

# Open issues and opportunities to guarantee the “right to the ‘healthy’ city” in the post-Covid-19 European city

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*This paper approaches the post-Covid-19 city in a historical perspective to reflect on new solutions for a common European urban development. The work deals with two features within the debate on post-pandemic territories. First, to comprehend that the current issues affecting the European city (such as socio-spatial segregation, urban inequalities, and environmental issues) are not just due to the pandemic. Instead, such issues dated back to the mid-19th-century Haussmannization patterns and their evolution over time. Second, to provide some tips to foster a*

## The debate on the 2020 pandemic: a spread of information and the intervention of the European Commission

The paper addresses a very topical theme, which is not new but have strongly entered in the current debate after the pandemic outbreak. The historical reconstruction of the rising of contemporary European city's problems (related to the unhealthy and unsustainable urban environment) may be claimed to be the starting point to understand that the current situation just exacerbated already-existing issues, but hopefully could accelerate the adoption of policies and actions to address them. Examples from Barcelona and Paris could provide new insights and ideas of policy/measures application to cope with the future planning of “healthier” cities. The objectives of this work are three. First, pro-

*debate on the management of the existing urban environment in the post-pandemic period. Emphasis is put on some concepts and key points regarding the post-Covid-19 city. Despite not being new or innovative, the approaches of ‘15-minute city’ and ‘Superblocks’ models approaches are suitable to develop a healthier, safer, and more ecologically and socio-economic balanced city in response to the 2020 pandemic outbreak in Europe.*

viding an historical overview of the issues affecting the contemporary European cities. Second, understanding the reasons why the Parisian 15-minute city and the Barcelonan Superblocks are feasible solutions to deal with the pandemic impacts. Third, reviewing concepts and key drivers for a common post-Covid-19 urban redevelopment. This paper adds new reflections on the increasing international debate in the field of urban studies regarding how the post-Covid-19 city will look like and the measures to be taken to guarantee a healthy, equitable, safe and sustainable urban environment. Countless articles on the web provided by international organizations, research groups, national and international newspaper are approaching the issues of the Covid-19 outbreak. Moreover, spe-

cific call for papers of scientific journals addressing a new ‘Healthy Urbanism’ (The Plan Journal, 2020), historical perspective on epidemics, planning and the city (International Planning History Society, 2020), and prospects of architecture and urban design (FAMagazine, 2020) are just some of the numerous themes researchers are being asked to reflect on. Cities across the world are being overwhelmed by the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic and are likely to change their urban built environment on the ground of a wide range of urban policy responses. Measures tackling the excess of traffic, unmitigated pollution, lack of green space and facilities, food security, accessibility, connectivity, and density are aimed at containing the spread of the virus and protecting residents and local economies (OECD, 2020). In this context, in the early March 2020 the European Commission established a Covid-19 response team focused on medicine, mobility and economy. This resulted in the proposal for a recovery fund and the EU's long term budget of the late May 2020, i.e. the multiannual financial framework (MFF) for 2021-2027 (Euro-

## A view of Barcelona's Extension from a northern hill

Fig. 1

Source: Camerin 2020

pean Commission, 2020). In this context, the paper is structured in the following way. Paragraph 2 provides a reflection on how the current issues afflicting the European cities derived from the application of the Haussmannization patterns from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Long before the Covid 19, the urban fabric of cities had been shaped by prior epidemics and the European cities responded with specific actions. Indeed, the study of epidemics had illuminated the many ways in which urban life and environment have changed during times of pestilence. Paragraph 3 takes into account Western Europe to address some of the key issues of two models implemented just before Covid-19, i.e. the Paris' '15-minute city' and Barcelona's 'Superblocks'. Despite both solutions found their *raison d'être* in the pre-pandemic period, the 2020 Covid-19 outbreak sped urgent changes in the urban environment. The Recovery Plan for Europe should consequently rely on some feasible and innovative solutions in response to the pandemic, such as those proposed by Paris and Barcelona in the pre-pandemic period. Having clarified the utter importance of the two solutions above, paragraph 4 proposes three main reflections on the concepts of 15-minute city and Superblocks to deepen their significance and clarify their origins. Paragraph 5, eventu-

ally, delineates the lessons learnt from this paper and further research on post-Covid-19 city according to the EU-fostered initiatives.

### **From a locus of plague and riots to a place of health and public order: the Haussmannization of the Western European city**

The current debate on post-Covid-19 cities, in many cases, refers first to the existing literature published across Europe as its cities have been hit by numerous pandemics over the centuries. Italian author Boccaccio describes the 1348 bubonic plague in Florence in "The Decameron", England's Daniel Defoe relating the plague of 1665 in London in "A Journal of the Plague Year", and Spain's Cristóbal Jacinto Nieto De Pina in the book "Memory of the diseases experienced in the city of Seville in the year 1786" stand out among others. Second, the debate emphasizes past large urban transformations, carried out especially during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in response to pandemics to confront them with the current Covid-19 challenges. Specific attention has been paid on this period as it dealt with the side effects of the Industrial Revolution in Europe (Engels, 1845). Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the main focus of the Western European governments interventions in the cities were related to public health issues. The first



town planning laws, as a matter of fact, were introduced as measures to "cure" the city's ills, such as Great Britain's Public Health Act of 1848 and Spain's Extension Laws (in Spanish *Ley de Ensanche de Poblaciones* of 1864). At that time, town planning was meant as a kind of "medicine" to deal with slums, congestion, disorder, ugliness, and diseases so as to improve the hygienic-sanitary conditions of the cities.

The sanitary-fostered town planning measures adopted to combat this "dirtiness" have historically taken the form of actions affecting not only the urban structure but also the economic and social characters of the city. An example of this utter change has been the 19<sup>th</sup>-century *Ensanches* in Spain, whose paradigmatic model was the Cerdà-designed Barcelona's Extension of 1859 (Cerdà, 1867; see

Figure 1). Paris is a model of most radical transformation operated in an European city during the French Second Empire (1852-1870), whose influence spread far and far beyond the French capital. Led by Baron Haussmann's programme of brutal demolitions and spectacular reconstructions, this urban renewal provided the reference patterns by which urban redevelopment actions would perform across Europe and the USA for more than a century<sup>1</sup>. This operation, the so-called 'Haussmannization' (Gaillard, 1977) as well as the aforementioned experience of Barcelona, substantially designed the demolition of antiquated blocks and their replacement by new apartment houses intended for the wealthy, transportation corridors and commercial space that broke up the pre-existing residential neighborhoods.

Breaking down the barriers to commerce presented by the medieval urban built environment, modernizing the city so as to enable the efficient transportation of goods as well as the rapid mobilization of military troops inevitably involved the displacement of lower classes from centrally located areas to the periphery. This massive urban renewal practice had also an important political and social dimension. The destruction and reduction of many Parisian neighborhoods occurred in the place where working-class insurrections occurred. The Haussmannization actually aimed to surround and control revolutionary areas, such as Faubourg Sant-Antoine. The way to respond to the threats of pandemics based on the mid-19th-century town planning actions took the form of 'zoning'. This practice generally contributed to a socio-spatial reorganization in several cities across Europe (Olsen, 1986), such as London (Schubert and Sutcliffe, 1996) and Naples after the 1884 cholera outbreak (Snowden and Frank, 2002).

Following these patterns, the extension of European cities on the ground of zoning regulations created socio-economic inequalities and segregations which took place in form of 'popular- and bourgeoisie-intended spaces of social reproduction' (Álvarez Mora, 2015). Zoning had spread across Western Europe and the

United States from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards (Fischler, 1998), being substantially meant to real estate operations with high economic returns and to the separation of population and functions with respect to the mixture and complexity that characterized the city of the previous period. In this way, "cleaned-up" areas gradually took over. On one hand, the beautification worked for the emerging bourgeoisie class and, on the other hand, new peripheral areas with respect to the extensions were meant to the working class and lower-middle class, generally coinciding with the new industrial areas. By doing so, the problems of social "dirtiness" were displaced from urban centers to peripheral areas, thus not completely eliminating the issues affecting the poor. Moreover, the accessibility and proximity that characterized the city has been increasingly overcome by the mobility based on the mass influx of private cars and city zoning.

#### **Will 15-minute city and Superblocks models be solutions for the wealthy or for everyone?**

This whole discourse, what it has to do with the recovery of European cities in response to the Covid-19 pandemic? The uncertainties and challenges the European city is currently facing are the result of

the segregation-intended urban renewals that took place from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The above explains why I reflect on the current pandemic based on a (brief) historical perspective. Cities have been spreading like wildfire, and nowadays they present a dispersed-shaped form which has evolved in the last century and a half under a perspective of unlimited development (Ingersoll, 2006). While cities had dramatically grown, their urban centers underwent remarkable urban renewals and regenerations searching for profit-driven spaces in which exchange-value overcame use-value (Álvarez Mora and Camerin, 2019; Atkinson, 2020). These patterns have had remarkable consequences in terms of more inequality between people and territories, progressive destruction of the past legacy, inadequate management of the available resources, and gradual increasing pollution at a global level, with all its negative consequences for the human being.

Recently, with the outbreak of Covid-19, it is a matter of proposing policies and actions that truly improve the quality of life of the environment and of the city as a whole, and not only of a certain urban spaces, the most prestigious ones (Alexandri and Janoschka, 2020). The *Paris en Commun*'s concept of the '15-minute city'<sup>2</sup> and the Barcelona's 'Superblocks'

(Mueller et al., 2020) apparently seem to be increasingly important, especially in Europe. On one hand, the goal of Paris' initiative is the guarantee for people to reach work and shopping places on foot or by bicycle within 15 minutes. On the other hand, the attempt of the 400-m<sup>2</sup> grid-shaped 3x3-block Superblock is the provision of new open spaces for pedestrians, cyclists, and kids to move among bike lanes, open paths, trees, sculptures, street furniture, and playground equipment. Both proposals would provide more space to slow mobility (bicycles and skateboards), as well as a decisive bet for public transport over private transport. The two approaches, however, should not result in an architectural and urban design aimed only for people who can afford them. New public spaces and green areas should not be the "excuse" for increasing the width of open space and demolishing urban fabrics defined as "incompatible" with the way of ensuring a "safe" social distance between people. Why not? Simply, new spaces for the wealthy and not for lower classes would be created following a sort of 21<sup>st</sup> century-Haussmannization patterns. The creation of new healthy spaces for the rich would worryingly result in new waves of gentrification that could exacerbate existing disparities at local and territorial scale.

### Revisited concepts and key drivers for a common post-Covid-19 urban development

The measures to develop a healthier, safer, and more ecologically and socio-economic balanced city must provide transformations whose cost will be bearable for the lower social classes. Having this in mind, the debate on the post-Covid-19 city should be framed according to a number of considerations and remarks, with two main goals. On the one hand, by slightly debunking the myth of the 15-minute city and Superblocks models as innovative and original solutions in contrast to the 2020 pandemic outbreak as they refer to previous concepts and models. On the other hand, by formulating a number of conceptualizations and guidelines to take into account at the moment of planning interventions in the existing urban environments oriented to dealing with the pandemic issues.

Three are the reflections on concepts. First, the 15-minute city and Superblocks are not new concepts and/or solutions in the planning discourse in contrast to pandemic issues, but adapted “case by case” at the neighborhood scale to tackle the consequences of late neoliberalism in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century European cities. In spite of the fact that Carlos Moreno and Salvador Rueda<sup>3</sup> are respectively (and astoundingly) regarded as the “key theorist behind

the recent resurgence in a new model for urban planning that seems almost custom built for this localised future” (Yeung, 2021) and the “father of Superblocks” (Ortega, 2020), the implementation of their models can be intended as neighborhood-unit-intended solutions. First coined by William Drummond in 1916, the neighborhood unit is credited to Clarence Perry (1929) taking inspiration from the ‘Garden Cities of Tomorrow’ of Ebenezer Howard (1902)<sup>4</sup>. Barcelona’s Superblocks were originally proposed by Oriol Bohigas in the late 1950s (Bohigas, 1958, pp. 474-475) to deal with the growth of the city, later developed by Salvador Rueda under the so-called ‘Ecological Urbanism’ (Rueda, 2014). Prior to these two models, the 20-minute neighborhood was introduced by both the Portland Plan (Portland City Council, 2012) and the metropolitan planning strategy Plan Melbourne 2017-2050<sup>5</sup>. Paris and Barcelona’s models refer also to the wide range of short-term, low-cost, and scalable interventions and policies that catalyze long term changes in a specific neighborhood, i.e. the so-called Tactical Urbanism (Garcia and Lydon, 2012). Second, the 15-minute city and Superblocks incorporate the concepts of sustainability and resilience to change lifestyle by two very different ways. Up to date (February 2021), the field of urban

studies lacks a comparison of these two case studies<sup>6</sup>. The 15-minute city allows residents to meet their daily needs within a 15-minute walk range (1.2 km) or bike ride from their homes (4.4 km). Four major principles, i.e. proximity, diversity, density and ubiquity, should improve the quality of life within short distances, and across six essential urban social functions, i.e. living, working, supplying, caring, learning and enjoying<sup>7</sup>. Superblocks model, instead, has a different scale as it groups 3x3 Cerdà’s blocks, corresponding to 5,000-6,000 inhabitants and a range of 5-minute walking. Parisian solution involves a larger scale than the Barcelonan one, so one city should choose between one solution and the other one as they may fail to be applied in the same city<sup>8</sup>.

Third, the use of the 15-minute city and Superblocks appears to be strictly related to the concept of the “right to the city” (Lefebvre, 1968). Under Covid-19 circumstances, what if the society takes a step forward and shift from the “right to the city” to the so-called “right to the ‘healthy’ city”<sup>9</sup>? The “right to the ‘healthy’ city” spatial paradigm is based on early social science works by Skinner and Masuda (2013) and then developed as an urban planning component by the Barcelona Lab for Urban Environmental Justice and Sustainability<sup>10</sup>. According to Skinner and

Masuda, the right to a health city means to guarantee the access to “*essential opportunities for health (e.g., social support networks, grocery stores, health services), and/or obligations (e.g., employment, education)*” (Skinner and Masuda, 2013, p. 212) that the current physical mobility cannot guarantee. Thus, it is a question to merge physical mobility to social mobility, i.e. cities should guarantee the ability to move within and around the city to participate in the full range of urban resources and opportunities. Nevertheless, cities are stuck into a sort of ‘mobility trap’ that involve social alienation, especially for the lower social classes (Musterd et al., 2017), thus precluding health equity for urban inhabitants.

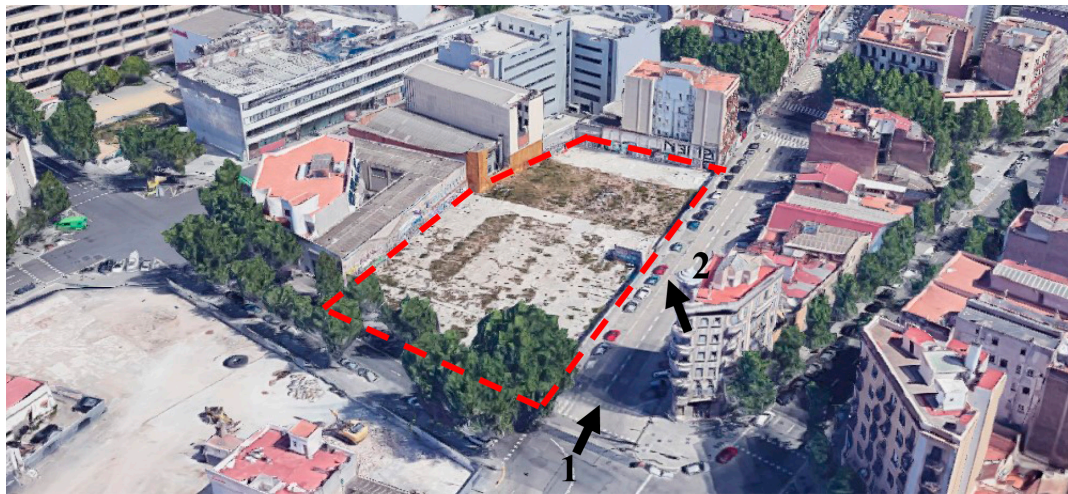
As regards the guidelines, mobility might tip the scale of post-Covid-19 city, so mobility should be at the center of new interventions to overcome the pro-car monoculture and guarantee the right to the healthy city. The mobility-related transformations to redefine cities may involve a wide range of initiatives (e.g., investments to both expand walkways, bicycle lanes and parking and to foster the use of car- and ride-sharing and the electrification of the transport system), but these measures should be introduced along with others. Here the focus is on two specific



## An example of urban void located within the perimeter of a Superblock unit in Barcelona's Poblenou neighborhood

Fig. 1

Elaboration by Camerin 2021 and photos by Camerin 2020



topics, i.e. urban voids and density. First, the so-called "urban voids" (Figure 2) may play a remarkable role in the post-Covid-19 period. The reuse of large-scale abandoned areas (such as old factories, markets, slaughterhouses, military premises, and so on) should not be seen as an opportunity to establish new real estate businesses, generally designed for speculative land use. These abandoned areas, being product of (an induced?) economic-financial and structural obsolescence of certain types of activities, will hardly be able to generate an exclusively economic gain today (Camerin, 2020a, pp. 113-118). Instead,

the finance-based paradigm to redevelop these derelict sites should be overcome to achieve the right to the city, also through temporary reuses that can also promote accessibility and walkability. Second, one can claim that crowded city, high urban density and compact design may contribute to high rates of infection and death (ITDP, 2020). Also, given the collapse of urban retail and the rapid proliferation of remote work, can dense cities remain culturally and socio-economically vital? Although less densely populated communities appear innately better suited to social distancing and self-isolation, urban densi-

ty provides sustainable solutions in terms of concentration of more services to allow access to a larger population. As pointed out in the recent survey by OECD (2020, p. 10), density alone is not the factor that make cities more vulnerable to Covid-19, but the structural, economic and social conditions. Density, in a nutshell, enables people to live within walking distance of healthcare or places of work, benefit from this proximity by not having to rely on cars to reach essential services. The provision of suitable infrastructure for accessibility and walkability is the enabler for density to work well, and this is the essential core of Parisian 15-minute city and Barcelonan Superblocks.

### Towards a conclusion. Are we at the beginning of a new époque for the European city?

Within the spread of information and analysis regarding the post-Covid-19 city, one can ask how the city would look like after the 2020 pandemic outbreak (Batty, 2020). Following the research path that this paper provides, which is based on a historic perspective of European cities, the lessons learnt can be the following. First, European cities should not essentially make the mistakes of the past so as to spread inequalities and segregation within cities and among territories. A

higher concentration of urban poor areas will be supposedly more vulnerable than healthier ones. Contrary to the measures adopted to tackle the 2007-2008 crisis, the management of urban interventions in contrast to the pandemic should stand a criteria of "austerity" understood as an effective and efficient management of available resources (Campos Venuti, 1978). Second, more research is needed to develop a framework to understand better common and different elements of the measures adopted city by city. Starting from the 15-minute city and Superblocks, numerous projects have been set out across Europe to improve the quality of the existing urban environment. The Swedish "Street Moves", also known "1-minute-city" (O' Sullivan, 2021), and the Milanese experiment "Open Streets" which strictly relied on the tactical urbanism (Comune di Milano, 2020) are two outstanding examples. The research on post-Covid-19 city may bring together the various initiatives launched in Europe to create a public inventory. Updating the state-of-the-art measures adopted in the post-Covid-19 city may be used as a tool of real experiences to evaluate, compare and export these measures on a case-by-case basis.

Third, in Europe, because of the pandemic and together with other policies not directly linked with it, large amounts of financial resources are being put in place by governments. Among the European Commission priorities, the Green Deal (European Commission, 2020b) and the NextGenerationEU (European Commission, 2020c) will allocate financial resources for actions aimed to foster the transition to greener, healthier, and more just cities. The European Commission has carefully reasoned on a number of ways to upload its urban policy agenda based on two types of issues. First, to provide instruments and measures to transform the urban environment in response to the pandemics. Second, to integrate the urban responses to Covid-19 into the actions dealing with the historical impacts of capitalist urbanization. EU-fostered interventions such as the Green Deal and the NextGenerationEU could address historic problems affecting the cities (i.e. those derived from the Haussmannization patterns and their evolution until today) and new problems related to the pandemics. By doing so, will European cities be finally able to change and meet their citizens' needs? Working on concepts and interventions related to the post-Covid-19 city may encourage the use of the pandemic as a catalyst for positive changes and transformation in cities.

To conclude, today we are at a crossroads between making good use of such resources for these objectives or missing one of the biggest opportunities to solve (or at least alleviate) numerous issues affecting our cities. Although recent experimental measures such as the ones in Barcelona and Paris could help to achieve what we may call "right to the 'healthy' city" (but in this case I would rather say territory instead of city), monitoring the beneficiaries of the European Commission funding will be essential (Khan, Ghiglione and Mount, 2021). NextGenerationEU will start as of mid-2021 and Italy and Spain are the biggest beneficiaries from fund but have (worryingly) poor record in using EU cash (European Court of Auditors, 2019).

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## Note

<sup>1</sup> After almost a century, the specters of Haussmann come to haunt the city through the figure of Robert Moses in New York. If Haussmann was searching for the creation of boulevards as wide as New York avenues, like «*Hausmann, Moses was faced with a metropolis that appeared to be ungovernable [...] the two men preferred to engage in constructive destruction, seeing themselves as "demolition artists"*» (Kishik, 2015, p. 150).

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.paris.fr/dossiers/paris-ville-du-quartier-d-heure-ou-le-pari-de-la-proximite-37>

<sup>3</sup> Professor at the Sorbonne University and Mayor of Paris' Special Representative for Smart Cities (<http://www.moreno-web.net/>).

<sup>4</sup> An exhaustive literature review on the neighborhood unit concept is provided by Lawhon (2009) and Scudellari and Staricco and Vitale Brovarone (2020, pp. 676-678).

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.planning.vic.gov.au/policy-and-strategy/planning-for-melbourne/plan-melbourne/20-minute-neighborhoods>

<sup>6</sup> Recently, Fabris, Camerin, Semprebon and Balzarotti (2020) critical compared the case of three global cities' urban renovation starting from the application of the ideas of 15-minute city, Superblocks and tactical urbanism.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.moreno-web.net/the-15-minutes-city-for-a-new-chrono-urbanism-pr-carlos-moreno/>

<sup>8</sup> In this sense, the C40 Cities, a city-led coalition focused on fighting climate change, is supporting and promoting the 15-minute city idea as a blueprint for post-Covid-19 recovery (<https://www.c40.org/other/agenda-for-a-green-and-just-recovery>).

<sup>9</sup> This spatial paradigm is based on early social science works by Emily Skinner and Jeffrey R. Masuda (2013) and then developed as an urban planning component by the interdisciplinary research group Barcelona Lab for Urban Environmental Justice and Sustainability (2019).

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.bcneuj.org/>

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