction. In the absence of such institutions, city life would be quite different.

Apart from inter-person interaction, we also love large congregations. Prior to TV, we used to congregate for hearing political leaders in large maidans. The charm of such gathering is already lost. But we still congregate for Ganeshotsav, Navratri, Id, Christmas and also weddings. The infrastructure that supports and survives on such congregations will face challenges of survival.

With e-learning, schools, colleges and universities may become redundant. With work-from-home offices as we know them may not be required. Houses will have additional space for learning and work, and instead of 2BHK apartments, 2BHLWK (L-learning and W-work) will be advertised. The treadmill will be an additional facility so that the outdoor walk as an exercise

will not be necessary. As the house and the people within will be self-contained, houses could be at distant and dispersed places. What will happen to existing schools, colleges and universities? Planners will have to look for alternative uses. They can convert them into urban forestry or, better yet, into open spaces that can be quickly converted into hospitals in pandemics.

However, the intriguing question is whether the citizens in such a city will still be responsive members of a community or self – centred morons?

How would planners respond to such behavioural changes in citizens? Let us consider each of the planners' long-cherished ideals.

Controlled Sprawl and Compact City: Planners disliked sprawl and aspired for compact cities. However, in the post-pandemic city, people will prefer distant and dispersed locations as travel time, and cost will not be major considerations. As they will work from home and their children will be undergoing online education. How to extend the network infrastructure to such a dispersed pattern of urban development would be the new planning challenge.

Priority to Public Transport and TOD: Planners have been arguing in favour of pubic transport and restraining personalised transport. In the post-Covid era, people will be reluctant to use public transport and would prefer personalised transport. Of course, there would be a significant reduction in travel demand, particularly during the peak hours as we know them today. Along with public transport, planners have been trying to promote TOD. This very concept may lose its relevance. With reduced traffic on roads, bicycles and e-bikes may gain popularity. Metro companies may have stared at the prospect of the loss of ridership and consequent fair-box revenues.

Medium-density neighbourhoods: Planners dreamt of having a medium density, self-contained neighbourhoods. The

" How to extend the network infrastructure to such a dispersed pattern of urban development would be the new planning challenge. "

very concept of the spatially defined neighbourhood will lose its relevance as the distance will no longer be a binding constraint. Online technology would enable people to create their own non-place realms.

Subsidised Slum Redevelopment and Chawl Renewal: In the case of Mumbai, planners have depended upon the demand for new homes in high rise buildings to generate subsidies for slum rehabilitation and chawl renewal. However, with such demand for new homes being lost, what will happen to slums and chawls in Mumbai? Will, their inhabitants, survive in them, or they too will seek dispersed location? In fact, that will be the reality check on reimagining the post-Covid city.

Vidyadhar Phatak is an urbanist of 53 years of experience. Out of these 37 years were spent in public service in Mumbai and 12 years in consulting in various states and cities in India. Last four years he spent in academics as the Dean of Faculty of Planning in the CEPT University, Ahmedabad.

He was a member of the Planning Commission Task Force on Urban Development and a member of the National Commission on Urbanization. He also served as a part time director of the National Housing Bank. His consulting assignments involved work in Mumbai, Ahmedabad, Hyderabad, Kolkata and Dhaka.

NAGDEVI STREET IN MUMBAI
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

IMAGE CREDIT: RAVEENA GADKAR