

# Re-evaluating the ‘Good City’ from (Post) Pandemic Southeast Asia

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## ABSTRACT

Arising from a keynote presentation given at the third Sustainable Design for Liveable Cities (SUDLiC) conference on “Sustainable Cities for All” in 2021, this short commentary considers some implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for urban futures. In particular, we take responses to the pandemic in cities in Southeast Asia as a set of resources for re-evaluating prevailing conceptions of the “good city” – now, and into the future. While initial responses understandably focused on the management of public health and safety, it has been recognised that pandemic times more widely have provided an opportunity for planning priorities to be “reset” (Martinez and Short, 2021). What has that meant across a region as diverse as Southeast Asia in terms of both governmental capacity and levels of economic development? What roles have been played during the pandemic by experts/authorities on the one hand, and “ordinary” city inhabitants on the other? And what do varied performances of these roles over the past two years tell us about possibilities for the post-pandemic city? These are among the key questions that guide our deliberation of future urban prospects in and beyond (post-)pandemic Southeast Asia.

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## 1. Re-evaluating the ‘Good City’ From (Post)Pandemic Southeast Asia

In early-2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic was just beginning, the most tangible evidence of the contagion for city-dwellers around the world was perhaps the various markers and signs that redrew their familiar urban landscapes around this new threat. “No-entry” tape cordoning off certain areas, lines and dots marking out safe-distancing requirements, and curfews of many kinds all became increasingly familiar. As the pandemic continued, these and other responses became more numerous and pervasive, both physically and digitally. The diversity of such urban spatial experimentation around COVID-19 is a rich

repository for comparative examination, not just of pandemic responses but also of future city-making. Indeed, just as this crisis has drawn attention to places of “good practice” for public health management, it also compels us to reconsider broader systems of evaluation for identifying the successful or “good” city.

Long before COVID-19, a wide variety of aspirational city ideas have been in circulation. One that has been prominent in academic urban studies for at least two decades is the “global city” – the regulating aim for cities to become centres for finance and other advanced producer service economy functions (Robinson, 2002). Although that particular aspiration has

realistically only ever been open to a small subset of cities around the world, economic-focused measures of urban and national “success” have been applied much more widely. One example is Malaysia’s Vision 2020 goals which from the early 1990s defined becoming “fully developed” in terms of specified GDP targets, and involved sub-national regions trying to “catch-up” with greater KL, as the most economically-advanced part of the country (Bunnell, 2004). However, there has also long been a preponderance of other non- or less economic-centred aspirations and associated criteria of evaluation including the “liveable city”, “inclusive city”, and “smart city”. Indeed, the ideas in this commentary were first presented at a Malaysia-based conference—conceived before the COVID-19 pandemic—around the ideal of “Sustainable Cities for All”.

What we have seen with COVID-19, of course, has been a push for the safe and healthy city. In the short-term, that concern (understandably) trumped other, existing city ideals. However, it must also be understood as intertwined with them. There is only so much to be gained from keeping people safe from disease if, for example, they lose their livelihoods, or an associated acceleration of environmental destruction threatens their long-term means of survival. In 2020, one of us wrote collaboratively about the COVID-19–city planning nexus to foreground the provision of equitable access to health care and “life chances” as one key criterion for evaluation of the “good city” moving forward (Bunnell and Goh, 2020). Life chances here mean both prospects for health and care in the pandemic present, as well as opportunities for flourishing in plans for any “new normal”. In that regard, our ultimate hope has been that it is possible to make better places of the future, incorporating pre-pandemic ideals—including established global commitments and targets, environmental and socio-economic—as well as new priorities and innovations emerging from ongoing pandemic-related experiences.

While moving beyond crudely economic-centred systems of evaluation is as important as ever, issues of economy nonetheless remain a vital component of any plausible notion of the good city. The pandemic has exacerbated economic inequality across the planet and done so in ways that—especially in the global South—threaten a reversal of the poverty alleviation progress made in recent years (United Nations, 2021). It is likely that this will, in turn, have negative effects on education, food security, and long-term health, among other cascading consequences. Conversely, in more equitable and wealthier contexts—where basic subsistence needs and medical services might be assured—focusing on viral health issues alone can diminish urban conviviality in ways that have profound negative consequences for individual mental health.

One thing that the pandemic appears to have taught middle class professionals is that digital technologies can effectively substitute many forms of interaction that would previously have involved physical mobility, including participation in academic conferences (Rachmawati et al., 2021). While this suggests new opportunities to plan cities that are at once smarter, more sustainable, and safer, to what extent can we rely on expanded use of digital communication technologies—and reaffirmation of “smart city” goals—for equitable urban “solutions”? After all,

such technologies tend to have highly uneven rates of accessibility, along the lines of age as well as social class, even in the most affluent and technologically-invested cities (Das and Zhang, 2021). Can the digital city also be an inclusive city? And at what point does the ubiquity of digital modes of communication and social interaction threaten the “in-person” city-ness of urban built environments?

While we certainly do not foresee a wholesale shift away from the city itself as a “good” form of socio-spatial organization, adaptation to the threats posed by the pandemic may well have eroded some of the things that have come to be valued about cities and city-ness. Even beyond formal lockdown situations, in many contexts, the privatization and securitization of public spaces has been accelerated during pandemic times. Not only does that diminish possibilities for cosmopolitan interaction and conviviality, but it often has disproportionately negative impacts for lower-income groups who depend more on access to the streets and public spaces. As others have noted, for many city-dwellers across the planet, “there was no lockdown” (Bhan et al., 2020) as various forms of precarity necessitated continued occupation of shared spaces, and transgressions of safety protocols, for sheer survival. The inverse has been true for many dormitory-confined migrant workers, whose mobilities through shared spaces have been increasingly controlled (Lin and Yeoh, 2021). How, then, can public space and social interaction be balanced with safety? And can that be done in ways that include less affluent and more vulnerable groups?

Of course, these are not just hypothetical questions. As we have already noted, cities have been experimenting, responding to the fluid and evolving pandemic situations they have each been confronted with. Some city authorities have for example used reduced road traffic and parking demand during the pandemic to expand public space; enabling socially-distanced, open-air sociality (see Combs et al., 2020). Others have used the premise of health and safety to crackdown on political dissent (Arao, 2021; Shin et al., 2022). How or whether initiatives in either vein will be sustained is unclear; but certainly, for all its challenges and terrible consequences, the pandemic has also provided opportunities for planning priorities to be “reset” (Martinez and Short, 2021).

To this end, we need to ask not just about the city “for whom” but also “by whom”. Some individuals and institutions have already invoked notions of the Right to the City in relation to pandemic and possibly post-pandemic urban futures (UN-Habitat, 2021). However, it is important to recall David Harvey’s point that the original radical intent of the right to the city was not just about inclusion of all inhabitants in the existing city, but the right for them to contribute to its (re)making in line with their own desires and aspirations (Harvey, 2012). Those kinds of concerns contrast with most of our coverage so far, which has taken a largely top-down planning and policy perspective, both in terms of future models and systems of evaluation for the “good city”. But what are the respective roles of experts/authorities on the one hand, and “ordinary” inhabitants of the city on the other?

We know that what has made or kept many cities “good” – or at least saved them from becoming worse – during the pandemic, has been the individual and collective action of ordinary inhabitants. This has been true to different extents in different places. From our vantage point in Singapore, citizens have been generally compliant in following plans and regulations from ‘above’, and the government has drawn on longstanding State capacity to effectively incorporate digital technology into its pandemic management, albeit subject to wider concerns about privacy and surveillance (Kitchin, 2020). In much of the rest of the Southeast Asian region, however, where the effectiveness of top-down management and reception to it has been more variegated, there are correspondingly more examples of proactive community-based initiatives.

In both Indonesia and Myanmar, studies have suggested not only that pre-existing neighbourhood bonds have been important for mutual-support and help during the pandemic, but that social capital and community efficacy have been strengthened through collective action at the local level (Padawangi, 2022; Perkasa, 2022; Sangsuradej, 2022). Such re-localization and connections to place have positive long-term potential. However, they can also be associated with new boundaries and forms of exclusion, and do not necessarily have a re-distributional component if people already live in socially homogenous residential areas or gated communities. Similar caution needs to be applied to consideration of the “community pantry” initiatives that have proliferated in the Philippines (Dionisio et al., 2021) and Thailand (Chatinakrob, 2022) in this period. The effects of people with more than enough food sharing with those who do not have enough are surely most powerful in mixed neighbourhoods or when socio-economically diverse “communities” extend spatially beyond residential localities. In Malaysia, where the White Flag Movement (#BenderaPutih) gained momentum and support, thought has been put into how to spread “aid” to those who need it most, including through the location of food banks in order to have re-distributional efficacy (Rahman, 2021).

It will be interesting to see how such people-led initiatives play out in relation to government policy and action. Of course, many have arisen in large part because of the inadequacy of government action and infrastructure – so, in Maliq Simone’s felicitous terms, might be understood as extra-state forms of “people as infrastructure” (Simone, 2004). In some contexts (as in the parts of Africa that Simone first wrote about long before COVID-19), this can lead to situations where governments simply abrogate responsibility for social services and support to large segments of cities and associated populations. In parts of Southeast Asia during the pandemic, there are cases where politicians and corporate figures have been very keen to get involved in popular community initiatives—albeit with a variety of motivations. What we can hope is that new forms of community-level mutual assistance allow governments to focus their understandably limited capacity and resources on targeting specific gaps—balancing state-led and bottom-up initiatives in complementary ways.

All of this raises important further questions about future prospects for the “good city” in and beyond Southeast Asia. We

raise three sets of questions in lieu of conclusion, starting from the urban/national context where the “Sustainable Cities for All” conference was held (virtually), and then moving further afield.

First, given the stark contrast between the bottom-up and youth-led #BenderaPutih movement in Malaysia on the one hand, and the top-down Vision 2020 which ended in that year (Bunnell, 2022), after some three decades: Can pandemic response initiatives in Malaysia form the basis for post-Vision 2020 imaginings of the future Malaysian city centred on care, kindness and sharing, rather than GDP targets? In what ways can efforts at shaping the post-pandemic city include aspirations, energy, and innovations of ordinary people, alongside the futuring work of governments, planners and experts of various kinds?

Second, moving out to neighbouring Indonesia, plans for a new national capital city – slowed but not abandoned during the pandemic – may open a range of future-shaping possibilities in addition to clearly grave local ecological concerns (Normile, 2022). Will the “Nusantara” project incorporate progressive planning imaginaries arising from pandemic “reset” time? Might Nusantara even become a prototypal post-pandemic city, spurring critical reflection on planning pasts across the archipelago?

Third, and finally, given the range of pandemic-related urban experimentation – bottom-up and top-down, problematic as well as potentially progressive – it is important that we continue to look out for, and be open to learning from, a variety of elsewhere. As COVID-19 restrictions are being relaxed in much of Southeast Asia – with “no entry” tape and signs fading from the built environment – where should we now be looking to in efforts to realize sustainable cities for all? Where is the good city now?

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