Space and place dynamics

Urban environments are undergoing substantial change, driven by societal, economic, environmental and technological developments. This is leading to re-imagining, and actual reconstruction, of urban spaces and places. Non-urban areas are being reshaped too, with some of the developments creating, or, improving access to recreational areas and activities.

What we're seeing

The pandemic's influence

The pandemic stimulated widespread re-evaluations of where, and how, people want to live and work. The very high cost of living is also influencing peoples' decisions about where to live. Reconnecting with natural environments and strengthening local social connections are becoming important drivers. The economic viability of many central city businesses and properties have also been severely tested through lockdowns, the rise in working from home, as well as increased online shopping. This is also prompting reassessments of urban planning.

The 15 minute city's moment?

The pandemic has given momentum to the concept of the 15 minute city, where people are within a 15 minute walk or bike ride of essential services. Paris and other cities are promoting this.[1] However, critics point out that this can suit those able to work from home but not others, and may lead to further gentrification.[2]

Regenerative cities

The Netherlands is actively pursuing development of regenerative cities, where green spaces and farmland are easily accessible to everyone.[3] Some cities are also adopting a circular economy strategy to reduce waste and improve sustainability. In NZ, restoring native biodiversity is becoming an important urban strategy in some cities.[4]

Sponge cities

Climate change impacts are expected to lead to managed retreats from some coastal areas, and restrictions on some new developments. This is likely to be an ongoing source of tension and conflict, between councils, communities, and developers. Overseas, some cities are redesigning their infrastructure so that they can better manage increasing rainfall or rising tides. These "sponge cities" rethink urban design to work with rather than resist nature.[5]

Rural revitalisation?

The expanding system of cycle and walking trails are leading to some rural revitalisation. However, they also bring added pressures, through not having the funding to support the infrastructure to meet the new demands.[6] More flexible working conditions, and high housing costs, may also lead to renewed growth in some rural regions.

Resistance to change remains

In 2017 the NZ Productivity Commission concluded that the urban planning system was failing to cope with diverse demands.[7] Ongoing disputes about water infrastructure, urban densification, cycleways, and bus lanes, indicate that the system still needs to change. Poor urban planning and coordination isn't just a local problem. Frustrations about slow or inequitable processes has led to "tactical urbanism'. This is where citizens (ands sometimes councils) create bike lanes, small parks, or gardens to illustrate the benefits and workability of new community-focused ideas.[8]

Potential implications

Create
- **More sustainable and resilient urban environments**
- **Improved community social connectivity and resilience**

Relate
- **Stronger connections to the local environment**

Consume
- **Changing patterns of consumption**
- **Need for increased investment in rural regions**

Degrade
- **Traditional approaches to urban planning and commercial activities disrupted**
- **Central city retail businesses become less viable in their current form**

Connect
- **More shared multifunctional community facilities for sport and cultural activities**
- **New community connections and dynamics emerge**

Define
- **The characteristics that make a city a desirable place to live and work**

More information (links)

[1] The 15 minute city
[2] What the city of the future borrows from the past
[3] What will it take to make the city regenerative?
[4] Restoring indigenous nature in urban environments
[5] China turns cities into sponges to stop flooding
[6] The pros and cons of the Te Araroa Trail
[7] Better urban planning
[8] Tactical urbanist's guide