



## COVID-19 and planning history: a space oddity

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EDITORIAL



## COVID-19 and planning history: a space oddity

In October 1875, Benjamin Ward Richardson gave the Presidential Address to the Health Department of the Social Science Association at their Brighton meeting. The title, ‘Hygeia: The City of Health’, honoured the Greek and Roman goddess of health, and in it Richardson projected a utopian city (common in those days) that would take public health as its primary design consideration. He stated from the outset that such an experiment would be more artistically pleasing at the smaller village scale, but in light of the fact that ‘the great mortality of States is resident in cities, it is practically better to take the larger and less favoured community’.<sup>1</sup> ‘If cities could be transformed’, he concluded, ‘the rest would follow’.<sup>2</sup>

Richardson’s city projected a population of 100,000, living in 20,000 houses, built on 4,000 acres of land, for a density of 25 people per acre.<sup>3</sup> As a reference, in 2010, New York City (the five boroughs) had a density of 42.2 people per acre, Chicago 18.5 people per acre, and Atlanta 5.5 people per acre.<sup>4</sup> Hygeia would emphasize air, light, and ventilation by limiting building heights to 4-stories, ensuring wide streets and alleys in a grid of primary, secondary, and tertiary circulation paths, and limiting building footprints and separating residences throughout the road system. Public baths and saunas would be distributed throughout, as would many hospitals (with no expense spared!). In this way Richardson argued that illness, particularly respiratory diseases, would ‘find no possible home’.<sup>5</sup>

Cognizant of the speculative nature of Hygeia, Richardson boldly proclaimed,

Utopia itself is but another word for time; and someday, these masses who heed us not, or smile incredulously at our proceedings, will awake to our conceptions. Then our knowledge, like light rapidly conveyed from one torch to another, will bury us in its brightness.<sup>6</sup>

Odd metaphors for a health city, but Richardson was undaunted. What seemed impossible, in time, would become an inevitability.

In one of the many strange coincidences of the current COVID-19 condition (quite benign compared to the very real struggles many are facing) is that the shutdown found my Planning History course at the dawn of modernity in the Eighteenth Century. We’d just read Leonardo Benevolo’s *The Origins of Modern Town Planning*,<sup>7</sup> with its wonderful combination of the utopian projects of Robert Owen, Charles Fourier, and Henri de Saint-Simon (Richardson would be comfortable in this group), and the grand technical/infrastructural projects of the 19th-century city throughout the industrialized world. His review of the technical and political aspirations of town planning, and

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<sup>1</sup>Richardson, *Hygeia*, 18.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Maciag, “Population Density.”

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 45.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 47.

<sup>7</sup>Benevolo, *Origins*.

the periodic divergence from a path toward more a democratic society, was his cautionary message. Planning, for Benevolo, could not be reduced to merely a technical exercise, but must also contemplate its political implications and project their consequences.

Before arriving to modernity, our class looked at the origins of city settlement; the rise of the Roman urban empire; the contraction of urban energies into the circumscribed monastic order of the St. Gaul Plan; and the slow re-emergence of cities around the northern Hanseatic network and the Italian trade republics to the South.

The nexus between planning, landscape architecture, and public health date back to the origin of the professions. The hyper-densities of Lower Manhattan chronicled by Jacob Riis led the reformist charge of the professions, and the urban parks of Olmsted and Vaux were, in part, a way to address public health concerns in the city.<sup>8</sup>

William Whyte and Kevin Lynch teach us how to design great urban public spaces that create comfort and beauty within small scales of intimate density.<sup>9</sup> The technical and imaginative powers of design can work wonders, and indeed, it is often conditions such as these out of which innovative design emerges. In this, our disciplines will be at the forefront of designing the future city: the 'future-craft' that Carlo Ratti and Matthew Claudel describe.<sup>10</sup>

The expansion and contraction of cities is a *leitmotif* that threads throughout urban history.

At the end of the twentieth century and up until now, there is the odd concurrent re-concentration of urban cores with the simultaneous expansion of metropolitan footprints. And this leads us to the now.

COVID-19 is bringing the world together in unprecedented ways through this odd condition of internationally-shared distancing. The new habitat circumstance accelerates and magnifies those latent and slower-moving spatial conditions that have led us to now: progressive automation of production and distribution systems; increased flexibility in office real estate markets; an acute affordable housing crisis; drastic downsizing of rural health facilities; and, a bifurcated post-industrial service sector.

To predict the spatial outcomes of this very real-time phenomenon does not seem fruitful. Who could have predicted in 2001, shortly after the 9/11 tragedy, that New York real estate would expand at an unprecedented rate until the next crisis in 2008? Recent scholarship of post-normal times (PNT) cautions against such predictive calculation based on past trends, just as Richard Sennett advises to maintain exploratory inquiry and spatial and social porosity in the design and curation of the open city. But to merely 'take-it-as-it-comes', and incorporate *laissez-faire* attitudes toward the COVID-19 virus is to deny our disciplinary training and responsibility.

The challenges are not merely technical. Design and technology are essential, to be sure. Public health professionals can address virology and epidemiology, the same way that climate scientists can address climate change. But politics (translated into policies) frame the scale of challenges and opportunities of the city in all its social, economic, and ecological facets. This is the channel through which collective action must be organized, expressed, and projected.

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<sup>8</sup>Kowsky, *Country, Park, and City*; Riis, *Other Half Lives*; Rybczynski, *Clearing in the Distance*.

<sup>9</sup>Banerjee and Southworth, *City Sense and City Design*; Whyte, *Small Urban Spaces*.

<sup>10</sup>Ratti and Claudel, *City of Tomorrow*, 5.

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