Is the pandemic a hope for planning? Two doubts

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic represents one of the critical events of the current times. Numerous authors believe the pandemic seriously changes the discussion, including urban policy. However, as the months since the pandemic outbreak has passed, some doubts have been raised. Were the hopes expressed at the first stage of the pandemic even correct? And what, concretely, should the proposed changes look like in the different (so strongly differentiated) countries and cities? An excellent illustration of the original early hopes was Ihnji Jon’s essay published in 2020, "A manifesto for planning after the coronavirus: Towards planning of care." Among other things, the author attempted to define a new pandemic-determined approach to planning. She identified some directions. These include inclusive planning practising a 'veil of ignorance', planning for care in humankind, extending care to other beings, and a call to rethink the relationship between nature and human intervention.

I share the assessments, demands, and emotions expressed in the essay. I find them visionary and interestingly formulated. However, after reading the text 2 years after its publication, in a somewhat different reality, I begin to have two kinds of doubts. The first doubt is whether the pandemic has a significant impact (on a global scale) on the directions of urban policies and whether subsequent events have not complicated earlier diagnoses. The second doubt concerns how legitimate demands are transferred to concrete urban policies. Here, I am primarily puzzled by the context of legal solutions in urban planning. At the same time, already at this stage, it is worth signalling that the issues taken up by the author have found continuity in other publications. One can point to the detailed delineation of the planes of urban policy response to the pandemic (Sharifi and Khavarian-Garmsir, 2020) and the emphasis on the role (and necessity) of linking urban policy to health policy (Frumkin, 2021). There have also been views about the inadequacy of the pandemic challenge of the 'friendly cities’ solutions practised so far (Moreno et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the concerns signalled above are also valid.

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Are hopes from the time of the pandemic outbreak justified?

The author points out that the pandemic should be the basis for an in-depth reflection, including on the protection of the vulnerable and a redefinition of the approach to the environment. However, another element must be added here, somewhat complicating the postulate indicated. During the pandemic, new positive social trends were observed, and the development of negative trends. From my perspective, it is particularly significant that in the later stages of the pandemic, significant parts of society refused to be vaccinated. It needs to be considered more broadly as a barrier illustrating, among other things, the level of social capital in many communities. Refusal to vaccinate on a broader scale means ignoring scientific and health demands and social solidarity. It is, moreover, a broader process. One gets the impression that the voices questioning (from a populist perspective) the scientific demands also apply to the sphere of climate protection. Perhaps the author’s phrase invoked that we humans ‘are the virus’ is still valid?

On the one hand, this is due to distrust, often ignorance, of scientific theses. On the other hand, it is related to a higher appreciation of one’s freedom and (specifically understood) privileges. What is particularly puzzling is the large scale of such attitudes, in my view, just revealed on the occasion of the pandemic. Consequently, this is translated into the attitudes of politicians, including those in public power. Therefore, the outpouring of empathy caused by the first wave of the pandemic (as mentioned by the author in her text) may be obscured by subsequent events. It will make it significantly more difficult in many cities to implement ‘inclusive planning under cover of ignorance’ and redefine the relationship between nature and human intervention. There is an increasing risk of accentuating individual self-interest at the expense of the community and of expanding uncontrolled human interference in the environmental and natural sphere.

On a broader scale, this is exacerbated by global political events. Also, the war in Ukraine theoretically creates barriers to redefining the optimal relationship between nature and human interventions. In addition to the direct consequences, this is noticeable in the indirect sphere concerning the direction of public debates. The rising cost of living makes populist politicians increasingly willing (and effective) to treat such demands as unlivable pipe dreams. Arguably, the subject’s approach varies from city to city, country to country and continent to continent. Of course, it is still possible to implement the author’s ideas in a significant number of cities, at least to some extent.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to bear in mind the increasing social and political barriers and their unexpected, difficult-to-predict direction mentioned above. Referring to the author’s reflections, I have a rather sad feeling. It may not be a direction that guarantees an apocalypse. Still, 2 years after the pandemic outbreak (and the formulation of the first diagnoses), I assess that it is more negative than positive. Various examples can be given here. In Poland, the public’s lack of willingness to vaccinate is also an expression of deepening desensitisation to the needs (and risks) of others.

On the other hand, the central administration’s lack of sensitivity to environmental and natural issues contributed significantly to the outbreak of a major environmental disaster in August 2022 – poisoning the Oder River. Similar trends can be seen in other countries. So, perhaps humanity has paradoxically become even less vulnerable after the pandemic
than before. And for at least part of the community, is it impossible to have a whole discussion about implementing the postulates proposed by the author? I am very curious to hear the author’s opinion on this.

**Change of planning and the legal dimension**

The second issue concerns how the proposals contained in the article are implemented. Let us optimistically assume that, despite everything, there is such a will in many states and cities. The question arises as to how to implement the postulates indicated. Indeed, much depends on the broader concepts formulated (depending on the regime of the country in question) at the levels of the various public authorities. Undoubtedly, such concepts will also refer to views developed in the literature, e.g. regarding the Right to the City and spatial justice.

Nevertheless, in some cities, generally formulated demands are not enough. Besides, due to the barriers I mentioned below, pushing through rather detailed demands and solutions will sometimes be more manageable. From my (also legal) perspective, it is particularly puzzling whether it is possible to develop concrete, precise demands related to urban spatial policies. In many cities, the key instruments can be described as spatial plans, which define both urban zones and specific development parameters. There are, of course, very considerable variations in the systems of individual countries.

Nevertheless, some directional proposals to the content of urban spatial plans, perhaps, would be a practical implementation of the general postulates. I think this ties in with the author’s call for a discussion of planning practice. Concerning the above:

— the postulate of planning practice "veil of ignorance" can be broadly translated into the optimal content of urban spatial plans. Again, the concept of Right to the City should be invoked here as an interesting basis for taking care of the position of the diverse social/ethnic-religious groups living in the city. The very process of zoning in spatial plans should therefore take place with the participation of representatives of the respective groups. In addition, the development parameters (e.g. building height) defined in spatial plans should also be defined in a way that is inclusive for the users of the city. This approach should be guaranteed by legal solutions describing the planning procedure. In my view, this is achievable. A particular point of reference could also be (subject to terminological discrepancies) the public interest in some countries (Sheydayi and Dadashpoor 2022);

— the demand for more in-depth care in our (human) kind can also be appropriately applied to the content and execution of spatial plans. It can be pointed out that the relationship between spatial policy and health policy needs particular emphasis. In many countries, there is an insufficient degree of integration of the indicated spheres (Afrin et al., 2021; Dockeril et al., 2021). The consequence has been noticeable, especially during pandemic waves, problems related to quick access to hospitals and health facilities. A separate context is the design of health facilities so that the environmental-natural dimension in treatment is adequate. These issues, too, translate into adequate zoning and building parameters in cities;
— it is worth addressing the demand for a redefinition of the relationship between nature and human intervention. Translating this into urban policies, particularly spatial policy, it is necessary to point to the need to develop some optimum level of environmental-nature goals in cities. Such steps are, of course, very often taken, but in my opinion, they are far from sufficient in many countries. On the one hand, this could be the proportion of land devoted to parks and green spaces and to green infrastructure. On the other hand, it could be the development parameters and the specific building design contained therein. The spatial plans with the solutions indicated can be one of the main points of reference for the debate in this area.

Ending

As the author rightly points out, the coronavirus convinced us that people are not invincible. Nevertheless, we begin to forget this on the first reflection, frequently focusing on developing our own needs, rights, and expectations even more broadly. It is, therefore, possible that we do not take advantage of this warning. It makes it all the more worthwhile, in addition to directional demands, to broaden the debate on specific (but at the same time universal) possibilities for their implementation. In my opinion, the legal and planning context is important here. A detailed analysis of this context could provide the basis for new, even more, powerful strands of debate. Therefore, I think it is worth considering international, interdisciplinary cooperation, which will result in in-depth reflections on how to translate the author’s postulates into the concrete sphere of legal and urban planning spatial solutions in cities.

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