Pandemic forced a pause; let's reimagine cities to make them more equitable and inclusive

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

Cities have been theatres of much that we recognise as modern human life, from industry and trade to innovation, culture – and pandemics. The manner in which COVID-19 plays out across world cities follows the template in urban history. Epidemics or pandemics tore through great and vibrant cities of the world, claimed millions of lives and upended businesses, laid bare ugly innards and exposed inherent inequalities, and in many cases led to improvements in urban living.

From the plague which spread through Athens in 430 BC and a millennium later in Constantinople to epidemics in modern cities – Yellow Fever, cholera, polio and Spanish Flu across centuries in New York, a cholera epidemic in 1854 in London, bubonic plague in 1896 and Spanish Flu in 1918 in Bombay to list a few – each one transformed those cities. The footprints of the epidemics were seen in new laws, governance systems, built environments including sanitary networks, large open spaces, design of buildings, and so on.

The COVID-19 pandemic is unique – like those of the past, it sears through the world's cities, leaving a trail of death and destruction but, unlike them, represents a colossal failure. When the early pandemics occurred, large-scale modern urbanisation was a nascent endeavour, if that. Today's cities should have coped better; they could not. Urban resilience, last decade's buzz phrase, crumbled in the face of the virus.

SETTLEMENTS ALONG THE
RAILWAY LINE, BANDRA EAST

IMAGE CREDIT: RAVEENA GADKAR

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The fragility of cities stood exposed. Cities, the modern industrialised world's showpieces, failed people during a grave health crisis, turning it into a humanitarian one. This is true of Mumbai and Delhi, New York and Sao Paulo, dozen other cities. Merely rebuilding them to accommodate the 'new normal' – physical distancing, mask-wearing, mass sanitisation – is not enough.

Cities have to be reimagined, repurposed, reset.

The reimagination must begin with the realisation that one-size-fits-all urbanisation and copy-cat built environments of tall glass-fronted towers and spectacular carriageways have failed. This approach poured investment into economically viable areas and neglected less promising or squalid ones; the market failed to use urban land as a resource for all; those in power ignored structural inequality. This urbanisation is best discarded. The post-pandemic city should be fundamentally different.

Who should reimagine the city and on what principles? It must be driven by the basic principle of making cities equitable, inclusive and just. Reams have been written about inequality in cities, of cities. Yet, the arc of urbanisation has not bent towards equality for all who live and work in them. The poor and middle classes live a hard life, commute long distances between work and home, have sub-standard or non-existent public facilities, pay obscene rents for inhospitable homes. When the pandemic forced lockdowns, millions in informal settlements found no work, no home, and little food.

In Mumbai, Delhi and other cities as New York and London, the poor suffered the most. Black lives lost to COVID-19 in NY are disproportionately higher than the community's population. More poor and lower caste Indians than the British died in previous epidemics in Bombay. If numbers are parsed for COVID-19 deaths, they would likely follow the pattern. This is urbanisation's failure – and shame. This needs repair.

Large cities will see COVID-related changes such as regulated public transport, remote work, and enhanced sanitisation. International cities have turned roads into pedestrian plazas and cycling lanes, introduced modular concepts for retail, converted parking lots into food courts, created 15-minute neighbourhoods. However, these are coping mechanisms during the pandemic.

What's needed is a structural shift in the way cities are organised. City governments must provide support across at least three sectors, but progressively less support as the class pyramid moves up.

Housing remains a primary concern across strata except for high net worth individuals. There is no substitute for affordable housing and inexpensive rental housing on a mass scale. The pandemic underscored this. That it remains only an intention despite decades of discussion is evidence that the property market cannot do the job. City governments have to be proactive. Singapore has shown that it can be done. There are stray examples in Mumbai too.

The health sector has received little to no investment in many decades. A robust primary healthcare tier that leads to speciality hospitals should be available for all citizens. Civic facilities in large cities like Mumbai and Delhi need urgent investment and expansion. The pandemic showed that private healthcare could not replace the public system, especially in an emergency.

The transport sector is in a quandary — COVID-19 discourages the use of public transport except with strict protocols which are difficult to follow in mass-commute cities like Mumbai and Delhi, but private vehicles are not the future either. Bicycle tracks, unobstructed pavements for pedestrians, pods within mass transit coaches are the way forward, not more cars and the coastal road for cars. Besides these, citizens must have access to public services like schools, recreation spaces, sanitary facilities, and more.

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These structural shifts call for at least two bold steps — to recast policies on land use from profiteering by a few to public service for many and to rejig resource allocation.

Reimagining cities must have active participation of people who live, work and play, raise families and find purpose in them. Cities are better imagined and made at the local rather than the national or state level. Top-down planning focussed on land-use or a selective project is a shibboleth waiting to be junked. Local governments must plan and execute, take responsibility and show accountability. This calls for devolution of power and strengthening the last-mile connectivity of people with governments.

The pandemic forced a pause on urbanisation. It also opened up a moment to reimagine urban life. Mumbai, Delhi and every city must see far-reaching fundamental changes, so they are more than economic hubs; they must offer sustenance, comfort and joy to all who live in them.

Smruti Koppikar, senior journalist, urban chronicler and teacher, has written extensively on urban affairs and city-making in leading publications of India. Her popular weekly column, MumbaiNama, was published without pause for nearly a decade. Her series on life in the poorest part of India's richest city sparked debate and action. She contributed to the conceptualisation and advocacy of writing gender into Mumbai's Revised Development Plan 2034. She has authored chapters for books and chronicles on Mumbai.

AT THE WELL, VASAI KOLIWADA
IMAGE CREDIT: ANUJA VORA