

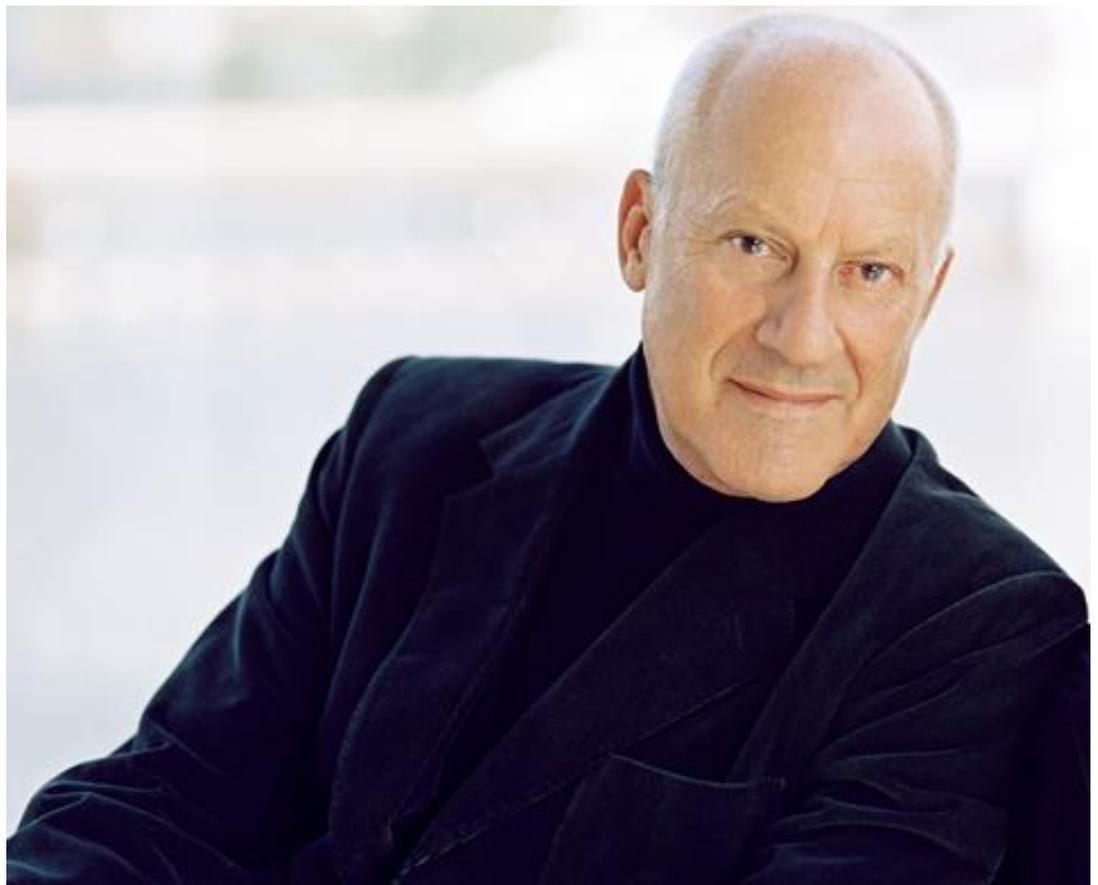
Learning from lockdown: Norman Foster on the future of cities

By Norman Foster | 7 October 2020

The pandemic could accelerate significant change, the Foster & Partners founder told more than 40 city leaders at yesterday's first UN Forum of Mayors

First, I would like to congratulate the UN on recognising, through this gathering, the importance of cities, their mayors and civic leaders. Cities are the future of our society – of our civilisation. The words are interchangeable – civic, civilised, cities, citizens. We all know that the world is urban but, in 30 years' time, 2.5 billion more people will live in cities.

Consider the pace of urbanisation before this pandemic, the equivalent of eight cities the size of New York were emerging annually around the world. In two years, 2011-13, China consumed more concrete than America used in the entire 20th century. Why? Because they are generators of wealth, opportunity, liberation and innovation.



But these powerhouses of our future need day-to-day running – leadership, vision and inspiration. And here I pay tribute to you – the Mayors and the teams that you lead – you are where the action is. Over six decades as an architect and urbanist, through my practice and more recently through my foundation – I have engaged directly with many city mayors and regional governors – so I speak from the heart when I talk about the challenges that you face. I have seen first-hand how, with courage and

foresight, that power can be used to change cities for the good of their citizens. I can think back to working with Pasqual Maragall in Barcelona to get rival TV companies to occupy one single communication tower to avoid a mess on the Barcelona skyline. Often, national leaders are just too removed from the front line to get things done.

Another of the many mayors who I have worked with is Mike Bloomberg, who argues that with collaboration cities, business and citizens can succeed in battling the big issue of our time, notably climate change – because governments are simply too slow and sclerotic.

Where do pandemics come in this discourse? Is covid-19 going to change our cities? I suggest that it might seem so now, but in the wider arc of history, the answer is no.

Instead of change, it has merely hastened, accelerated, trends of change that were already apparent before the pandemic. The only constant is change and cities are forever evolving, learning from each other across continents. Changed by the technologies of their times and by leaders who have the vision to embrace them.

Take London as an example. The Great Fire, 1666, created building codes that led to fireproof brick construction. The cholera epidemic, of the mid-19th century, cleaned up the Thames from an open sewer and was the birth of modern sanitisation. In its wake came the healthy dimension of public parks. Then tuberculosis struck and helped the birth of the modern movement in architecture – big windows, sunlight, terraces, white and clean. But every one of those consequences – fireproof construction, sewers, green parks, modernism – would have happened anyway and not just in London but in cities around the world, because cities learn from each other – each crisis hastened and magnified the inevitable.

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It has been said: if you want to look far ahead, then first look far back. History tells us that the future is not two metre distancing. The last major pandemic 1918-20, claimed more lives and young ones, created deserted city centres, face masks, lockdowns and quarantines. Sounds familiar? It also heralded the social and cultural revolution of the 1920s, with big public gathering spaces, department stores, cinemas and stadia.

What, after this pandemic, will the equivalents be for our coming age? What defines us? It's mobility. Mobility of people, goods and information at a time of climate change and decarbonisation. Look at some trends of change in mobility. Some with us – some on the way. Many are being implemented by the mayors here today:

- :: Clean electric vehicles – away from fossil driven.
- :: Induction charging on the move.
- :: Driverless, densely packed, nose-to-tail.
- :: Young people less interested in ownership.
- :: Their embrace of ride sharing and on-demand services like Uber.
- :: Rise of e-bikes and scooters.
- :: Prospect of drone technology to move goods and people.
- :: Much less space needed for vehicles.
- :: Car parks could be obsolete.
- :: Monorails could have a new future

Look at some trends of change in the patterns of working:

- :: More working from home or a third place, which could be an electronic Starbucks in the high street or a retreat in the high Alps.
- :: A greater appreciation of the benefits and need for face-to -face contact in the traditional workplace, but with a far greater emphasis on social spaces and healthy environmental systems.
- :: More flexible hours and less travel.

We now have scientific evidence to prove that green buildings with natural ventilation are not only good for your health, but they enable you to perform better. These kinds of buildings are now the exception. But they could become mainstream.

We also have proof that green spaces in cities – however big or small – contribute to health and wellbeing. I have worked with civic leaders over several decades in the German Duisburg to bring green and progression to what could have been a rust belt.

Finally, some trends on industry and culture:

:: Globalisation has lifted billions out of poverty but created local rust belt communities of despair. So, a better balance of local and global is on the way and each city could play a part.

:: Industry is no longer about smokestacks. Urban manufacturing is clean, creates jobs and can reinvigorate the economy.

:: Encouraging culture in spaces for the arts is another economic lifeline.

:: Urban farming once a reality in cities past, could enjoy a renaissance in the future – hydroponics uses a fraction of precious water, make for greater yields to deliver fresher, cheaper, more flavourful food on the city's doorstep. Imagine an urban version of the farmers' market. An obsolete multi-storey car park makes the ideal urban farm.

The cumulative effect of just some of these many trends are transforming city centres and local neighbourhoods, making them quieter, cleaner, safer, healthier, more friendly, walkable, bikeable and, if the opportunity is grasped, to be greener.

As less space is needed for transport, we could see increased paved public space, avenues of trees, mini parks, new terraces using radiant technology to be cooler in summer, warmer in winter. Trees beautify as well as absorbing Co2 to improve the air quality.

This is what I mean when I say that covid-19 has accelerated more sustainable and equitable trends. Many of you at this event have embraced change with enthusiasm and, through leadership, have brought your citizens with you – setting new standards for all.

What is new? Attitudes – a public attitude of mind that is more open to change than ever before

Neighbourhoods have seen a resurgence in appeal with the tag of the “15-minute city” – where living, working, dining, learning, being entertained and entertaining can all happen within walking distance. This is not new, but it has been boosted by the pandemic, and by design could be improved.

Some dense communities have not seen higher infection rates than the suburbs. The problem is dense cramped households, which could be within cities or suburbs alike – already an issue before the pandemic. Affordable housing remains a challenge and is linked to the homeless issue.

Some of these trends are not new. I led the changes that transformed Trafalgar Square, in the heart of London, and rescued the Port of Marseilles from traffic, to bring it back to a neighbourhood. I

witnessed in America Boston's big dig, in Europe Madrid's Rio Project and in Asia Seoul's city centre – all have created vast new green parks out of highways from the past.

So, what is new? Attitudes – a public attitude of mind that is more open to change than ever before and with that a new range of opportunities to improve the quality of life for urban citizens as well as helping to combat climate change.

Buildings and transportation, between them, account for 42% of greenhouse gas emissions. So the dense, compact pedestrian-friendly European city is a model of sustainability and sociability, compared with the sprawling car borne gas guzzling metropolis. Now is the time to make it even more compact and liveable. City planning should not be two-dimensional paperwork – the reality is in three dimensions and should be modelled accordingly.

Public spaces are outdoor rooms. Culture, clean industry, leisure, commerce, shopping and housing can all co-exist side by side but that needs changing attitudes to zoning. On the question of housing, if the market is unable to address issues of equality with the right kind of affordable accommodation then, as in the past, that could be a civic initiative. When I was a young student, some of the most outstanding public housing was commissioned by city authorities.

In the move to making cities self-sustaining, barriers between different interest groups and professions need to be relaxed in a holistic approach. An obvious example is when those concerned with waste work with the energy sector to convert waste to energy – but there are many other examples of such synergies.

The pandemic is a tragic event for so many. We have all lost loved ones and for the moment the virus continues. But, stepping back, I am confident that cities will prove their resilience and appeal – they will bounce back stronger and better as a consequence. We are all of us grateful for the untiring efforts and leadership that you, the mayors and civic leaders are achieving in these difficult times and looking beyond into a bright future.