



WNY APA EDITORIAL BOARD

Editorial Board Welcome

Written By: George McKibbin

In our first editorial entitled “Planning During and After the Age of COVID-19” we addressed how planners might respond to the pandemic. In this second editorial, we explore how planners can reconceive and recreate public open spaces as one means of containing the virus’ spread.

As we drafted this editorial, we drew upon research reported in the Journal of the American Planning Association and presentations by Dr. James Sallis, Ken Greenberg and Sari Liem at an Ontario Professional Planners Institute (OPPI) Friday Forum Webinar on July 3rd 2020. I moderated that session and was able to discuss their presentations and review their background research in depth. OPPI graciously made that Webinar available to APA members in the Upstate Chapter and the Western New York Section.

The Webinar represents the second cross border event the Section has organized in which members of the Upstate Chapter and OPPI participated together.

Your editorial team took all that information and drafted the second editorial.

Special thanks go to Ann McKibbin, McMaster University, and John Forester, Cornell University, both of whom reviewed the article and provided comments. We also thank OPPI for the making the Friday Forum Webinar available to New York State APA Members! Last, a special thanks goes to Dr. James Sallis who graciously offered us his permission to publish the infographic demonstrating “How activity friendly cities can benefit non-communicable and infectious diseases.”

We hope you find this editorial stimulating and helpful and welcome any comments and suggestions for future editorials you may have!

How Planners Can Help to Contain the Spread of COVID-19: Creating Safe Public Space

Written By: George McKibbin

Our local paper, the Welland Tribune (Thursday, July 30), observes Niagara Region's COVID-19 case load is increasing. We are reaching levels not experienced since early June. We just moved to Stage 3 of Ontario's re-opening plan. The day before, 40 new cases were reported: 23 of which are Niagara Falls related, perhaps to Clifton Hill, a popular recreation area. Lake Erie beaches are also crowded this hot summer. Dr. Deborah Birx and Dr. Anthony Fauci report COVID-19 spread in the United States entered a new phase: widespread outbreaks are occurring in rural as well as urban areas throughout the States (Washington Post, August 3rd). Our borders remain closed and will be closed for the foreseeable future.

In his striking book, Loss and Changeⁱ, Peter Marris observes the COVID-19 challenges we face involve grief and loss of meaning. Grief occurs when social relationships and their attendant meaning are disrupted. Predictable spaces of social encounters, spontaneous or planned, no longer exist. To recover, we need time to process our grief by reconstructing lost meaning respectfully in new and needed and as yet uncreated spaces. Recovery is beginning but we struggle. Planners can help by designing spaces amenable to recovery of lost relationships and meaning in this perilous time.

COVID-19 stresses produce four categories of grief and lost meaning. First there are changes from which no course of action exists to prevent loss of relationship: quarantining and the hospitalization and death of a family member from COVID-19. A second class involves changes where the cause can't be easily identified: the disruption of global corporate resource supply chains and retail functions we need for supplies to survive. A third class involves the loss of predictable attachments where no action is capable of restoring meaning: the furloughing of religious gatherings, schools, community meetings and the loss of use of public and private parks. Last, changes where the relationship's meaning is lost but not the relationship itself: I still have my job/business and my health and family, but what am I to do?ⁱⁱ

Some changes we experience don't challenge meaning. For example, the changes we make as we mature, choose a profession or partners, and raise a family. Recovery from a broken arm won't challenge personal meaning. Adoption of new technology may not challenge collective meaning: for example, moving to digital meeting technology like ZOOM and e-commerce involving portal to portal delivery. Except where these changes overlap our COVID-19 experience we can set these types of changes aside for the moment.

There may be no best strategy to stop COVID-19 spread short of a vaccine. Evolving treatment strategies and a vaccine development hold promise but require time and expensive research. But less well understood is how effective vaccines will be and for how long? Canadian health officials suggest COVID-19 challenges may remain long after vaccines are available.

Meanwhile, we experience COVID-19 disruptions in each change category discussed aboveⁱⁱⁱ. COVID-19 is an infectious disease, but with the application of science and best practices its spread can be limited by applying social distancing, quarantines, capacity limits, spacing requirements and contact tracing.

But implementation of these measures presents us with a mystery. How and where do I, my family and my community meet one another safely? The challenge immerses us. Its dimensions are as

variable as the personalities involved.

Institutions, public and private, apply science and its general specifications for social contact to address COVID-19 abstractly. But how are we to encounter each other face to face “in a world governed by technics”?^{iv} This lost spontaneity challenges our practical ability to be compassionate and empathetic. What does it mean to be a family, a community in this time of COVID-19?

Marris wrote, “*Any serious bereavement impairs the ability to attach collective meaning to events and spaces, and hence the ability to learn how to survive.*”^v In this time of COVID-19, our planning challenge involves finding new ways to encounter each other in the spaces we use and share safely. Grief arises when our old ways of meeting are no longer appropriate or possible. The resulting desolation is profound: we feel disorganized, bewildered, lost! Unattended to, this desolation escalates into rudeness, blame, racism, opioid and substance abuse, and spousal abuse, incidents of all of which are rising in both of our countries.

We need safe places where we encounter each other and self-identify as individuals, families, and communities. These encounters make living special and provide meaning. So “*recovery from grief depends on restoring a sense that the lost attachment can still give meaning to the present, not in finding a substitute.*”^{vi} ZOOM may be an important part of our software future, but virtual meetings don’t replace face to face encounters entirely.

We need to take the meaning we received from encounters in spaces before COVID-19 and design a full range of safe spaces for meeting and encounter to recover those experiences. With time, we may move beyond that former space and meaning, but that is a matter for time’s passage and the conscious decisions of all users. This spatial redesign will enable us to reformulate our purposes in ways that will be emotional, personal and self-directed, too. Once undertaken we can move on.

Collective change can involve conflict: witness the reactions to face masks requirements. We need to provide time and the opportunity for individuals to act out in safe forums, not in our streets and in stores. These forums and processes require time, respect and patience. We need to enable “*the realization of the essential continuity in the structure of meaning*”^{vii} in this difficult time. If we do not, some will strive without success to return to a lost, and now unsafe past; discriminate and blame others; and become narcissistic.

In the midst of this confusion and disorientation community planners are also participants in the COVID-19 event: each of us and our profession experiences loss of meaning and requires silence and patient work to process our attendant grief even as we address that of the communities we serve. As we think of how we help our communities, remember you need space to process it all.

In the first edition of this Editorial, we discussed the importance of setting rules for the deliberative conversations we engage in as planners in our communities:

1. Participants need to be collegial in all their discussions;
2. All the applicable sciences should be employed;
3. Evidence based decision making should be adhered to when providing advice; and
4. All points of view among the participants need to be listened to during discussions and when providing advice.

We must remember: The virus doesn't discriminate! But we need on-going enquiry and learning shaped by leadership combined with scientific expertise and social solidarity^{viii}!

What can land use planners constructively do to help? How might we mobilize land use to better serve our communities in this difficult time?

Here is an illustration. The entrances to the Seaway Mall in Welland, Niagara Region, notify all who enter that "mall walking" is prohibited. Before the pandemic, the elderly and idle and shoppers and employees walked for exercise and socialized in the mall corridors while using the food court, library and stores together with shoppers many of whom met together and engaged in vibrant conversation.

This mall houses many commercial and office spaces. A cinema, municipal library, medical services, commercial day care and an outdoor seasonal farmers market round out the mall's private and public functions. Extensive parking surrounds the complex together with a municipal transit stop. Big box stores (Staples) co-exit separately with associated parking that services all. Some shops closed due to COVID-19. Those which remain open are staffed nervously. Some outlets in the food court are open for take-out: seating has been removed.

Less obvious are pension fund and insurance policy investments and their banks and managers who make the mall retail function possible^{ix}. Even less obviously, commercial property value world-wide, hotels, shops, offices and warehouses quadrupled since 2000, and institutional investors (pension funds and insurance companies) hold a third of that value.

But COVID 19 upends this in two ways:

1. Tenants may simply stop paying rent and limit investor's ability to make mortgage payments; and
2. Investment trends towards warehouses and e-commerce accelerate, further devaluing commercial property^x.

Mall stores adapted with a mix of social distancing, capacity limits, the use of masks, and physical re-organization for curbside pickup depending upon the Provincial re-opening stage that applies. Building operators use more stringent air conditioning filter standards together with greater air circulation from without and within^{xi}.

But other uses are hard pressed and some are failing: hotels, restaurants and smaller owner-occupied shops. Half of America's independent restaurants may go under while a third of America's 1,100 malls may be demolished. When public and private financial supports end, will the Mall survive?

Jeffrey Hardwick's biography reports that Victor Gruen, "Mall Maker... , Architect of an American Dream" envisioned America's shopping malls as recapturing the nostalgia he felt as a child growing up, with rich experiences of walking and frequenting Vienna's streets, before his family fled the Nazis. Today, supply chain changes transform commercial functions and space requirements, but the experience of walking the Mall and encountering people still undergirds the Mall experience.

Planners cannot address COVID 19's land use effects without grappling with the lost spaces within which we encountered each other. For the moment, I suggest we set aside the vast changes taking place within institutional supply changes and address recovering this space first.

The lost social space encompassing the Seaway Mall are multiple and varied depending on the

categories of public and private space encountered in the complex. Kenneth Frampton differentiates public spaces into public, semi-public, private and service space^{xii} where semi-public includes the functional space where customers and clients view the wares, negotiate their prices and have their needs met, or not as the case may be.

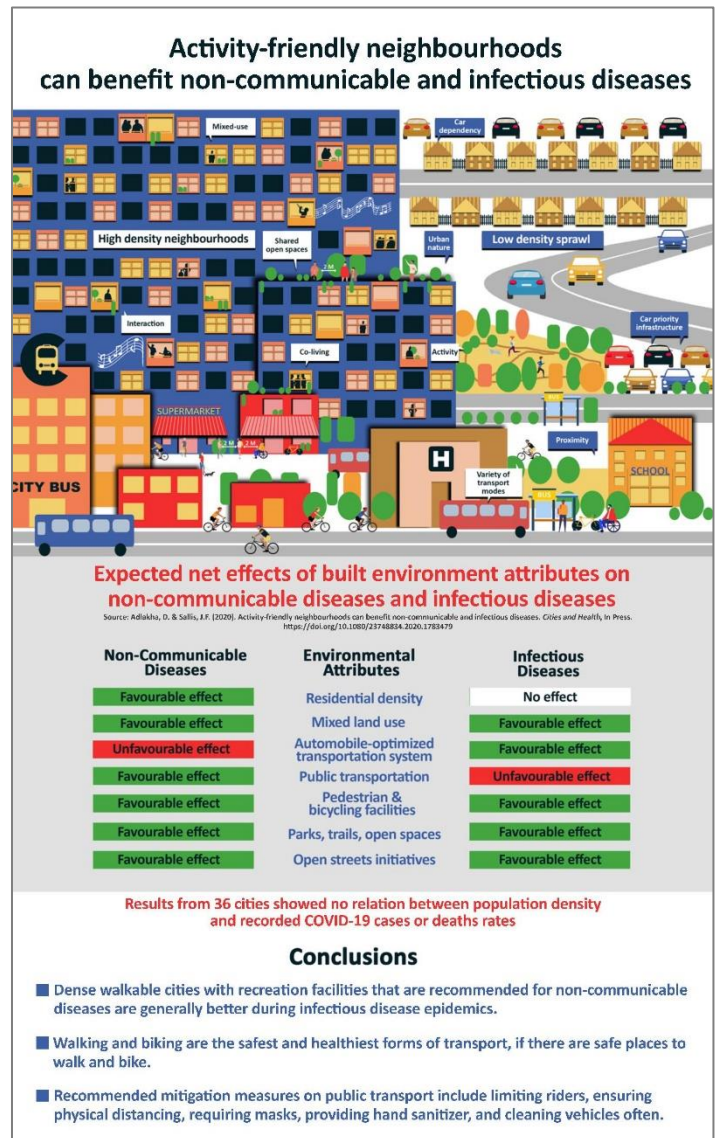
Private Mall spaces include spaces where personal nurture needs are met. For example, consider the animal shelter where lost pets are reconnected to new families and homes, and the library. Semi-public space is space restricted to employee access: where sales displays and supplies are organized, stored or office space, where meals are cooked and where the service needs to clients are met: banks and dental offices.

Service areas serve the building itself: loading docks, the parking lot and municipal bus station; and those areas that minister to corporeal needs: the washrooms, coatrooms etc. The indoor mall corridors and outdoor sidewalks act as public spaces linking the stores and offices.

In the pandemic, economic changes compound the collective recovery of lost encounters within these various public spaces^{xiii}. We can't walk the mall for physical exercise needed. Employees can't get the hours or generate the sales needed to support their families, their businesses and make rent and mortgage payments. We can't meet safely with colleagues and friends with whom we work or serve or have coffee and lunch or use a public washroom.

Planners need to help redesign and replace these lost spaces within which social encounters occur safely and people can interact:

- a. We need to recapture the mall experience either in place or in different settings. We can design public spaces that enable people to socialize while maintaining social distancing. That may involve open air shopping and physical activity in streets which are either closed or with some lanes closed to vehicular traffic for some or all of the day.
- b. A system of street and/or lane closures can enable cycling and walking corridors to encourage physical activity throughout and acknowledge social recognition and encounters between walkers, cyclists and bystanders. Even if that recognition is limited to a wave, or hello in passing or how are you from across the street, it enables people to wish each other well and to stop to reconnect at safe distances during this difficult time.
- c. In OPPI's Webinar on "Planning for a New Normal: COVID-19 Impacts on Community Building, Intensification and Public Health"^{xiv}, Ken Greenberg described how Calgary is providing



temporary sidewalk widening to help physical distancing. Similarly, he described how Winnipeg is limiting vehicular traffic in designated areas to provide for expanded cycling and active transportation routes. We need to experiment in these techniques to better provide opportunities for interaction.

- d. In OPPI's Webinar, Dr. James Sallis^{xv} observed physical activity benefits where chronic and infectious diseases are many and varied. Of importance for this pandemic, specifically, walking "improves immune function and decreases inflammation; reduces non-communicable diseases that place people at higher risk to COVID-19; reduces psychological stress; rebalances stress hormonal cortisol which helps improve immune function and inflammation; improves lung function; and improved response to vaccines, when one is made available."
- e. Staying at home is likely counterproductive in the long term where COVID-19 is concerned unless one is under quarantine. We need to provide constructive opportunities for physical activity in community shared space.
- f. Dr. Sallis also reported on research suggesting that there is no correlation between urban population density and COVID-19 infections and deaths. Please see the attached image Dr. Sallis helped produce for further explanation of this and other observations between built environment attributes and infectious and non-communicable diseases.
- g. It may be productive to begin to reconsider family clusters to include larger clusters of unrelated persons who provide each other supports like child care, cleaning, grocery shopping, and teaching so as to enlarge support available to single parent families and individuals living alone, elderly or otherwise.
- h. Overcrowded and dense communities are not the same thing (see Jane Jacob's definition^{xvi}). Overcrowding occurs when too many people occupy the same space. We can and do have densely populated urban areas which are not overcrowded. But Homeless populations are too often in overcrowded communities and will require immediate and more directed assistance than the larger population doesn't require.
- i. Shima Hamadi, Sadegh Sabouri and Reid Ewing^{xvii} found in their research on density and COVID-19 that connectivity matters more than density where infections and loss of life are concerned. In OPPI's Webinar both Ken Greenberg and Sari Liem stressed the importance of land use diversity that enables family and community living to safely occur in closely knit and diverse neighbourhoods with an abundance of public open space and which minimize the need to travel to different communities.

ⁱ Peter Marris, *Loss and Change*, Revised Edition, Routledge and Kegan Paul, plc, 1986.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, Marris, 1986, page 124.

ⁱⁱⁱ Joseph Rykwert, *Remembering Places: A Memoir*, Routledge Press, 2017, page 156.

^{iv} *Ibid*, Joseph Rykwert, 2017, page 156.

^v *Ibid*, Marris, 1986, page 149.

^{vi} *Ibid*, Marris, 1986, page 149.

^{vii} *Ibid*, Marris, 1986, page 156.

^{viii} Forester, John., George McKibbon., *Beyond Blame: leadership, collaboration and compassion in the time of COVID-19*, awaiting publication in the *Journal of Socio-Ecological Practice Research*, Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd., 2020

^{ix} *The Economist*, "Commercial Property, Like a Ton of Bricks", page 57, June 27th 2020.

^x "IBID, *The Economist*, Page 57, June 27th 2020.

^{xi} Wall Street Journal article carried in the Welland Tribune Saturday, June 11th, 2020.

^{xii} Frampton, Kenneth., *A Genealogy of Modern Architecture: Comparative Critical Analysis of Built Form*, Lars Muller Publishers, Zurich, Switzerland, 2015/16, page 31

^{xiii} *Ibid*, Marris, 1986, page 148

^{xiv} Greenberg, Ken, "Design for Resiliency in Post-Pandemic Age, Powerpoint presentation at OPPI's webinar "Planning for a New Normal – COVID-19 Impacts on Community Building, Intensification and Public Health, OPPI Forum Friday Webinar – July 3, 2020.

^{xv} Deepti Adlakha, James F. Sallis, « Activity-friendly neighbourhoods can benefit non-communicable and infectious diseases, in *Cities and Health*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23748834.2020.1783479>

^{xvi} This statement comes from Jane Jacob's classic, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, page 268. It reads "This confusion between high densities and overcrowding, which I will go into briefly because it so much interferes with understanding the role of densities, is another one of the obfuscations we have inherited from Garden City planning. The Garden City planners and their disciplines looked at slums which had both many dwelling units on the land (high densities) and too many people within individual dwellings (overcrowding), and failed to make any distinction between the fact of overcrowded rooms and the entirely different fact of densely built up land. They hated both equally, in any case, and coupled them like ham and eggs, so that to this day housers and planners pop out of the phrase as if it were one word, "highdensityovercrowding"."

^{xvii} Hamidi, Shima, Sadegh Sabouri, and Reid Ewing., "Does Density Aggravate the COVID-19 Pandemic?", in the *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 2020. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01944363.2020.1777891>

John Forester (Cornell University) and Ann McKibbon (McMaster University) reviewed and provided very helpful comments on drafts of this editorial. I am very grateful for their insights! Thank you!