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Viewpoint
Pandemics and planning: immediate-, medium- and long(er)-term implications of the current coronavirus crisis on planning in Britain

The attention and priority of many governments around the world has rightly been on reducing the infection and death rate from the coronavirus, despite many countries now lifting lockdown. However, in the same way that Abercrombie and others sought to plan post-war Britain in the midst of the Second World War, it is important to consider how planning policy and the profession could change post-coronavirus. This article offers some reflections, which perhaps raise more questions than answers, but these are still pressing and poignant issues to consider. One thing is clear: planners and the planning profession (should) remain vital to a post-coronavirus world.

Pandemics and planning: history

Although it is difficult to establish *direct* causation between progress in planning and pandemics, especially tracing the impacts of the Black Death when there was hardly any state control over the built environment, the Great Plague of London in 1665, followed by the Great Fire (1666), clearly had an important impact on the more spacious rebuilding of the City as envisaged by Sir Christopher Wren and others (Hall, 1998; Ogborn, 1998). The construction of London's sewers by Bazalgette and the national banning of 'back-to-back' housing through the various Victorian Housing/Health Acts can be related to the terrible outbreaks of cholera and the desire to improve public sanitation (Hall et al., 1973; Cherry, 1979). Similar trends can be seen in the building of the Paris sewers and the redevelopment of the city in the Haussmann era (Gandy, 1999). Likewise, the First World War and the 'Spanish' flu of 1918–1919 clearly informed the Tudor Walters report (1918) and subsequent Addison Act of 1919 in Britain, which resulted in more spacious space standards for new social and private housing (Hall, 2014).

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The fascinating question is whether there may be a similar paradigm shift within planning post-coronavirus. These shifts arguably often result from a 'conjunctional' crisis or combination of events, like the Great Fire *alongside* the Plague and the First World War and a desire to build 'homes fit for heroes' *alongside* Spanish flu (Peck and Tickell, 2012, 245; Inch and Shepherd, 2019, 1). In other words, change is not always inevitable, linear or teleological (one-directional), although the *culture* in which shifts take place is very important and this is not to argue that important changes *should* take place in planning. It remains to be seen whether the combination of the Grenfell fire disaster, coronavirus and possible economic disruption from Brexit conjoin to bring about a significant culture change and increased public pressure to, for example, introduce national space standards. However, there is only room in this article to concentrate largely on what changes are taking place, and may take place, rather than judging whether each change is desirable.

Immediate changes: planning policy and permitted development

Permitted development (PD) rights permit the change of use, or alteration of a building without planning permission but according to certain rules, and so have more similarities to zoning (planning) systems compared to Britain's traditionally discretionary system (Clifford, 2018; Clifford et al., 2019). These rights apply to changing agricultural and office buildings to residential use and are being changed to incorporate demolishing offices for housing and adding extra storeys to buildings, as symptomatic of the increasing deregulation and neo-liberalisation of Britain's planning system (Bakers and Parker, 2018; Holman et al., 2018; Ministry of Housing, 2020). However, the government's emphasis has been on speed and on the system being 'flexible' enough to respond to the coronavirus crisis, so PD rights have been introduced for the National Health Service (NHS) and there may be wider temporary rights introduced relating to vital institutions and industries, like care homes, under-takers and key factories (e.g. those producing ventilators or face masks), especially if the virus persists and there is a second 'wave'.

Short(er)-term changes to planning and prosperity: housing and high streets

Another priority, as the lockdown begins to lift, is the completion of existing development sites, although it remains to be seen how strongly the housebuilding industry recovers. One thing is clear, there is still a 'housing crisis'. Whilst this crisis has global characteristics in terms of its affordability dimension (Wetzstein, 2017), Britain's crisis

is a particularly severe and deepening 'wicked problem' because homeownership is the main route to household wealth with the insecurity and expense of private renting (homeowners during the 1960s and 1970s spent around five per cent of their income on mortgages whereas private renters spend around 36 per cent (Corlett and Judge, 2017, 4–5; Lund, 2017, 36; Gallent, 2019)). However, as the governing Conservative Party is particularly popular among homeowners, housing will probably remain a political priority.

In terms of retail, there has clearly been a huge (further) shift to online retail and, with the social-distancing measures likely to continue for some months, it is unlikely that there will be a swift retail revival, especially for pubs, restaurants and cafes. In Britain, (historically) there has been less decentralisation of retail towards hypermarkets, out-of-town malls and industrial estates than in other countries like the US or Australia, with the influential ideal and aspiration of a physical 'high street', typically in a town or city centre, protected by the 'town-centre first' policy and green belts. Nevertheless, the rise of online retail has led to a decline in the 'high street', although, as with many cities around the world, the 'high street' and retail generally have moved more towards 'experience' and leisure, i.e. a place for social interaction, rather purely being about directly purchasing goods or services. However, the 'experience' economy has clearly been adversely affected by the lockdown, thus further exacerbating the high street's decline. It will be interesting to see the varying impacts this will have on other spatial contexts, such as al fresco Mediterranean dining or the North American mall, but evidently this is also affected by the length and severity of a country's lockdown. In Britain, this means that planning for recovery and economic prosperity will probably become more important. Indeed, with the widespread job losses resulting from coronavirus and the lockdown, there will clearly be more pressure on local authorities to allocate and approve the expansion of businesses and employment where the demand arises as seen in the justification for recent planning permission approvals, such as a new supermarket in Worcester (Barnett, 2020b).

Spatially, given the shift of the economy towards online (and maybe an increase in industrial production due to the disruption in international trade), this may result in the expansion of warehouses and factories, which are often located on the periphery of conurbations and at strategic transport locations. Clearly, alongside the speed and scale of the recovery of the housebuilding industry, these economic changes will have an important impact on the planning consultancy industry globally, but, during this crisis, it has become apparent in Britain that public-sector planners *are* 'essential' workers and *may* (and arguably should) get enhanced powers to plan for economic recovery. Indeed, are we at a point where there may be a culture change away from the frequent waves of deregulation of the planning system, with more reforms promised in the Planning White Paper (Ministry of Housing, 2020), to a focus on properly resourcing and empowering the profession, especially public-sector planners, so that

they are freer to serve the public interest and use their creativity and expertise in place making, rather than feeling constantly pressured to meet 'targets' (Slade et al., 2019)? Or will the pressures of reviving the economy and restarting the housebuilding industry, represented by a powerful and well-resourced lobby (Colenutt, 2020), lead to the further neo-liberalisation of planning with more reforms promised in the Planning White Paper and potentially a move towards zoning-led planning (Ministry of Housing, 2020)? We are truly at a momentous crossroads and much depends upon the conjunction of many factors.

The medium and longer term: planners, property and place

The further we look into the future, the more difficult it is to predict, but coronavirus may have important implications for space standards for housing and green space, despite the pressing housing crisis in Britain. First, the lockdown has demonstrated the necessity of each household having enough domestic space, natural light and personal outdoor space, such as a balcony. Second, although the notion of 'homeworking' has been critiqued conceptually as restricted to professional workers compared to the millions of manual workers, the virus may have an impact on the spatial configuration of homes, especially apartments. Indeed, the preference has been for 'open-plan' living, but demand for discrete space, like an office or living room often seen in Victorian homes, may increase. Third, having a garden or nearby green space has emerged as extremely important, as has been widely acknowledged by experts internationally for many years (Salazar and Menéndez, 2007; Gidlow and Ellis, 2011), especially as parks were threatened with closure during the lockdown in Britain and were actually closed in Paris. This could all have important ramifications for PD rights for office buildings in Britain, which often have a terrible lack of outdoor amenity space (Clifford, 2018; Clifford et al., 2019).

Reflecting upon these changes in my area of research, green belts clearly rely upon urban densification of existing urban areas and accusations of 'people/town cramming' associated with city living globally now have to be seriously debated (for example, Evans, 1991; Madeddu et al., 2015). Indeed, the already strong societal preference for homes with gardens may increase in Britain and other countries through the growth in homeworking and worries about another lockdown. If space standards are introduced in Britain, it may be that the scale and density of urban development are also reduced, potentially putting more pressure on the green belt. Conversely, as cities have been the most affected by the virus, the popularity of urban living globally, combined with more flexible homeworking, may reduce development pressure in city centres. Indeed, if the daily 'tidal flow' of commuters is reduced, the 'leapfrogging' of development also becomes less problematic, but this, in turn, could have important implications for the traditional 'central business district' (CBD), including demand for office space and retail and ancillary services. More broadly,

this could have ramifications for cities benefiting from 'agglomeration' economics – the co-location of people and industry – and their role as the engines of the global economy (Glaeser, 2011).

This then raises significant wider issues regarding the nature of the economy. A frequently expressed desire among the public, planners and academics, perhaps held for many years but intensified by the lockdown, is for a more localised, sharing economy and less dependence on the (fragile) global economic system (Cameron and Gibson, 2005; Corbett, 2020). However, whilst this may be a laudable aim and coronavirus has demonstrated the fragility of the globalised economic system and need for more international cooperation, it is difficult to see how globalised processes can be reversed in the short term, in terms of the flows of both physical goods and international finance. A glance at the emerging skylines of London and England's other core cities tells a familiar story of global finance (Gallent, 2019), whilst a visit to a supermarket demonstrates how much food and how many manufactured goods are the product of global systems. However, this is not to say that change is not possible in the longer term, although, again, much depends upon the conjunction of factors.

More immediately, in terms of the planning profession in Britain, the trend towards homeworking, which has been more widely adopted in the public sector, may accelerate and become more widespread in the private sector. The planning process is clearly becoming more digitised, including the consultation and planning-committee process (whereby democratically elected councillors vote on individual planning applications). If the review by the citizens' campaigning organisation Civic Voice finds that these changes are successful (Edgar, 2020), this may lead to permanent changes in the planning process in Britain and internationally. Notwithstanding campaigners criticising the digitisation process as excluding people without easy technological access, including older people, the digitisation of consultation might also better engage with younger and busier demographics who do not have the time to attend public meetings. Personally, although I missed 'seeing' the councillors at a local planning committee I listened to, I thought that the virtual format worked very well and this was echoed by positive commentary in the local press (Barnett, 2020a).

Conclusion: 'make no little plans'

Of course, this article is on how things *may* change. However, perhaps we all need to return more to the vision and ambition of the founding fathers of the planning system, like Howard, Burnham, Haussmann and Unwin. Hopefully, one result of coronavirus/the lockdown will be that we have more ambitious, strategic plans, like Abercrombie's Greater London Plan, and that we follow Daniel Burnham's advice to make 'no little plans' (UK 2070 Commission, 2020, 1)! Certainly, the monumental challenge of recovery from coronavirus and a lockdown perhaps unprecedented in

British history, like reconstruction after the Second World War, requires a tremendous amount of planning and therefore it is imperative that planners are given the necessary powers and resources in this great endeavour.

Acknowledgements

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