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COVID-19 and the Future of Urban Policy and Planning

SHAUNA BRAIL

On March 23, 2020, the city of Toronto declared a state of emergency as the COVID-19 pandemic precipitated sudden and dramatic changes in urban life around the world. Initially, the city became eerily quiet. Public transit ridership fell by nearly 90 percent. Office occupancy in the downtown core fell even further, as those who could work from home were required to do so. Restaurants were closed for indoor and outdoor dining and open only for take-out. Schools from the nursery to the graduate level moved to online learning.

As the virus spread and mutated, it was clear that the most negative impacts were being experienced by the most vulnerable: low-income and racialized households living in crowded conditions; workers in sectors where in-person work is a necessity, such as health care and manufacturing; and people living in congregate settings, including nursing homes and homeless shelters. The city government—along with its counterparts at the provincial and national levels—adapted by introducing a range of policy, planning, and program interventions to address public health needs and provide support to manage the otherwise devastating economic and social effects of public health policies such as business closures. The city’s state of emergency lasted for 777 days, until May 9, 2022. In many ways, Toronto’s experience has been typical of cities around the world during the pandemic.

THE END OF CITIES?

At the onset of the pandemic, various pundits predicted that COVID-19 would mark the end of

cities as we knew them. In spring and summer 2020, news headlines in the *Guardian*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, and more heralded the end of big cities. In the spring of 2021, urban scholar Joel Kotkin wrote in an *American Affairs* essay that a new urban order was likely to emerge, predicting that the urban core could lose its dominance due to continued population dispersal alongside reduced emphasis on mass transit.

In one rebuttal to such predictions, comedian Jerry Seinfeld contributed an August 2020 *New York Times* opinion piece titled “So You Think New York Is ‘Dead’ (It’s Not).” Seinfeld suggested that at the heart of New York’s City’s greatness is an energy that comes from the people who live there, and although the city will change, its allure is certain to persist. In a similar vein, urban sociologist Sharon Zukin wrote about New York’s “special mantra,” reminding readers that the city has both an extensive history of surviving disasters and experience with rebuilding.

The death of cities has been predicted many times before. Previous pandemics, including the 1918 Spanish Flu, threatened but ultimately did not dampen the vibrancy of cities. Deep concerns over the future of cities arose as the adoption of private automobiles began to take hold in the 1920s; Henry Ford suggested that the “city is doomed.” In the post–World War II era, city-regions grew and spread across North America, with the construction of highways connecting newly built enclaves of suburban family housing. Many central cities, like Chicago, experienced years of declining population while their suburbs grew, but these cities did not die.

As high-speed Internet service proliferated beginning in the early 2000s, the premise that the rise of telework might lead to the decline of the office and the central business district was paraded

SHAUNA BRAIL is an associate professor at the Institute for Management & Innovation at the University of Toronto, Mississauga.

about in service of revived theories about the death of urban life. Yet as Michael Storper and Michael Manville wrote in a 2006 article in the journal *Urban Studies*, “Nowhere, even in America, did dense urban life come to an end; distance never died and the world never became a flat suburbanized plane.”

In March 2020, when so many of the world’s cities seemed to come to a standstill, as workplaces shuttered and streets went silent, the question arose yet again: Will COVID-19 mark the end of cities? The answer is a resounding “No.” An examination of a range of recovery metrics, from reductions in unemployment rates to increases in spending at brick-and-mortar retail locations, shows ongoing improvement.

At the same time, signals still point to ongoing challenges. A study led by urban planning scholar Karen Chapple found that downtowns in the largest North American cities are struggling to recover to pre-pandemic levels of activity; as of May 2022, places where lockdowns lasted longest and where workers rely most on public transit to get to their jobs continued to face the greatest hurdles to recovery.

As the pandemic has worn on (and on) over the course of more than two years, it is obvious that while cities will continue to be key centers of concentration for people, ideas, capital, and the movement of goods, they are also on the cusp of change. And we still do not know for certain which changes are temporary, and which will be permanent.

Although the pandemic will not mark the end of cities, it nevertheless marks an inflection point in urban life. The long-term impacts of COVID-19 on cities are certain to be complicated and nuanced, reflecting the complex nature of cities—and the wide and varied networks that they are part of.

GOODBYE, CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT?

To be sure, there are elements of urban change associated with COVID-19 that are markedly different from the past. Two metrics in particular illustrate the potential for enduring change: the continued rise of remote work, and the accompanying sharp reductions in public transit ridership. These two metrics stand out in 2022 as remaining lower than pre-pandemic levels, whereas others, such as employment, rents, and retail spending, have largely recovered. If left unaddressed, the

trends in remote work and transit use will have substantial negative effects on the future of cities.

Toronto-based commercial real estate firm Avison Young’s Vitality Index measures the return of workers to downtowns across North America’s 24 largest cities (using March 2, 2020, as a baseline), highlighting the proportion of workers returning to offices by city and by industry. By the week of May 23, 2022, in every city on the index, nearly one-third or more of office workers had not returned to offices on a daily basis. In Austin, Texas, approximately 4 out of every 10 downtown office workers had not returned; in New York and Boston, it was more than 5 of every 10; and in Miami, nearly 8 out of 10. A similar index published by workplace security firm Kastle Systems indicates that in ten benchmark US cities, 44 percent of regular office activity had resumed by June 2022.

Questions of whether, and to what extent, office workers will return to in-person office work present a range of policy challenges for cities. One of the most significant of these relates to the future sustainability of the central business district (CBD), a term that refers to the concentration of office activities in a city’s core. Older cities that grew to prominence as centers that coordinated markets and industrial activity typically had a core office zone.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, sociologists based at the University of Chicago conducted a range of studies examining the ways cities grew in the industrial era, noting the location, role, and form of the central business district around which the rest of the city was typically structured. The concept of concentrating key office activities in an urban core continues to influence contemporary plans for cities. Yet the pandemic may prove to be the final straw that disrupts the role of the CBD.

Cities are dynamic, and in recent times they have experienced difficult, transformative shifts. One such transition is the move away from an urban economy focused primarily on manufacturing and other industrial production, and toward a knowledge-based economy. The loss of manufacturing employment in cities connected to globalization and technological change precipitated years of high unemployment in some places and sectors. In the United States, cities in the Rust Belt—an area once characterized by a high reliance on manufacturing

*Will the rise of remote work
change the nature of the
downtown environment?*

employment—suffered as a result of the loss of such jobs in the second half of the twentieth century. For some places, longing for a revival of the industrial past stalled efforts to transition to post-industrial activities.

Once noxious industrial activities had left cities, however, opportunities arose for rebirth. Waterfronts were reoriented from serving industry to serving people. Abandoned and underutilized factory spaces became desirable sites for creative and cultural activities, for new industries like digital media, and sometimes for altogether new uses, including loft-style housing. Cities transformed spaces of production into spaces of consumption—examples include Toronto’s Distillery District and New York City’s Meatpacking District.

Some suggest that the current rise of remote work will change the role of the CBD forever, similar to the way that the loss of factory jobs changed the urban landscape in the past. My University of Toronto colleague Richard Florida calls CBDs places where people are “packed and stacked” for the purpose of work, a last stand of the industrial age that will become a fatality of the pandemic. Though evidence on pandemic recovery in cities remains tentative, it is not premature to consider the policy implications of massive shifts in the location of work and the role of the CBD as the city’s centrifugal force.

What makes this potential transition even more challenging is the fact that the CBD is not solely the location of concentrated employment in sectors such as legal, accounting, and financial services, media and communications, management consulting, tech firms, and more. The concentration of a sizable proportion of a city’s workforce in a central area is also served by massive investments in infrastructure, such as subway systems. The multibillion-dollar public investments needed to support transit systems, especially subways, typically rely on ridership revenues. If current trends continue and office work takes a radically different form in the post-pandemic period, or if ridership drops off by 20 to 30 percent a few days a week, entire transit systems could be thrown out of balance—a balance that was precarious even before the pandemic.

Uncertainty regarding how and whether a larger-scale return to work will unfold is already putting pressure on infrastructure planning for the

future. In New York City, there are questions about whether it still makes sense to invest tens of billions of dollars in a major project to add another rail tunnel under the Hudson River.

Similarly, a new subway line that opened in London in the spring of 2022 added 10 new stations in the center of the city, at a cost of 19 billion pounds. Like many expensive and complex infrastructure projects, the Elizabeth line, initially conceived in the 1980s, took decades to move from concept to completion. Construction took 13 years and experienced significant pandemic-related delays. When the line finally opened, some questioned whether commuting patterns still warranted urban transit investments of this magnitude.

Transit systems are not the only services that were designed for cities with concentrations of jobs and people in the city center. As office employment clustered in downtown areas, so, too, did restaurants, dry cleaners, gyms, and other ancillary services that rely on foot traffic. These businesses and services employ chefs, servers, hair stylists, cashiers, cleaners, and other staff. Remote work is not an option for those who work in a kitchen or a hair salon. These businesses and workers suffered heavy income losses during successive waves of the pandemic and work-from-home mandates.

With their concentrations of office towers, CBDs also represent a valuable source of property tax revenue for municipal governments. In some cities, special charges paid by property developers help pay for amenities and infrastructure including public art, parks, and affordable housing. In 2021, San Francisco lost \$400 million in tax revenue as a result of shifts in office occupancy and work. Reductions in property values and development activity will have severe repercussions for municipal finances.

Another justification for investment in the vibrancy of city centers is that dilapidated cities and urban spaces are very difficult to revive. As Jane Jacobs highlighted in her 1961 classic *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, having concentrations of people who pay attention to and care about what’s happening on the street is crucial for urban vitality. As they reevaluate approaches to recovery in the downtown core, cities will benefit from considering how to ensure that there are more “eyes on the street,” in Jacobs’ words.

The pandemic has led to renewed focus on the role of neighborhoods.

Iconic buildings and thriving business districts also contribute to a city's image and brand. This helps promote economic development and attract businesses to cities and city-regions. Recognizable city skylines are part and parcel of the attraction of place. If left unaddressed, declining activity in business districts stemming from pandemic-induced disruptions could ultimately lead to a cycle of disinvestment, reducing even the appeal of iconic skylines.

REORGANIZING DOWNTOWNS

If the CBD as we know it is indeed in the process of becoming a relic of the industrial age—or, more likely, it no longer represents a place to which office workers travel daily for the purpose of work—this does not have to equate with the demise of downtowns. But to manage uncertainty in light of the potential for transformation of the CBD and the city more broadly, proactive policy and planning are needed.

First, even if the role of the CBD as a place of office work appears destined to shift—though the degree of this shift continues to be uncertain—the importance of concentration will not necessarily decline. Firms will still be anchored in space; businesses and people will continue to be drawn to the urban core. Downtowns will survive these shifts by remaining hubs of cultural opportunities, central points for transit accessibility, and places where people want to gather, work, live, and meet.

For downtowns to meet the challenge of staying attractive, governments, firms, and other organizations will have to provide compelling reasons for people to still be tethered to cities. Despite the potential for remote work, in-person activities will continue to matter for most employers, at least some of the time. As of this writing, Big Five tech firms such as Amazon and Google are making efforts to encourage many workers to return to the office at least three days a week. Airbnb has embraced a work remotely “forever” stance. In announcing details of the plan in April 2022, however, the firm indicated that employees should be prepared for quarterly, weeklong, in-person meetings.

Observers should be asking questions about the meaning of “forever” in the language of corporations. It is too soon to confirm whether forever means for a year, a decade, the lifespan of a company, or something else. Employers that pay attention to the ongoing connections between increases in remote work and labor productivity, innovation, training and talent attraction, team-

building, culture, and communication are likely to shift their policies as conditions change.

With potentially fewer people working downtown on a daily basis, city planners will have to consider how to preserve downtown employment space while improving quality-of-life features in downtowns. As they pursue pandemic recovery, cities may find they need to upgrade CBDs with the addition of urban neighborhood-style amenities, such as pedestrian-oriented streetscapes. Within office buildings, greater attention is being paid to what's referred to as the “amenitized office,” one that includes spaces for socializing, exercising, and relaxing. Evidence on office occupancy rates shows that buildings featuring such extensive amenities draw higher demand relative to other buildings.

Retrofitting buildings is another tactic that may help to usher in a new era for the CBD. This might mean converting office buildings to housing, an expensive but not unheard-of approach that has been proposed as a means of tethering people to downtowns while addressing housing supply and affordability issues in cities.

Downtowns, of course, are more than just offices; they are frequently centers of government, hospitals and universities, sports stadiums and theaters. Even with fewer office workers coming in every day, they will continue to be places where people gather to carry out the business of government, to conduct innovative research and treat patients, and to train the next generation of physicians, scientists, designers, policymakers, and more.

Even as many office workers have been reluctant to return to in-person work, cities have continued to thrive during the pandemic as places to celebrate and to protest. Although a city cannot survive on festivals and parades alone, the fact that these activities continue to bring large numbers of people to downtowns, often by transit, provides a spark of relief. For instance, in June 2022, the Bay Area Rapid Transit agency tweeted all day about ridership returns (and routing suggestions) during a parade in San Francisco in honor of the Golden State Warriors' National Basketball Association championship.

Downtowns can continue to be places where people want to be together, even if they don't want to be in the office. Banking chief executives observed this in the summer of 2021 in New York City and tried to enforce a return to the office, arguing that if people could gather in restaurants,

they could also resume in-person work. This approach did not work. In the face-off between talent and Wall Street's office towers, talent won and continued to work remotely.

THE 15-MINUTE CITY

In all these ways, cities continue to pursue pandemic recovery efforts that will maximize existing urban assets in the downtown core while promoting resilience, adaptability, and vibrancy. A number of broader-scale approaches are being experimented with and debated.

The presence of a number of smaller office districts spread throughout a city and city-region may provide a cushion for dealing with the economic effects associated with events such as a pandemic. This type of "polycentric" urban form involves the dispersal of activities, including investment, jobs, and commuting, across a large area. Los Angeles is one well-known example of a city featuring a polycentric form, with multiple centers spread across an extensive landscape. The pandemic has heightened interest in whether polycentricity provides a buffer to enable greater distancing while offering better connections between residential and work locations, reducing congestion and commutes. There is no simple solution, however. While Los Angeles represents a model of polycentricity, it also suffers from sprawl—with traffic congestion, smog, and higher-than-average commute times.

The experience of the pandemic has also led to renewed focus on the role of neighborhoods and the networks of social interaction that they can provide in times of mobility restrictions, such as lockdowns. There is growing discussion among city-builders about whether to focus resources on the "15-minute city" concept. A 15-minute city is a moderately dense, mixed-use neighborhood that includes a range of options for housing, work, socializing, consumption, and recreation. The idea is that creating nodes of activity in relatively small, condensed areas will facilitate easier mobility, minimize travel times, and improve quality of life.

The notion of concentrating urban life at the neighborhood level is not new, but it has regained appeal in connection with the pandemic as well as the climate crisis. In Paris, efforts are underway, led by Mayor Anne Hidalgo, to focus investment and resources on creating 15-minute cities throughout the capital. But questions remain about the suitability of this model for restructuring the downtown core.

Limitations to the 15-minute city ideal include the difficulty of managing incompatible land uses. One instance of this is the increase in demand for warehousing space and logistics centers as well as the workers to pick, pack, and deliver goods. While warehouses and smaller "dark stores" used for fulfilling online orders need to be close to customers to meet rapid delivery expectations, they do not tend to fit well in neighborhoods oriented to the pedestrian scale. There are also challenges in ensuring that the 15-minute city results in vibrant neighborhoods that provide housing for people from a range of income groups, including lower-income households.

Another series of changes to urban form that was both precipitated and accelerated by the pandemic relates to shifting demand for public space. From parks and plazas to sidewalks and streets, public spaces have been subjected to new pressures during the pandemic. Given the rising demand for safe places to gather and interact outdoors, parks have never been more popular.

Cities have responded with efforts to provide residents with access to green space and recreational resources, such as fire pit rentals and outdoor barbecuing sites. An emphasis on outdoor activities also leads to greater demand for shade in warmer temperatures, access to public bathrooms and drinking water, and waste disposal.

Programs that enable outdoor dining on streets and in public plazas are credited with helping to salvage the businesses of independent restaurants. In downtowns, both inside and outside CBDs, the provision of public spaces where people actually want to gather, for a range of purposes, is a key component of ensuring that cities remain vibrant and desirable places.

HOW GOVERNMENTS CAN CHANGE

Early in the pandemic, observers noted a wide-ranging turn toward institutions—especially governments. Governments have played a crucial role in managing policy responses to COVID-19, from securing vaccine supplies to providing income support and relaxing regulations on sidewalk use. All this has made the role of government more visible.

City officials have convened groups of leaders from government, industry, and civil society to encourage a return to the office in an attempt to increase activity in the urban core. Efforts to support small businesses by providing property tax relief and access to outdoor street spaces for

commercial uses are common. The return of street festivals, concerts, and conferences helps to bring visitors downtown.

Programs designed to drive consumption in such ways do matter for keeping cities vibrant. But so, too, do efforts geared toward providing social support. At the outset of the pandemic, when little was known about how COVID-19 was transmitted, some observers noted the imperative of caring for the most vulnerable. In a March 31, 2020, address regarding the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic, United Nations Secretary General António Guterres noted that in an interconnected world, “we are only as strong as the weakest.” This sentiment applies at a global scale, and locally too. A city, in order to function, must care for both the vulnerable and the privileged. The cities that thrive through ongoing uncertainty in the future will be those that prioritize compassion and care.

It is a truism that what gets measured, gets done. Governments have been instrumental in collecting data during the pandemic to better understand the implications of policy measures and waves of infection. At a local level, data on building permit applications, office occupancy and vacancy rates, and transit use helps assess whether and how recovery is proceeding. Data is also an enabler of urban innovation. For instance, data collected from cell phones and key fobs can help to monitor the return to work in the CBD by industry, day of the week, and location. Such data can be used to forecast ongoing shifts in the revival of activity in CBDs, and to develop and adapt policies and funding streams in the meantime.

Finally, local governments can act as role models to encourage a resumption of in-person work. In some cities, coalitions of transit agencies, boards of trade, and governments have collaborated on initiatives to encourage downtown-based firms and white-collar workers, including those in the public sector, to return to the office.

Yet the pleas of mayors, civic leaders, and CEOs have been minimally successful, at best, in encouraging a return to downtown offices. This is especially the case in large cities, where the level of remote work remains higher than in smaller places where workers predominantly commute by car. Recognizing that the challenge of returning downtowns to their pre-pandemic vibrancy is harder than anticipated, mayors in cities such as New

York, San Francisco, and Toronto have asked coalitions and expert panels to develop strategic advice on fostering long-term recovery.

FROM THE LOCAL TO THE GLOBAL

COVID-19 was initially understood to be the cause of a global public health crisis; more than two years on, it is widely recognized that the pandemic has had cascading impacts across society. As waves of uncertainty linger, we know that cities will continue to feel the effects. The characteristics that made cities strong in the past, such as CBDs with large concentrations of office workers, may not remain strengths going forward. There is a need for ongoing analysis, adaptation, and experimentation. This is not a new task for cities, but the current challenge may be the most difficult one yet.

Both the global networks of which cities are a part, and the local contexts in which they operate, will continue to matter. And as the role of the CBD changes, its relationship with the larger metropolitan region will matter even more. This is likely to necessitate further intragovernmental col-

laboration and coordination—practices with which many places have gained greater experience over the course of the pandemic.

Here in Toronto, pandemic recovery ebbs and flows. Though downtown office workers have been slow to come back, street festivals returned this past summer, restaurants are bustling, transit ridership is rising, and questions about challenges facing the city beyond the pandemic—such as housing affordability—have taken center stage. The city’s experience of the pandemic to date has been reflective of the ways in which the health crisis has impacted global cities around the world—notably the uneven, inequitable distribution of viral transmission, job loss and precarity, and the subsequent unevenness of recovery.

Reviving Toronto and other cities will require rethinking patterns of urban development, the interconnectedness of the urban labor force and business sectors, with new emphasis on the city as an amenity-focused destination, and reliance on formal institutions. Most importantly, this will involve the role of governments, at all levels, and their ability to use policy levers to foster recovery and prosperity—acknowledging the need for innovation and adaptation as cities adjust. ■

Public spaces have been subjected to new pressures.
