

COVID-19 and urban informality: Exploring the implications of the pandemic for the politics of planning and inequality

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted a major contradiction in contemporary urban planning. This is the relationship between the entrepreneurial modes of urban politics that shape contemporary planning practice and the interrelated dynamics of economic precarity and informalisation of low-income communities that exacerbate contagion, and therefore enable pandemic spread. Through a review of literature on the urban dimensions of COVID-19, and on the historical relationship between pandemics and urban planning, we develop a framework for analysing the debates that are emerging around planning approaches to addressing contemporary pandemic risk in low-income, informalised communities. We argue that post-pandemic debates about urban planning responses are likely to take shape around three discourses that have framed approaches to addressing informalised communities under entrepreneurial urbanism – a revanchist approach based on territorial stigmatisation of spaces of the poor, an incrementalist approach premised on addressing the most immediate drivers of contagion, and a reformist approach that seeks to address the structural conditions that have produced economic precarity and shelter informality. We further argue that any effort to assess the political outfall of the COVID-19 pandemic in a given context needs to take an inter-scalar approach, analysing how debates over informality take shape at the urban and national scales.

Keywords

Built environment, COVID-19, health, inequality, informality

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摘要

新冠疫情凸显了当代城市规划中的一个主要矛盾。即影响当代规划实践的城市政治创业模式与经济不稳定和低收入社区非正规化这些相互关联因素之间的矛盾，这些因素加剧了传染，从而使流行病蔓延。通过研究有关新冠城市层面的文献，以及关于流行病与城市规划之间历史关系的文献，我们制定了一个框架来分析关于某些规划方案的争论，这些规划方案旨在解决低收入、非正规社区中的当代流行病风险。我们认为，在后疫情时代，关于城市规划响应的争论可能会围绕三种话语形式产生，这些话语构成了在创业型城市化下，应对非正规社区的方法。这些方法包括：复仇主义方法，该方法基于对穷人空间的领土污名化；渐进主义方法，此方法基于导致传染病发生的最直接因素的解决；以及改革主义方法，该方法寻求解决导致经济不稳定和住房非正规性的结构性条件。我们进一步指出，任何评估在特定背景下新冠疫情的政治争论的研究，都需要采取跨标量的方法，分析关于非正规性的争论是如何在城市和国家范围内形成的。

关键词

建筑环境、新冠肺炎、健康、不平等、非正规性

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The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the contradictory politics of informality in contemporary cities. While urban planning and policy research has focused attention on the relationship between the density of cities and the transmission of the disease (see for example Carozzi et al., 2020; Hamidi et al., 2020), it is quite clear that COVID-19's spread in the hardest hit communities has reflected a more complex, multivariate relationship between contagion, economic precarity and the dynamics of informalisation and limits to access to services in low-income settlements. Across many contexts, low-income urbanites, forced by the immediate threats of hunger, eviction, job loss, and the loss of access to essential infrastructure and services, have exposed themselves to infection in their roles as 'essential workers'. They have returned home to crowded and substandard housing in which it is often impossible to maintain physical distance, where their legal and political marginality leaves them with inadequate access to health care, and where ventilation and sanitation often do not meet regulatory standards (RHJ

Editorial Collective, 2020). These intersections of housing marginality and socio-economic precarity help explain the threat of COVID-19 contagion in both the Global South (e.g. the widely cited case of Dharavi in Mumbai) and the Global North (e.g. the early high contagion spots of Chelsea, Massachusetts and Corona and North Corona in New York City) (Correal et al., 2020; García, 2020; Yashoda, 2020). This remains the case even as infection rates have subsided, and many countries have lifted safety measures and targeted regulations. Scholars of urban planning and policy need to shift some attention from the anxious defences of cities and of planning that have animated empirical efforts to understand the role of density, and from self-congratulatory arguments for the 'reinvention' of cities in the post-pandemic era (see for example the articles and blogs collected at Planetizen, 2022). The severe inequities of COVID-19's impacts demand a careful, research-based assessment of the relationship between the political economy of urban planning, the reproduction of conditions of urban

marginality, and the concentration of severe consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in precarious and informalised settlements where structural hierarchies and systemic exclusions converge.

This paper develops a framework of analysis for addressing the questions: How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the politics of urban informality? And how might the political contestations over the relationship between informality and COVID-19 contagion shape planning responses? We build this framework by bringing three literatures that elucidate different aspects of these questions into conversation with each other. We first contextualise our understanding of the politics of informality through a brief review of the literature on the state's role in producing inequality in the contemporary conditions of economic globalisation and fiscal austerity that shape urban politics in many contexts. Second, we seek insight on the relationship between pandemics and this politics of urban informality through a review of the literature on the equity implications of historical planning responses to pandemics and other societal risks. Finally, we review the nascent literature on the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic more specifically for the politics of informality and urban poverty.

Our literature review on this last topic emerged from a broad scan of journal articles that specifically address the contestations and debates over the political and legal status of low-income urban residents that have emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic. While we sought to capture the insights of these studies at a point in time, we must also acknowledge that this literature is rapidly evolving and changing. We further draw on examples documented through primary sources such as reports, government documents, newsletters and organisation websites, to illustrate the insights from this literature review. While we draw examples from a diverse set of contexts, this review of

primary sources is necessarily more selective, and focuses somewhat more strongly on cases that the co-authors are most familiar with from our own previous research on informality and urban poverty. We do not seek to engage in a comprehensive review of the dynamic scholarship on the socio-economic dimensions of the COVID-19 pandemic, but rather focus on the question of how the pandemic is impacting political contestations that emerge around how informality is defined, policed and governed.

Our central argument is that the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the paradoxes inherent in what we refer to, following Harvey (1989), as the entrepreneurial city model of managing informality. This model, which has taken shape in post-1980s contexts of austerity and market-oriented governance, focuses on ensuring the state's flexibility in managing informalised settlements in ways that maximise prospects for economic growth and corporate capital accumulation. Under such regimes, informalised settlements have found themselves alternately valorised as sites of entrepreneurialism (and the reproduction of cheap labour), and vilified as obstacles to the developmental and aesthetic aspirations of urban governments. They have consequently often been managed alternately through tenuous accommodation, and through policy pushes for dispossession and displacement, as dictated by the vagaries of land markets and infrastructure plans. We argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the complicity of this model in the economic and political precarity that exacerbates pandemic risk and has animated a debate about the state's stance towards informalised settlements.

We further argue that the entrepreneurial city model has given shape to three distinct discourses in public and political debates over informality, each very much in play in debates over COVID-19's impacts. The first frames informalised settlements through the

lens of what Wacquant (2007) has referred to as territorial stigmatisation, or the process through which people become 'stained' by the symbolic denigration of place superimposed onto extant stigma (e.g. poverty, class position, ethnicity) attached to residents. Territorial stigmatisation has in many instances shaped discourses which have focused on low-income communities as epicentres of contagion. The second, in contrast, is premised on a recognition of the important role of informalised settlements in the urban economy, and is deployed to recommend a reformist approach. The third response, emerging from within settlements of the urban poor, seeks to institutionalise citizenship and rights to urban space through community-based strategies of self-enumeration, organising, political agitation, and self-help, in what Appadurai (2001) has characterised as an aspirational model of 'deep democracy'. The politics produced through the debate between these three framings, we argue, will ultimately shape state responses to the intersection of planning, informality and pandemic risk that has become apparent with COVID-19. It will shape whether states enact revanchist policies that expunge the poor from urban spaces or engage in incremental reform to address the most immediate contagion threats, or whether instead they seek to more systematically address the underlying issues of economic and political precarity that have fuelled COVID-19's emergence and spread.

In the pages that follow, we review literature unpacking the historical relationship between pandemics and the field of urban planning. We then examine recent studies and media accounts to explore the contemporary construct of informality as it relates to pandemic risk. Finally, we discuss how debates about the COVID-19 pandemic will reshape state stances towards informality through an interaction of political dynamics across the urban and national scales.

Pandemics, planning and informality: A brief literature review

Urban theorists have increasingly understood informality not as an unintended externality of urban growth, but rather as a state strategy of selective application of regulations and laws intended to maintain state control over the production of urban space (Roy, 2007, 2009). Roy (2009) famously argues that, particularly in Global South contexts, the weakening of customary or negotiated regimes of land management, and changes to bureaucratic regulations that define the boundary between the legitimate and illegitimate, are essential tools that state actors use to achieve 'territorialized flexibility to alter land use, deploy eminent domain, and to acquire land' (Roy, 2009: 81). This idea of informality as a state strategy has emerged as an important comparative lens through which to understand the politics of urban poverty in contexts across the Global South and North (see for example Varley, 2013). Roy's framework has demonstrated that an analytical focus on the state's role in the production of categories of informality is a powerful comparative tool for understanding how state actors seek to maintain territorial control in the face of the social dislocation that is endemic to capitalist societies.

It is because of this role of the state in constructing categories of informality that we refer to settlements as 'informalised', rather than 'informal', throughout this paper. We further follow Durst and Wegmann (2017) in arguing that these insights apply to contexts of the Global North as well. Examples of informality in the United States and Europe that they point to include: vehicle living, the extra-legal occupation of abandoned units, sub-leasing in crowded immigrant neighbourhoods, and the sale of unserviced land (as

in the Texas colonias). We argue that in both Global South and Global North contexts, informalisation leads to conditions of crowding and lack of infrastructure and services that potentially exacerbate disease contagion. In many Global South contexts, high housing costs, restrictive zoning regulations, and the creeping delegitimation of customary and negotiated property claims have all contributed to the structural exclusion of many low-income people from access to legally recognised tenure. Informalised settlements are consequently often neglected in state infrastructure development and service provision, and subject to the chronic instability that attends their legal precarity. In Global North contexts, low-income communities (often of immigrants or minorities) witness the development of extra-legal housing submarkets (e.g. subletting and renting of garages as residences) whose crowding and lack of services similarly often reflect the economic marginality and/or the tenuous legal status of the residents.

Research in public health and the social sciences provides some evidence of a relationship between economic and shelter precarity and COVID-19 contagion. In the United States, immigrant communities like Corona in the New York borough of Queens, and Chelsea, Massachusetts, emerged as the most impacted communities in the initial spread (Correal et al., 2020). Subsequent research in US cities has found clusters of high COVID-19 incidence and mortality in areas with a high concentration of poverty and a history of severe racial segregation (Bilal et al., 2021: 939). A study in Kolkata finds a correlation between COVID-19 hotspots and lack of access to water, sanitation and other infrastructure (Das et al., 2021). Studies across other geographical contexts have similarly found a correspondence between the social marginality of groups, and their limited capacity to

engage in preventive behaviours like physical distancing and regular handwashing (see Nyashanu et al. (2020) on South Africa and Mena and Aburto (2022) on Chile). In contrast, the relationship between urban density and COVID-19 contagion has been subject to substantial research and has generally found this correlation to be either moderate (Bhadra et al., 2021), or more attributable to other factors than density itself, such as the greater global connectivity of large metropolitan regions (see Angel and Blei, 2020). Taken together, these findings are consistent with the hypothesis that the specific conditions of informalised settlements, including precarity and lack of infrastructure, in addition to place-specific density, explain much more of COVID-19's impact than metropolitan population density. The recognition of these relationships has led to a growing debate about how urban planning and policy should respond.

While theoretical debates about the implications of the pandemic for the politics of informality are still at an early stage, scholars have, in recent years, begun to ask how the state's role in processes of informalisation might interact with the growing centrality of narratives of risk from other threats, such as flooding, climate change, earthquakes, and terrorist attacks. In their analysis of the eviction push that followed the devastating storm-induced floods that struck Metro Manila in 2009, Alvarez and Cardenas (2019) argue that the city's politics have long been shaped by narratives that blame low-income communities for Metro Manila's incomplete modernisation. In the aftermath of the floods, these narratives have resulted in what they term a 'resiliency revanchism', a politics of revenge that selectively deploys expert knowledge of hydrology to argue for the eviction of informalised settlements based on their supposed culpability in flood risk. In Jakarta, Shatkin and Soemarwi (2021) argue that narratives of

existential flood risk have pulled debates over informality to the centre of urban politics. They discuss a ‘dialectic of state informality’, defined by legal and discursive debates between state actors who seek to assert unilateral authority over urban spatial relations as a means to address flood risk, and communities who seek to defend their claims to urban space based on historical use, legal precedent and the state’s own complicity in exacerbating flooding. In each of these accounts, crises posed by hazard risk have intensified political contestation around the state’s role in adjudicating the boundary between the legal/illegal and the legitimised/delegitimised, and have placed new pressures on the state to resolve the contradictions inherent in this role.

These ideas resonate with early experiences in the management of COVID-19. Early in the pandemic, many governments responded by moving quickly to cordon off ‘slum’ communities, and to subject their residents to strict surveillance and in some cases punitive discipline. In Buenos Aires, police acted quickly to erect barriers and deploy security forces to cordon off some of the city’s poorest districts (Goñi, 2020). In Mumbai, state officials used drones to track the movements of Dharavi residents, to ensure that a much-feared explosion of contagion there did not leapfrog beyond the settlement’s boundaries (Datta et al., 2021). In the Philippines, the administration of Rodrigo Duterte responded to protests over the hardships imposed by lockdowns with threats to have anyone who violated COVID-19 ordinances and regulations shot on sight (Hapal, 2021). Marginalised urban communities and their allies have countered punitive and oppressive approaches that stigmatised them as sites of contagion by asserting that COVID-19 originated in the overworld of jet-setting elites but has disproportionately impacted the poor (Bengali et al., 2020). Community groups sought to

develop alternative approaches through self-enumeration, self-help, collective action and mutual aid – tactics they have developed over decades of community organising to resist eviction and gain political support for claims to land and urban citizenship (DOH, 2020). Collective action has taken the form of ‘happiness-sharing pantries’ in Bangkok (Chatinakrob, 2022), community kitchens and food relief networks across Philippine cities (Guazon, 2022), and a COVID-19 situation tracker in Kenyan informalised settlements (Muungano wa Wanavijiji and SDI Kenya, 2020). In solidarity, sympathetic activists and academics have called for policies that heed grassroots demands, for measures that solidify community claims to land, and for urgent action to substantively address their most immediate sources of economic precarity and vulnerability to disease contagion (Corburn et al., 2020).

Historical research demonstrates that such debates over pandemic response are likely ultimately to crystallise into new paradigms of planning and governance. Indeed, scientific advances leading to an increasing understanding of the relationship between the built environment, social life, and disease spread have played a fundamental role in shaping the foundations of contemporary planning. Until well into the late 19th century, predominant theories of miasma associated disease with foul odours and stale air (Kidambi, 2004). Analyses of the spread of disease in the industrialising cities of Europe and the United States, as well as in colonised countries, often deployed racist and classist stereotypes in identifying the purportedly unhygienic practices of low-income communities, and their role in producing miasma, as major sources of disease (Shah, 2001). As contagionist theories increasingly understood diseases like cholera, yellow fever, and polio to spread through the circulation of microorganisms in the air, water, human waste, animals and pests, they increasingly

came to form ideas about water and waste management, and the importance of air circulation and light in the built environment (Nevius, 2020). The consequences were far reaching. Gandy (2006: 18) argues that the emergence of the ‘bacteriological city’, and resultant innovations in water and waste management, led to the formation of a ‘technocratic paradigm for modern governance so that political changes in the urban arena became a progenitor of wider regional and national goals for public policy’. Hence emergent understandings of disease contagion led to ‘the expansion of state bureaucracies so that the development of cities became an interrelated facet of the growing political power of the nation state’ (Gandy, 2006: 18). Early experiments in state regulation of housing development, and in the development of public housing, were a response both to concerns about social unrest in the congested ‘slums’ of turn-of-the-century industrial cities, and to the growing understanding of the role of crowding and lack of sanitary facilities in disease spread.

While knowledge of the relationship between disease and urban form evolved gradually during the late-19th and early-20th centuries, it was the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918, combined with sociopolitical changes accompanying the Great War, that accelerated the adoption of new principles in architecture and urban planning (Frost, 2020). As Banai (2020) notes, it is the universal nature of the experience of pandemics (implied by the term’s Greek root meaning of ‘all people’) that, like experiences of global war, depression, or global climate change, acts to galvanise broad social reform movements. Frost (2020) argues that the Spanish Flu pandemic informed the broad adoption beginning in the 1920s of a ‘sunlight movement’ in popular architecture, emphasising access to light through elements like balconies, terraces, and flat roofs in housing, and the importance of outdoor

recreational spaces. Le Corbusier’s modernist agenda of social engineering through machine age architecture was in part a response to the social upheaval of the post-war era, but it also reflected the post-pandemic adoption of air circulation, natural light, and access to outdoor spaces as central elements in avoiding disease contagion (Campbell, 2005). The adoption of reform interacted with the particularities of socio-economic and political divisions in varied contexts, sometimes with far reaching consequences. In South Africa, for example, the Spanish Flu pandemic informed the passage of legislation that established patterns of state-sponsored segregation that were to inform Apartheid era planning – notably, the Housing Act of 1920 which subsidised housing improvements for whites, and the Native (Urban Areas) Act of 1923 which ‘formalized racial residential segregation’ (Finn and Kobayashi, 2020: 218).

Hence the early growth of the field of planning, with its focus on regulatory control of the built environment and modernist design and infrastructure, was shaped by an international shift in planning paradigms that reflected advances in epidemiology and the experience of pandemic. Yet the rollout of planning interventions also interacted with the political interests and imperatives of governing elites to shape planning agendas in ways that had long lasting implications. In European and American cities, governing elites were principally focused on addressing threats of working-class political agitation in cities dominated by industry, seeking simultaneously to legitimise the state through narratives of progress, and to increase the legibility and control of cities through an eradication of ‘slums’. In colonial contexts, where electoral working-class political pressure was largely not a factor, Gandy (2006: 19) and other scholars have argued that ‘moralistic and “neo-miasmatic” discourses’ continued to shape policy and planning

agendas of exclusion and eviction well into the 20th century (see also Kidambi, 2004).

We hypothesise that the universal nature of the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic may similarly accelerate a shift to new planning paradigms, albeit in response to a different set of contemporary contradictions. These are the contradictions of the austerity-driven, entrepreneurial forms of governance that have emerged since the 1980s in response to intensifying global competition and the retrenchment of local governments with the rollback of national government transfers and subsidies. Urban scholars have argued convincingly that these contradictions adhere in a broad range of contexts where cities are integrated into global supply chains and circuits of finance and investment (Harvey, 2007; Smith, 2002). Such cities rely on a steady supply of low-wage and flexibilised labour whose reproduction, in the context of expensive land markets, requires that workers either tolerate extremely long commutes, or seek accommodation in dense settlements closer to the city centre (Smith, 2002). These dense settlements frequently violate land use and zoning regulations that are premised on elite aesthetic criteria, and in many postcolonial contexts often emerge on land that is subject to customary and negotiated land tenures (Ghertner, 2015). Such settlements find themselves only tentatively accommodated, subject to crackdowns and expulsions rationalised by an imperative to achieve economic growth through the pursuit of aesthetic and infrastructural goals, and often further motivated by nativist, racist, classist, and communal impulses in politics. In sum, shifts in labour and socio-spatial relations in the age of entrepreneurial urbanism have undermined the tenuous arrangements of urban citizenship that underlie the very bureaucratic-regulatory regimes and modernist planning principles that previous pandemics helped inspire.

The COVID-19 pandemic has fully exposed this crack in the veneer of urban citizenship by highlighting three shared conditions that we argue are intrinsic to the condition of informalised settlements across contexts of cities in both the Global North and the Global South. First, it has revealed the vulnerability to contagion that is inherent in the tight relationship between economic precarity and housing informality that low-income communities experience. Policy agendas have sought to ensure the availability of low-wage labour to support economic growth by creating flexibilised labour regimes that limit access to social welfare provisions like unemployment insurance or paid sick leave, and that selectively encourage informal economic activities where they meet specific labour needs (Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), 2020). The hand-to-mouth existence of workers under such labour regimes dictates that they must continue to venture out into the public realm to work, thus exposing themselves to contagion. The privatisation of health services further decreases their access to health care. These workers come home to neighbourhoods that are deemed in violation of planning regulations due to the very density and conditions of built environment that market failure has dictated are financially feasible (as when multiple families crowd into an apartment or people take up residence in a garage), or that have been developed deliberately without freehold title and/or in violation of land use or building codes in response to this market failure. The particularities of the processes through which economic precarity leads to housing precarity are myriad and locally contextual, but almost everywhere they contribute to crowded, underserviced living conditions that potentially exacerbate the spread of disease, in contexts where there is reduced or negligible state support for housing

improvement. Studies indicate that COVID-19 transmission occurs most easily indoors through microparticles suspended in the air or use of shared surfaces, and there is some indication of possible faecal–oral transmission (Megahed and Ghoneim, 2020). Concerns about the rapid spread of the disease in crowded housing conditions, and those without readily available water for handwashing and access to public health resources, are well founded. While these concerns have given rise to notable instances of community-based collective action to respond to the pandemic, as will be discussed later in the paper, the lack of support for housing and public health that ultimately necessitates such collective action simply highlights the struggle for the urban poor and marginalised to gain substantive citizenship rights (Gupte and Mitlin, 2021).

Second, the COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated the vulnerabilities inherent in the connection of informalised communities to larger urban, regional, and global socio-economic networks (Ali and Keil, 2008). The functions that residents of informalised settlements play in the city – performing service work for the middle and upper classes, engaging in manufacturing and trade, operating urban infrastructure – place them one or two degrees of separation from the originating sources of the spread of the virus. While COVID-19 was initially referred to glibly in some quarters as a ‘rich person’s disease’, the socio-economic connectedness of low-income communities, their mobility patterns, and their diasporic family or social connections, have ensured its quick arrival in these settlements (Bengali et al., 2020).

Third, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the political marginality of informalised settlements. As already noted, communities have often been subjected to draconian regimes of enforced enclosure, isolation, and surveillance. Undocumented and documented immigrants, as well as

overseas contract workers, have likewise been subjected to new pushes for mass deportation and new restrictions on entry, as well as intensified discrimination (Eichelberger, 2007; WIEGO, 2020). Rural–urban migrants have come under renewed efforts to keep them in the countryside or send them back (Recio et al., 2021). Yet state responses have not always been punitive and reactionary. The ‘entrepreneurial city’ model has been controversial everywhere and has frequently led to conflict and contestation between levels and branches of government. In the United States, for example, political debates over the spread of COVID-19 initially took shape in the context of a revanchist federal administration with an explicit anti-immigrant agenda that many beleaguered municipal administrations in the hardest hit cities sought to resist. Likewise, in India, the heavy-handed approach of the national administration in mandating a countrywide shutdown has contrasted in some cases with greater engagement between local officials and community-based organisations (Bagri, 2020). Hence debates over COVID-19 have mirrored debates over poverty and informalisation more generally.

As with the pandemics of more than a century ago, therefore, the politics of planning under COVID-19 will reflect a particular, historically contingent set of political economic conditions. It will also reflect locally contingent political dynamics, so that it is fruitless to hypothesise that any particular outcome is likely to unfold everywhere. However, the preceding review of the historical relationship between pandemics and the emergence of modernist agendas in planning, and the initial responses to the COVID-19 pandemic under entrepreneurial policy and planning regimes, point to three modalities of planning action that are likely to shape political debates about planning approaches to pandemic mitigation. Each of these

modalities is apparent in prevalent discursive debates and past approaches in many cities and reflects the varied interests at stake in cities marked by the conditions of fiscal austerity, growth-oriented urban policy and the commodification of land and housing, that characterise globally connected cities across a range of contexts.

The first approach resonates with Alvarez and Cardenas's (2019) concept of 'resiliency revanchism' and is underpinned by Wacquant's (2007) territorial stigmatisation. Such an approach would build on long-standing path-dependent ideologies of modernisation and entrepreneurial governance, and would seek to counter pandemic contagion by reinforcing modernist agendas of eradication of urban forms and uses of space that are rooted in customary and negotiated forms of land tenure and governance, rather than state-dictated regulatory regimes. Planning approaches under this modality might be enacted either through efforts to eliminate populations that reside in informalised settlements from the city through evictions, expulsions and restrictions on migration or immigration, or through increased efforts to delegitimise customary arrangements and impose state definitions of order. In many cases, such moves involve mobilising nativist and revanchist discourses that stigmatise the spaces inhabited by the urban underclass, consequently rationalising their elimination, erasure, and 'renewal'. These places include not only 'slums', but also city streets and public spaces. Heightened calls for 'better' governance that reiterate formalisation, regulation, and rehabilitation as solutions to urban problems as varied as housing and mobility sometimes function to extend the logics of removal and 'renewal' of the misplaced and the out of place.

The second approach is rooted in a market-oriented discourse that argues that the rights of low-income communities

should be protected because of their importance to the urban economy and the functioning of the city (World Bank, 2020). Such a discourse recommends accommodation through selective enforcement of regulations and a modest extension of social and infrastructural services. In other words, it seeks a continuation of the status quo of entrepreneurial governance with modest reforms intended to ensure the availability of low-wage labour while mitigating some of the most immediate drivers of contagion risk. The 'essential worker' label that has entered the global pandemic lexicon is indicative of this point. It emphasises the multiple intersecting layers of precarity of people who many now realise are essential to maintaining cities and the web of urban life, and reiterates their indispensability as a rationale for prioritising their welfare. Such an entry point clarifies that the motivation to care for those who have otherwise been cast out of the urban collectivity is underpinned by a political recognition not so much of the urban underclass as urban citizens, but rather of their social utility, from which they are believed to derive their value and consequently their right to a place and a life in the city. This conditionality proceeds from and reproduces ideas of deservingness, which when not authoritatively designated needs to be painstakingly demonstrated to be bestowed. The pressure to perform deservingness only escalated with the stigma of informalised settlements as 'hot spots' of transmission (World Bank, 2020) and informalised places of work as 'vectors of disease' (WIEGO, 2020).

The third modality is a reformist approach that is rooted in a critique of the state's role in producing informality – its tendency to legitimise, accommodate and formalise legal and regulatory transgressions of the wealthy and powerful, while delegitimising and informalising low-income settlements even where their claims have legal

grounding (Ghertner, 2015). This approach seeks to equalise the terms of urban citizenship through the legal strengthening of customary and negotiated land rights of low-income communities, enhanced community control in resilience planning and state support for the decommodification of housing and increased availability of shelter that does not compromise residents' health and security (Corburn et al., 2020).

The contradictions of the entrepreneurial mode of governing processes of informalisation outlined above, and the discursive debates that result, adhere in major metropolises across many contexts of the Global North and South that have been impacted by COVID-19. Yet path-dependent conditions in particular cities make every difference in how these contradictions and debates unfold. The particularities of racial, caste, gender, and class dynamics of political systems, of property rights regimes and of patterns of land ownership and use, all of which have taken shape through decades of political struggle, play a central role in defining debates over pandemic responses. Analysis of changes in dynamics of informalisation therefore must take context carefully into consideration. In the pages that follow, we will suggest that unpacking these contextual factors involves thinking across scales and analysing how inter-scalar interactions shape agendas of change at the urban scale and national scale.

A scalar approach to interpreting the politics of planning responses to COVID-19

The inter-scalar nature of the dynamics at play in the politics of pandemic risk is readily apparent. Viruses and bacteria circulating through transnational networks lead to contagion, and fear of contagion, in everyday, micro-scale, interpersonal interaction. This fear animates municipal, state/provincial

and national political pushes for new urban agendas based on regulation, law, policy, and planning intended either to restrict access to urban space, or to reconfigure spatial relations in ways that address pandemic risk. Interpreting the political dynamics that emerge from contagion in any given setting therefore requires an inter-scalar perspective. Here, we briefly discuss the inter-scalar dynamics that are shaping the political responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the implications of these political responses for how we understand planning and policy approaches to informality. We focus on two scales of political contestation and planning and policy change – the urban and the national. Our intention is not to review the dynamics of COVID-19 contagion across these scales, but rather to analyse the ways that political responses to COVID-19 emerge through interactions across these scales.

While we focus here on the urban and national scales, it is important to reiterate that the politics of these scales is deeply interwoven with the politics that takes shape at the micro-scale of everyday interactions. These micro-politics are deeply contextual, founded as they are in stigmas that have roots in histories of class, racial, caste, and ethnic conflict and contestation. We find Garrido's (2019) ethnographic work in Metro Manila particularly instructive in thinking through the ways that the social stigma and associations of the poor with contagion translate into fraught everyday interactions that shape political discourse at the urban and national scales. Garrido (2019) describes the everyday experiences of humiliation and stigmatisation of low-income people based on their territorial association with what, in Metro Manila, is commonly called the 'slum' or 'squatter' settlement. His research participants describe the ways this stigmatisation is enacted by the wealthy – in a refusal to make bodily contact, in washing themselves with disinfectant after touching hands, and in strictures on servants

about avoiding physical proximity and not sitting on furniture in the homes of their employers. Garrido further argues that the anger and frustration of the poor with these daily experiences of rejection shape their political behaviours. Their visceral support for Joseph Estrada, a Philippine President who was removed from power largely by popular mobilisation of Metro Manila's 'middle class', was motivated in part by his ability to transcend these physical boundaries, thereby making the urban poor feel like social and political equals. Recent middle-class support for the authoritarian President Rodrigo Duterte, in contrast, arises partly from their yearning for political candidates who are beholden neither to the 'masa', nor to corrupt elite oligarchs, and who can thus be counted on to clean up Philippine politics, as well as the spaces of dense urban settlements.

Garrido thus shows the micro-politics of stigmatisation to be dynamic, leading to significant political changes both in the everyday politics of discourse, and in urban and national politics. We see these micro-politics at play in other contexts – for example in India, where Muslims were targeted early on by some as a source of contagion due to stereotypes of their practices of worship, and where Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) of middle-class colonies sought to exclude domestic workers early in the pandemic (Tiwary, 2020). Yet we also see emergent forms of community-based resistance and counter-narratives that interrogate the logic of popular and state stereotypes of the poor. In Chennai, for example, one NGO launched a video game, *Survive COVID*, that puts the player in the position of a domestic worker who must make choices between the risk of destitution and hunger, and exposure to the virus, as they transit between their vulnerable communities and multiple potential points of contagion in elite colonies, in public spaces, and in the transportation system (Upadhye, 2020). The

game thus positions the figure of the domestic worker as a citizen of the city rendered vulnerable by the failures of prevailing infrastructural and socio-economic systems. This contrasts with perspectives that focus on this figure as a potential point of contagion who must be managed either through surveillance and control, or through expulsion from certain spaces.

These anecdotal examples are intended to make the simple argument that the politics of pandemic response at the urban and national scales will take shape in dialogue with a broader societal debate over the kinds of stereotypes that Garrido writes about so eloquently. These stereotypes are shaped by profoundly context-specific and historically contingent social dynamics.

The urban scale: Renegotiating the spatiality of entrepreneurialism in an age of contagion

We follow Brenner (2019) in thinking of the urban scale not as a set of bounded units (cities, suburbs, metropolitan regions), but rather as a fluid dynamic through which the restless rescaling of capital drives the emergence of urban processes across broad territories. We argue that analyses of the urban impacts of COVID-19 must consider not only how the spatial impacts of the pandemic are eliciting municipal policy and planning responses, but also how these spatial impacts are interacting with and reshaping the political dynamics of ongoing processes of the rescaling of capital. During the Spanish Influenza epidemic of 1918–1920, the attenuated take-up of the modernist ideals of Le Corbusier and others reflected the aspirations of state actors to use their power, recently enhanced during war and post-war recovery, to combat the twin crises of class conflict and pandemic risk through the rescaling and reengineering of the highly centralised and relatively static

centre of capital that was the industrial city. As Brenner (2019) has argued, however, we are now seeing an explosion of urbanism outwards, conjuring new extended landscapes of labour mobilisation, resource extraction, industry, and consumer amenities, even as finance and corporate control functions concentrate in certain major urban centres. State actors have scrambled in this context to create ‘business-friendly environments’ in efforts to capture mobile capital, while struggling to manage the social impacts of, and reactions against, spatial change under conditions of austerity dictated by entrepreneurial governance. It is this rescaling of urban processes that has fostered the dynamics of informalisation that have defined the marginal position of many low-income communities and their vulnerability to pandemics, and that has also arguably shaped the dynamics of stigmatisation described by Garrido.

Under these conditions of state entrepreneurialism and austerity, the kinds of muscular interventions in the form of mass public housing, master planning, and infrastructure development that marked the early- to mid-20th century response to pandemic risk in cities of the Global North are likely to be deeply contested and difficult to achieve. How, then, can we expect state actors to seek to reshape urban space in response to COVID-19, and at what levels of the state and what scales of action? Will a growing understanding of the relationship between precarity and contagion provide state actors with the political capital to intervene in urban development in assertive new ways that meaningfully counter the contradictions that have concentrated risk in low-income communities? Will they have the imagination to do so? Or will the economic and fiscal threats posed by COVID-related dynamics – the flight of elites and capital from the city, the growth of telecommuting and e-commerce – lead state actors to

double down on the politics of entrepreneurial urban planning, marked as it is by a subsidisation of corporate interests and the management of low-income settlements and economies through informalisation, exclusion, and selective expulsion? How will the policy and planning responses and political rhetoric surrounding the management of pandemic risk in low-income settlements interact with the dynamics of exclusion and stigmatisation described by Garrido?

The answers to these questions will emerge only through extended political debate over COVID-19 responses in the years to come. We can, however, observe the contours of an emerging debate in the strategic responses of cities, and in emerging proposals for action. These responses have reflected varied impulses, from revanchism to incrementalism to reformism.

First, some governments have responded by revisiting previous agendas of modernist planning through a focus on modernisation of housing and infrastructure. The Delhi Development Authority (DDA), for example, directed its planners to develop measures to manage density and provide greater access to housing and public space while preparing the Master Plan of Delhi 2041 (Chitlangia, 2020). As a result, the final draft of the plan emphasises ‘slum’ rehabilitation projects, provision of affordable rental and ownership housing for the urban poor, working hostels for migrants, and decentralised workspaces as measures to reduce density in the city (Delhi Development Authority, 2021). Similarly, as early as April 2020, the Department of Human Settlements of South Africa, in collaboration with civil society organisations, sought to relocate informalised settlers to temporary residential areas, and allocate plots for new housing projects (South African Government, Department of Human Settlements, 2020).

While reconfiguring the built environment and regulating use of space may help

mitigate contagion, such spatial and design solutionism may also risk exacerbating extant social vulnerabilities. To the extent that approaches centred on de-densification and decongestion are premised on a misdiagnosis of density and agglomeration as the major source of pandemic risk, they risk reinvigorating historically entrenched territorial stigma of informalised settlements and public housing estates as epicentres of contagion (Power et al., 2020). This stain of place can serve to re-energise political commitments to longstanding practices of using selective enforcement of zoning and land use codes to strategically expel and resettle informalised settlers and workers. Without any earnest effort to confront the causes of marginality, end impoverishment and overturn deeply unequal relations, such technoscientific approaches may also devolve into an aestheticisation of security, cleansing the city of the sensory experience of disease, contamination, and contagion by eliminating the sense perception of blight and disorder (Ghertner, 2015). This is the case when the houseless are banished, slum residents are evicted, informal workers are displaced, care networks are crippled or dismantled, and people are excluded from agenda setting and decision making. This was the case when street vendors' stalls in Lima, Peru were cleared to prevent contagion, even as outdoor dining in 'formal' establishments was celebrated and encouraged (Ogando and Abizaid, 2020).

Second, some policy and planning efforts have sought to address structural challenges that have exacerbated the risks facing marginalised communities, specifically instituting measures to counter the commodification of housing. In the most immediate term, many cities have instituted eviction bans, although their frequent failure to extend these bans and the absence of measures to counter housing precarity have often intensified arguments over the fundamental role of housing as a

first line of defence against COVID-19 (RHJ Editorial Collective, 2020). Governments that understood the far-reaching impact of fair housing on managing the pandemic undertook bolder action (Hussaini, 2021). In Barcelona, the municipal government moved to seize empty apartments through compulsory purchase at below-value rates to convert them into affordable public housing (O'Sullivan, 2020). In Lisbon, the municipal government prohibited the registration of new Airbnb rentals and rented out active listings as subsidised units for workers and students (Medina, 2020). This is potentially a substantial intervention in a context where half the residential units in parts of the city are being used as short-term rentals, thereby limiting the availability of homes for long-term occupancy and consequently driving up housing prices.

Third, many community organisations and NGOs have responded by reiterating the importance of utilising informal channels to reach informalised communities (DOH, 2020: 1). Community organisations, mutual aid associations, citizen groups and their supporters have responded to the pandemic with a variety of practices. They have monitored market prices to counter price gouging, given out hand sanitisers and masks, and distributed food and cash to vulnerable households and people made ineligible for state food allocations by punitive immigration laws. Collective action has also taken the form of cultivating community gardens and setting up food banks and community pantries; organising livelihood development schemes like home-based craft work; lending bicycles to healthcare workers in the face of transport shutdowns; and simply documenting the impacts of the virus and the lockdown to use for demanding urgent, meaningful action (DOH, 2020). In some instances, as in the notable case of Dharavi in Mumbai, municipal officials partnered with NGOs, community organisations and religious institutions

to engage community residents in decision-making, undertake public education and facilitate logistics in COVID-19 screening and in the distribution of food and other emergency supplies (Golechha, 2020; Kaushal and Mahajan, 2021).

Such instances illustrate the importance of what Bhan et al. (2020) refer to as ‘collective life’, or the arrangements that make and sustain life in the urban margins. Allies and academics have framed urban poor responses as a call for a broader set of reforms to address the vulnerability, precarity, and marginality of low-income communities by building on the capacity of residents and their organisations. These include reforms that institutionalise community participation in hazard mitigation planning, create new social welfare and income distribution schemes, broaden citizen participation in infrastructure governance, enforce restrictions on evictions, and substantially increase state investment in housing improvement (Corburn et al., 2020). More broadly, such calls underscore the need for new modes of policy and planning that centre community-engaged policy approaches to reconfigure urban life and relations according to a more inclusive ethos (Acuto et al., 2020: 978).

In sum, these debates over state responses to COVID-19 have broad implications for the politics of the ongoing process of the rescaling of urban space. They embody debates over the exclusions and inclusions in the governance of urban and urbanising places, over the regulations and laws that have shaped dynamics of spatial exclusion and inclusion, and over the primacy of use versus exchange value in urban politics.

The national scale: Transformations in national citizenship and rights to urban residence

Finally, we address the national scale, or the transformations in national citizenship and

in the management of populations by the national state, that have attended COVID-19. Because changes at the national scale have direct implications for the urban scale, these cannot be understood separately. Indeed, the politics of the national-scale response to COVID-19 can be seen in part as a response to the incapacity of the entrepreneurialised state to address the causes of contagion directly through reforms in urban spatial relations, such as implementation of new housing programmes or new land use planning or regulatory regimes. The response of national state actors to this incapacity has, in some cases, been to resort to a nationalist rhetoric that seeks to galvanise support for efforts to reassert order by restricting immigration and migration, and by legally redefining citizenship or urban residence. This nationalist strategy is most evident in the prevalent use of discourses of war in framing the fight against the pandemic. This war discourse reframes the debate over COVID-19 around the need for internal stability, thus shifting emphasis from public health and social welfare interventions to the national state’s role in exercising control via surveillance and internal security (see for example Datta et al., 2021; Pfrimer and Barbosa, 2020). This rhetoric defines stigmatised bodies as nuisance, and even as enemies of the state befitting discipline and punishment. Indeed, in the Philippines, the Duterte regime rationalised punitive measures against the poor by stigmatising people as ‘pasaway’, a Filipino term that refers to an ‘importunate, stubborn, and obstinate’ person (Hapal, 2021: 226). The pasaway archetype drew upon entrenched class prejudices that stereotype the urban poor as ungovernable subjects whose recalcitrance threatens to thwart the state’s war against an ‘unseen enemy’.

The discursive and legal debates over state efforts to redefine citizenship and urban belonging in the city in response to

COVID-19 have taken shape in varied ways. In the United States, the pandemic enabled the Trump administration to push forward with its efforts to restrict legal immigration and punish illegal immigrants. Yet some municipal administrations in 'sanctuary cities' resisted federal efforts to crack down on undocumented immigrants, and public support for measures that targeted immigrants ultimately proved limited. In the Philippines, the *Balik Probinsya, Bagong Pag-asa* (Return to the Province, New Hope) Programme, sought to entice migrants in Metro Manila to return to their hometowns by providing a meagre package of financial and transportation allowance and promising livelihood assistance. While the programme was announced as part of a broader effort to rebalance economic growth between rural and urban areas, critics have argued that the lack of resources dedicated to countryside development uncovers the central aim of the initiative to decongest Metro Manila of 'slums', a measure that appears to privilege the megacity while potentially spreading COVID-19 through rural networks of returnees (Recio et al., 2021).

Ultimately, these and other national state efforts to restrict the movement of people deemed threatening or ungovernable simply call into question the state's role in a more sustained programme of addressing the systemic roots of contagion. In the Philippines, for example, the simple math of rural economic insecurity ensures that the root causes of migration to Metro Manila will prevail, and programmes that peddle hope, like *Balik Probinsya*, will remain symbolic gestures. Without a reorientation of the economy to enhance public welfare by confronting land injustice and bolstering rural economic productivity, a national state investment of resources, and a political imagination to address the intersecting layers of urban marginality, migrants will continue to flock to major cities and to live

in places that are vulnerable to pandemic contagion.

In these contexts, and elsewhere, the deployment of discourses of war and the mobilisation of nationalism have played on fears of 'the other' that are deeply embedded in the everyday politics of race, ethnicity, caste and class. Whether efforts to close off access to urban spaces will succeed will ultimately depend on the success of political factions in shaping public discourse and framing alternative agendas. Efforts to counter policy tendencies towards expulsion and exclusion are most likely to succeed where they are able to convince governments and urbanites of the fallacies of the revisionist histories that disregard the historical social, economic and cultural contributions of immigrant and migrant communities, and the legal and political legitimacy of their claims to urban space. Their success will also be contingent on a clearer understanding of the roots of pandemics in general and COVID-19 contagion in particular, not only in existing modes of urban governance, but also in extant imaginaries of the 'good' city. Success will rest as well on the identification of planning and policy alternatives that meaningfully address the socio-spatial dynamics that contribute to contagion and public health crises, and crucially on the reorganisation of urban life along frameworks that dismantle these very conditions.

Conclusion

The history of urban planning reveals that crises of risk, whether from pandemics, disasters, or socio-economic unrest, have been moments of inspiration and ambition for planners, policymakers, architects, urban designers and other professions involved in shaping the urban built environment. In the midst of wrenching experiences of disaster

and upheaval, planners and urbanists have spun new theories of an ideal city, and of the mechanisms of governance, technocratic management, control, and sometimes repression that might be required to achieve it. This paper has argued that, given the clear correlation between economic and housing precarity and vulnerability to the pandemic, the politics of poverty and informality must be central to any analysis of the implications of COVID-19 for the future of urban development and of the field of planning. We have further argued that these implications need to be understood in the context of the particular mode of contemporary planning, what we have termed an entrepreneurial mode of managing informality. In this context, we argue that planning responses may trend either towards a deepening of an entrenched sociopolitics of territorial stigmatisation and informalisation, towards an incremental reform that does not directly confront the roots of pandemic contagion in the contradictions of the political economy of urban entrepreneurialism, or towards reforms that do more directly address these contradictions. Finally, we have argued that unpacking these shifts requires an analysis of intersecting political dynamics at the national and urban scales.

At the moment of this writing (Autumn 2022), epidemiologists continue to debate when COVID-19 will transition from the pandemic to endemic phase, and planners, designers, and policymakers continue to debate the implications of the pandemic experience for the future of urban development. As these debates unfold, our call to centre questions of informality and economic precarity is a call for researchers to focus on questions of when and under what circumstances the experience of pandemic is informing efforts to intervene in the structural conditions that have defined the entrepreneurial mode of planning informality, and what form those structural interventions

have taken. Have governments sought to institutionalise revanchist approaches to pandemic response rooted in territorial stigmatisation by reinforcing state powers to intervene in the claims to space and movements of the poor? Or have they sought to address the causes of precarity through measures to address the structural factors that impede access to affordable shelter, economic opportunity, and social services? What levels of government have taken the most impactful action, and to what extent has there been tension or cooperation across these levels? How and under what circumstances have community groups and their allies sought to build upon the COVID-19 experience of community organising, community-based research and innovation in the self-provision of relief services, to demand broader social reform and a more meaningful partnership in policy and planning? What are the contextual factors that shape divergent outcomes in state–society relations and government responses in varied settings? These questions imply a need to examine responses to COVID-19 across multiple scales and through multiple modes of action, from community-based collective action, to cross-community collaboration and organising, to municipal planning and policy, to national state responses.

Ultimately, the intent of the framework developed here is to help shape new agendas of urban planning and policy research that critically engage knowledge systems and relations that uphold hegemony (Westman and Castán Broto, 2022), and that reinforce the unequal structures of power that underlie inequities in pandemic impacts. The research agenda that we propose is intended to reframe understandings of planning responses to the pandemic as differentially shaped by an assemblage of powers and interests (Acuto et al., 2020). In doing so, it is intended to inform analyses and critiques of the demolition of urban collective life that

the pandemic has set in motion, in many instances as the effect of structures and systems of exclusion cultivated foremost by the state (Bhan et al., 2020). The perspective outlined here reveals the entrepreneurial city model of managing informality – and the racial, gender, and class oppressions that underpin it – as integral to what Bhan et al. (2020) describe as the profound erosion of the arrangements that make life possible in the urban margins. We seek further to inform the development of what Bhan et al. (2020) refer to as ‘new ways of paying attention’ – a different mode of planning that is aligned to the practices of ‘urban collective life’, which refers to the broad arrangements that the marginalised organise to manage their daily existence. Such a planning approach would be anchored in the fundamental recognition of disavowed people’s humanity, thereby stretching the notion, extending the scale, and widening the scope of inclusivity.

The fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic will without doubt lead to a shift in paradigms of urban development. As a field that addresses urban questions with a focus on equity and sustainability, and through a holistically multi-system approach, planning can and should play a central role in this shift. Whether planning fulfils its potential in doing so will depend on the capacity of planners to develop frameworks for understanding the inter-scalar and inter-system nature of pandemic threats (such as Jon’s (2020) manifesto for planning based on care), and to develop political tools for addressing this complexity. It will also require new strategies to confront the forces that have produced the profound inequalities that shape contemporary urbanity. We have argued here that understanding the connection between pandemic impacts and the politics of informality is essential to the field’s ability to respond meaningfully to these challenges.


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