**Is COVID-19 a turning point for active travel in cities?**

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**Abstract**

The need for physical distancing in the midst of Covid-19 has laid bare the absurdities of transport in our public realm.  With people confined to their homes the roads, which have dominated urban planning thinking, lie empty.  Simultaneously the same people, allowed out of their homes to exercise, find that the space given to sidewalks, and near non-existent cycle ways, are not nearly enough to maintain physical distancing. In our piece we ask:  Is Covid-19 a turning point for our urban transport systems and where the arguments made in favour of sustainable transport finally break through?

**Keywords**: *Cycling; Active Travel; COVID-19;*

Article:

Urban planning is punctuated with turning points, crises and schisms. Often triggered by events which are so fundamental in their nature, they critically expose the flaws in our society. Moreover, they demand remedying action.

One could think of Roosevelt’s ‘New Deal’ which, amongst other things, instigated massive infrastructure development to stimulate growth in the wake of the Great Depression, or the UK’s post-war creation of the welfare state and National Health Service under Atlee. Arguably the most recent of those trigger points remains the 1973 Oil Crisis, which ushered in the period of Post-Fordism which underpins many nation’s macro-economic models. Other events such as climate change represent crises on a similarly large scale, but their slow-burn nature has meant that responses have been likewise creeping and, as we’ve argued elsewhere (Nurse and North, 2020), often not so fundamental as to critically challenge the existing economic model.

COVID-19 is such a critical event. Globally, towns and cities have gone into lockdown. Although the extent of these measures has varied, with Italy, Peru, Colombia, Spain and China amongst the most restrictive, even more-permissive responses from those such as the UK, USA, Argentina, Australia and France, have seen all but the most-essential economic activity come to a halt. The Great Pause.

Indeed, it is the Great Pause itself that has revealed those critical flaws in urban life. With people confined to their houses excepting for a few fundamental reasons (buying essentials, caring for relatives and loved ones, and exercise), a new phrase entered our lexicon: social or physical distancing. Yet the urban fabric we have built over the last half century has demonstrated itself to be uniquely unfit for this purpose.

COVID-19 has exposed the absurdity of transport in our public realms. Roads have been dominated by private automobiles and placed at the centre of attempts to keep cities moving, despite evidence of being a public health liability (Rojas-Rueda et al., 2011). Yet, these roads now lie empty. The UK’s transport minister reported road traffic that is at its lowest since 1955. The induced demand, brought on by the widening and adding of additional lanes, had evaporated. With this reduction in traffic however, comes increases in speeds, and (for example) police forces across the UK are reporting substantial increases in drivers vastly exceeding posted speed limits. Instead the demand for space is now on the pavements and sidewalks.

Yet, as people emerged from their houses for their daily exercise, they quickly realised the discrepancy between space for pedestrians and that for vehicles and, in many global cities, how pedestrian space is not fit for purpose and entirely unfit for meaningful physical distancing. Sidewalks are rarely the necessary 2 metres wide, meaning that as walkers, runners, dog-walkers et al., try to pass one another they are often required to walk through mud or step into the road. Long-forgotten bikes have been retrieved from the depths of storage spaces, and bike shop owners we spoke to have told us how they have “*sold out of entry-level bikes as people want to avoid public transport”,* so cyclists have found that the near-non-existent cycleways present two options: ride on already-crowded pavements, or ride on the often-deserted, but potentially still-dangerous roads with more irregular driving patterns.

Policy makers became more receptive to the argument for cycling (in particular) as a utilitarian commute which combines time-savings and exercise (Steinbach et al., 2011) when it became clear that public transport networks would be forced to operate at a capacity which could be as little as 10% in order to maintain appropriate physical distancing. Discussions swiftly turned to how to avoid road network capacity becoming overwhelmed by private cars as economic activity resumed. Yet there was also recognition that a massive decrease in public transport capacity would also disproportionately affect the urban poor, whose low car ownership leaves them more reliant on public transport and short of alternatives in its absence.

Some cities have recognised this from an early stage, and as the pandemic has progressed ‘pop-up’ cycle lanes have appeared. Early leadership came from the Global South, with Bogota amongst the first to expand its existing cycle network to alleviate pressure on public transport. These ideas subsequently took hold across the Global North – first in the USA in cities like Oakland and New York, where city mayors seemingly enjoy more ‘rapid-response’ planning powers, then Mainland Europe, where Milan, Brussels and Paris are amongst many cities taking up the initiative, and Oceania (e.g. Auckland). Throughout, there are common themes within this temporary, physically-distant, exercise space. In some cases, it has involved ‘taking back’ road space (e.g. suspending parking spaces, or closing-off/narrowing redundant lanes) to create wider footpaths and/or temporary cycle lanes (Dunning and Nurse, 2020). Elsewhere it has involved closing roads entirely to cars. This approach is not universal, however, and whilst many other cities across the globe have followed suit, others have not. Crucially this includes cities in China, who have seemingly made little change to their transport networks either during, or post-lockdown, and across Africa where restrictions have resulted in transport becoming increasingly expensive and leaving passengers stranded (Deutsche Well, 2020)

At the time of writing, much debate is dedicated to virus ‘exit strategies’. How do we, as citizens, as businesses, as cities and their economies, return to business as usual? At the same time however, this Great Pause has provided the time and, perhaps more importantly, the literal space to stop and consider what we want the restart to look like and to ask: do we want to keep things the way they were? In other words: a new usual seems possible.

For many years planners have toiled over how to increase active travel rates – even despite clear recognition of the multitudinous socio-economic and environmental benefits it provides. Almost overnight they have been gifted a breakthrough moment where the question has flipped from ‘how do we change things?’ to ‘how do we keep things the way they are?’ This window of opportunity is also likely to remain open for the time being – not least given it’s expected that some forms of physical distancing measures will remain in place once more stringent lockdown measures are lifted. Importantly, this doesn’t mean getting rid of cars entirely. Even in the Dutch and Danish models cars work within this thinking – people who need cars are free to use them – the only difference being their place in the overall hierarchy is diminished.

There will come a time, post-pandemic, when we will take stock of what has happened and how our cities have changed. There are differences in city responses across the globe – but there are examples of strikingly common approaches undertaken in the global south and north to reallocating road space and prioritising active travel, and sadly also examples of ignoring active travel in the global north and global south. If the principles of Urban Entrepreneurialism (Harvey, 1989) hold true, over the longer period the ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ will emerge. Inevitably some places will have made great strides during this period, transforming their transport networks in ways that would be considered unthinkable 12 months ago. There will be others caught napping – and will be considered to have squandered this opportunity. Research is needed to consider the effects of this action. Building upon research which makes the connection between air quality and COVID-19 mortality (Wu et al., 2020), and linking deprivation to COVID-19 outcomes, future work should consider how decisions to create temporary active travel networks affects air quality and health outcomes longitudinally. Research should also explore the lasting effects on modal-share across contexts and differing car-cultures, and, in governance and policy terms, any attempts to make the temporary permanent.

As the ‘first wave’ appears to be subsiding in many countries around the globe we can now ask: What’s next? Now, and in the coming months, the challenge for transport planners is how to work with this ‘new normal?’ Having spent decades trying to redesign our streets to reduce congestion, improve air quality, and make space for others, how will they succeed in making the temporary, permanent? With the short-term viability of public transport networks uncertain, it’s not unrealistic to expect a greater number of people moving through our cities in a sustainable way. Concomitantly, we might see a fall in private car usage as drivers perceive an active-travel network that is safe, viable and something they can use. Here there is real potential for a virtuous circle. If these efforts succeed, and in time, we may also recognise that this is when our climate efforts reach a turning point – sneaking in through the backdoor after years of trying to alter the pre-existing economic model.

COVID-19 will leave a grim scar. It is the challenge of a generation. Following the Australian bushfires earlier this year, pictures emerged of plant-life growing once the flames had passed through – life returns. However, this Great Pause reveals that we might be able to change life for the better. We have the opportunity to create a similar legacy as that created in the wake of previous crises. There are many aspects of life we will want back to ‘normal’ as soon as possible, but there is also a ‘new normal’ which has emerged, not least in how our transport network operates. We might like to keep it.

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