

# Making sense of the impact of Covid-19: planning, politics, and the public good

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We live in interesting times. A global pandemic combined with a global recession combined with a once-in-a-generation national infrastructure investment is so far from our typical frames of reference that it is difficult to make sense of it all.

To complicate matters, while there is certainty that the Government are going to significantly increase the national debt to offset the expected drop in private sector investment and consumer confidence, there is still a lot of uncertainty concerning how, when, and where that money will be spent, what the impacts might be, and how they should be managed.

There are loud calls for transformation, alongside loud calls for rapid recovery. Claims of urgent financial support from one ailing sector are jostling against arguments to use the stimulus to create new ways of working. Some demand faster decisions that limit opportunities for citizen involvement, while others raise cautionary tales of the known problems fast tracking can bring. Meanwhile, a number of advocates argue passionately for a greener economy and climate change focused investment, at the same time as the Infrastructure Minister Shane Jones [raises worrying concerns, not just about 'red-tape', but 'green-tape' too](#).

It feels like urban planning is at the precipice—which arguments, ideologies, and lobby groups will influence urban futures the most? The scale of investment guarantees this will be an opportunity, but we do not yet know which ideas will shape it, or what impacts will be increased or reduced.

One way of making sense of this fluid situation is to recognise that crises do not necessarily lead to any logical set of responses. They are better understood as creating new political spaces. Spaces that can be occupied by powerful ideas, or indeed, powerful groups. While, as we are currently seeing in Aotearoa New Zealand, we see fresh thinking concerning alternative possible futures, there is also a history of political short-termism and a compelling desire to restore business-as-usual.

Rather depressingly, the evidence from scholars of crises suggests that despite the increasing prevalence of global crises—whether financial, pandemic, environmental, or even about housing or infrastructure—transformation is rare. In the wake of the Global Financial Crisis for example, we saw similar innovative ideas emerge, comparable calls for a 'green' recovery, or calls to avoid future crises, such as by separating the more speculative arms of banking from those that managed our mortgages. Time has since demonstrated how this played out. We bounced back, rather than bounced forward. The structures remained broadly intact and much of the systemic financial risks remain, albeit with a larger financial buffer in some countries.

It is also quite difficult to say what the focus of post-pandemic urban planning should be. For instance, urban density initially seemed very significant as the data on infection rates began to be collated, but it is now apparent that the key concerns of epidemiologists and indicators of success were not about urban form. They were related more to wider societal issues, such as how quickly a government was prepared to act on uncertain information and take the difficult decision to lock down, the preparedness of the health system, the ways vulnerable people were protected, or the ways that risks were communicated to the public who changed behaviour in response.

Sure, there was a spatial dimension, and spatial constraints, but we have seen very dense cities and countries performing better than those more sparsely populated. We also now know that the choice posited by some of protecting the economy or protecting the health of people was a false one; in hindsight, locking down hard and fast may have been the [best economic decision as well as the best one for health](#).

However, while it is difficult to say what the impact of Covid-19 will be on urban planning there are lessons we can learn from previous crises and opportunities we can still seize.

The key message I'd like to emphasise is that, regardless of your views, we need to recognise the convergence of crises has opened up what academics refer to as a 'properly political moment'—one of those rare opportunities for genuine change—and contribute to the new debates these entail. Other groups push for the status quo, particularly those with established capacity and expertise in PR and lobbying, many of whom benefit from business-as-usual. To compound matters, given the amount of additional national debt a return to the status quo may mean we are now in a worse position to respond to the next crisis that comes along.

I was asked in this article to provide thoughts on what the future of urban planning may hold, and, as you can tell, I ended up in a slightly different intellectual place. You see, the future is being made around us right now and the only thing I can say for certain is that if you are concerned with social or environmental change, now is the time to act. The lessons from previous crises are clear. The new political space is open, for a while at least, and history argues that this scale of investment will probably not be repeated in the working lives of many readers.

It is uncomfortable being political, but it is part of our responsibility as academics or experts to use the knowledge we have to benefit society. We tend to do this in preparing specific plans or projects, now the stakes are much higher. The temptation in crises is to predict the future, to assess how bad it may get and then respond to the impacts. But, I think we can go further than that. I think now is the time to be more active as a community of impact assessors by drawing upon our knowledge of the impacts of current structures and practices, the ways they were unsustainable, unequal, or unjust, to create new debates and try to create a different future. There is a wealth of expertise in this sector, perhaps it's time to use it in a different way for the public good.