Let's talk about the Future

of Cities

Pablo Sendra

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Open institutions and social infrastructure

The ongoing health and social crisis originated from the Covid-19 pandemic is a warning to the environmental crisis we are living and will live during the 21st century. Climate change is bringing and will continue bringing many challenges to our cities. It is important that we do not quickly forget some of the key lessons learnt during the pandemic and prepare our cities, their institutions, their spaces and communities to face (and prevent, if possible) the effects of climate change.

In the book *Designing Disorder*[1], which I wrote with Richard Sennett just before the global pandemic hit the world, we propose strategies in two dimensions that are interconnected: Networks and municipalism. Networks are those transformations that come from the grassroots. It is important to note that much of the recent awareness on climate change comes from the influence of social movements such as School Strike for Climate of Extinction Rebellion, so the importance for actions from the grassroots is vital to fight the environmental crisis. In the book, we call them "networks" seeking inspiration on anarchism, the squatting and the co-operative movements. Each node of the network of grassroots movements is independent, has its own system for decision-making and for taking action. However, at the same time, while each node is independent, they collaborate with, share knowledge with and learn from other nodes of the network. This allows for flexibility to take action, and also enables creating networks of solidarity and convergence across different groups in cities.

The other dimension, municipalism, consist of having open institutions in our cities that ensure that no one is left behind. These open institutions have the responsibility of providing basic services such as housing, health, education, as well as good public spaces and infrastructure in the city. These institutions are "open" because they are continuously learning from the networks of social movement. The Mayor of Barcelona Ada Colau, in her opening mayoral speech in her second mandate in 2019, highlighted that many of the achievements of her administration had been thanks to the social movements that are continuously pushing for a better future. Most progressive policies implemented in many countries come from the pressure of social movements, so these connections between networks and municipalism and essential for addressing the environmental crisis.

Richard Sennett proposed this two-tier system of welfare provision in his lecture series about welfare[2], where he argued that state support is fundamental for ensuring social justice. This contrasts with neoliberal policies such as the Big Society agenda by the Conservative-Liberal Democrats Coalition in 2010, which advocated for more responsibility from the civil society and combined this with austerity cuts that took out these responsibilities from the state. As Sennett argues, the layer of welfare based on networks of mutual care provided by the civil society complements but does not substitute the welfare that should be provided by the state.

Below, I present a series of strategies to prepare our cities for the ongoing environmental crisis. They navigate between these two tiers of welfare provision, explore how city institutions can become more open, and how they can support grassroots organisations that make our cities more resilient. These are not recommendations to carry out in the next decades or "targets" of what could be achieved in a few years. These are actions that can be implemented *now*, since we cannot waste another second in addressing this environmental crisis. We are already late.

Fighting inequalities

One of the key challenges that contemporary cities are facing are socio-economic and environmental inequalities. If we look at the two major crises we have lived in the 21st century – the 2008 global financial crisis and the ongoing health crisis – they have exacerbated inequalities and poorer communities have been affected the most. In global cities like London, the financial sector took a hit in 2008/2009, but it soon recovered and became even stronger after the crisis. The same happened with the real estate sector: housing prices in London went down only momentarily to then grow even faster than before the recession. This led to higher inequalities, with more people not being able to afford to rent or buy a home and with an increase in homelessness. This was paired with austerity policies that left the communities that need more help with very little support from the state, with an increasing number of people needing to access foodbanks[3]. During the ongoing health crisis, we have witnessed how while the majority of people were suffering the effects of the pandemic, large corporations like Amazon were skyrocketing their profit and their executive management were pursuing selfish adventures in the outer space. The response from governments varied depending on the country, with countries like Spain giving a wide social support to people and businesses, and others like the US providing very little support.

The pandemic exacerbated socio-economic inequalities related to labour conditions in the city. While office workers could re-adjust their working environment and work safely from home, manual workers either lost their job or had to keep commuting to their workplace and had a stronger exposure to the virus. In the UK, the working conditions of nurses – who has suffered a huge decrease in their actual salary[4] since the 2008 crisis – and other key workers left them completely exposed to the virus.

These inequalities also manifested in the home size and in the access to outdoor spaces, where there were profound inequalities everywhere. They also manifested in the access to nature and clean air, and on the mental and physical health associated to this. These inequalities make even more evident that a decent home near your place of work is a basic right that must be ensured by institutions, as Richard Sennett and I propose in when proposing open institutions that ensure that no one is left behind.

Inequalities are planetary

The pandemic has also evidenced that inequalities are planetary. This is very important when addressing these inequalities and the environmental crisis. We cannot think them as in a bubble, limited to the cities or countries we live in. The environmental crisis is affecting different countries unequally. Countries in the Global North have been exploiting the resources of the rest of the planet for years, and this is having an effect on the access to water, the quality of the air, the temperature and the ecosystems.

If we think about the response to the global pandemic, richer countries have stock themselves with hundreds of millions of vaccine doses, while leaving poorer countries to little access to vaccines. There has also been resistant to make the vaccines patent-free so they can be produced in a wider and global scale. As we are witnessing in the last few months, this gives rise to new variants of the virus, which inevitable spread quickly across the world.

When addressing climate change, we need to understand the planetary dimension of the problem and the inequalities that can emerge when addressing the environmental crisis.

Housing affordability, density and mobility

During the pandemic, there has been many debates questioning density, arguing about the end of the city and an escape to the countryside. On the other hand, there have been also arguments advocating for the 15-minute city, which gives continuation to the compact city model and support having a diversity of services and businesses in proximity to every home, so people can work, do their shopping and attend all their basic needs within a 15-minute walk.

All these arguments avoid talking about the elephant on the room: housing affordability. Ideally, many of us would like to live in a place that is not far from our job, and where we can access a wide diversity of services, shops and amenities within walking or cycling distance. However, for a service or manual worker that works in central London, it is impossible to afford a home anywhere near when they work. The pandemic evidenced that in cities, it is no longer sustainable to have millions of people a day that spend around two hours a day commuting in motorised transport, either private or public. In London, where there is an efficient public transport system,

the underground Tube is totally crowded in peak hours, when millions of people commute to their job. Strategies should not be limited to increasing the efficiency of public transport, but they should promote that people live closer to the jobs so they can walk or cycle to it. In most of the cases, people do not choose to live far from their work. They have to live far because they cannot afford to live nearby. This means that one of the key strategies for reducing the number of commutes – and therefore reducing carbon emissions – is providing genuinely affordable housing for all, which allows people to live closer to their jobs.

If we keep promoting the compact city model, the 15-minute city, or other re-branded versions of the same concept without addressing the issue of housing affordability, we will be widening inequalities, gentrifying the inner city and displacing those with less income out of the cities.

The end of cars (for commuting in cities)

This leads to other of the key lessons of the health crisis that addresses the climate emergency: the use of motorised vehicles for commuting in cities is obsolete and the streets must be re-claimed for the people. Before the pandemic, Barcelona was pioneering on implementing the Superblocks, which drastically reduce the amount of space dedicated to cars and expand the public spaces for people to gather, play and walk along the city. Four years ago, these actions were seen as controversial, but the pandemic has evidenced that reducing the amount of space for cars and prioritising public spaces for people is the natural thing to do, particularly in this context of climate emergency. Many cities and districts have followed this example during the pandemic, turning roads into play streets for people to informally gather.

In London, this has been branded as Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTN). Cycling from my child's school in East London to my work at UCL – which takes about 30 minutes – has changed completely compared to before the pandemic. Thanks to a few small interventions of closing roads to motorised vehicles with planters, one can cycle without barely seeing any car. The improvement of cycling infrastructure and these types of interventions have increased the usage of bikes for community significantly.

There are many critics to Low Traffic Neighbourhoods, which needs to be acknowledged to ensure that we can move forward and ditch the car as soon as possible. Firstly, they can lead to inequalities, with more expensive residential roads being pedestrianised, while roads with poorer communities get all the traffic. Both the superblock and the LTN models aim to reduce the number of people using car, so in the midterm these roads should also get less traffic. In some occasions, they have been criticised because of the lack of public participation in the process. Making people participants of this process is essential for moving forward. Another critic is the way it may affect local businesses, which might not be able to survive road closures while the road is being transformed. Many of the transformations that have happened lately have required little intervention, so the time for road closure is minimal. In any case, it is important to match these interventions with support for local businesses in the transition process.

Public and green spaces

This strategy of reducing the space for motorised vehicles in favour of more spaces for people connects with the basic need for green and public spaces. The pandemic has demonstrated the importance of having open spaces for people to gather safely outdoors. With the tendency of densification in global cities like London the green spaces, the open public spaces and the spaces to gather in general are being substantially reduced. Depending on where people live, they have unequal access to green spaces and nature, which is also another of the inequalities related to the pandemic. The reduction of permeable surfaces in cities is leading to frequent floods, since cities are becoming more vulnerable to floods when removing their green spaces.

If we look at Barcelona's Superblock strategy, this is not limited to reducing the traffic, but also provides more green spaces to a very dense city that lacks sufficient open spaces. The new green corridors that the Superblock strategy is proposing incorporates connecting the natural assets like the mountains, the rivers and the sea to the rest of the city.

In our book *Designing Disorder*, Richard Sennett and I propose re-assembling public spaces so they can become an infrastructure that enables socialisation and the emergence of unplanned activities. The 'infrastructures for disorder' that we propose have the capacity to disrupt rigid public spaces to make them more open-ended and adaptable, and more collective through encouraging people to share (and negotiate) a common infrastructure. This provision of infrastructure addresses inequalities by providing collective spaces and resources, and at the same time encourage the emergence of grassroots 'networks' that surface through the experience of sharing the space or resource.

Social infrastructure

Our proposal for building 'infrastructures for disorder' connects with the importance of having a strong social infrastructure (both buildings/spaces and organisations) that encourage social and care relationships. In a world where everything is measured on its economic value, the Covid-19 health crisis evidenced the importance of the social value of places, buildings, organisations and groups that make possible and encourage people to gather, relate and care for each other.

One of the examples of social infrastructure we discuss in the book is Granville Community Kitchen, a social kitchen that before the pandemic served dinner almost every Friday in a community building in South Kilburn Estate, North-West London, to anyone that would show up. These Friday dinners were a space for people to gather and enjoy the company of the neighbours. In addition to getting free healthy food, people from different socio-economic backgrounds had a space to relate to each other. During the pandemic, Granville Community Kitchen transformed itself into a food aid infrastructure, delivering food packages to hundreds of families a week and also offering families to collect their package from the community centre. This

became an essential service for the communities in the area, particularly for those at higher risk that were shielding in their homes. In addition to this, people would use the cue to collect their food package as an opportunity for a weekly catch up with their neighbours in a time when they could not see anyone. This demonstrated that the value of these organisations and the buildings they occupy cannot be measured economically, but in the social infrastructure they build. During the pandemic, many other mutual aid platforms emerged all over the world, which resonates with some of the discussions in this book, where we explain the need of having a two-prone approach to provide welfare: a state that provides the basic services and ensures that no one is left behind, and a strong and connected civil society that develop mutual help networks that provide an additional layer of welfare. Similarly, mutual help groups have been operating all over the world in response to climate disasters such as flooding, or on-going effects of climate change such as draught or other crises. For the forthcoming challenges and for achieving environmental welfare and environmental justice, we need institutions that care for everyone's environment and ensure that the most disadvantaged are not left behind, and we need civil society organisations that care for people and their environment.

Refurbish, work with the existing, re-assemble, not demolish

Many of the pieces of social infrastructure described above – buildings, public spaces, community spaces, cultural venues, the organisations using these spaces, and the connections between people – are currently at risk. The main reason they are at risk is because of a system that prioritises profit. As urbanists, it is very important to work with the existing social infrastructure, explore how to support it, and never dismantle it.

In the book *Designing Disorder*, we explain a process of re-assembling, which consists of studying which are the existing socio-spatial relationships that occur on a space, and introduce new elements that would enhance and supports the existing relationships. Much of my activist-research work in London has been on supporting communities living in social housing estates contesting the demolition of their homes and co-producing with them alternative options, which respect the existing situation and propose interventions to improve the neighbourhood. Likewise, I have worked with communities contesting schemes that would reduce their community spaces or put at risk the activities taking place there.

The reasons for not demolishing are both social and environmental. It is not economically sustainable to keep demolishing and rebuilding every piece of the city, since the resources in our planet are finite. We need to work with the existing built environment. In addition to this, people have a personal attachment to their homes, their community spaces, the venue around the corner, and the places where they gather. There are social and care relationships that depend on the existence of some buildings, or on the proximity of people living next to each other. Demolishing homes implies displacing or re-housing people, which affects social relations and systems of mutual care. Eliminating or reducing community spaces and places for gathering

also affect this social infrastructure. The open institutions we propose need to support these spaces, which are key for the emergence of social infrastructure that create affection and relationships between people.

Notes

[1] Sendra, P., & Sennett, R. (2020). *Designing Disorder: Experiments and Disruptions in the City.* London: Verso.

[2] Sennett, R. (2019) State and Civic Society. Welfare after Beveridge, LSE.

Available online: https://welfareafterbeveridge.wordpress.com/civil-society/

[3] Trussell Trust: https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/end-year-stats/

[4] Salary taking into account cost of housing and other costs of living.

Dr Pablo Sendra is an architect and urban designer. He is an Associate Professor at The Bartlett School of Planning, UCL. He combines his academic career with professional work through his own urban design practice, <u>LUGADERO LTD</u>, which focuses on facilitating co-design processes with communities. At UCL, he is the Director of the MSc Urban Design and City Planning Programme and the Coordinator of the Civic Design CPD. He has carried out action-research projects in collaboration with activists and communities. His work with communities can be accessed in the <u>Community-Led Regeneration platform</u>. He is co-author of *Designing Disorder* (with Richard Sennett, 2020), which has been translated into 7 languages, co-author of *Community-Led Regeneration* (with Daniel Fitzpatrick, 2020) and co-editor of *Civic Practices* (with Maria Joao Pita and CivicWise, 2017). He is part of the City Collective for the journal City.

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