



# Responding to COVID-19 in the Liverpool City Region

Urban Psychology and Urban Design:  
Transforming Cities After COVID-19

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## Map of Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) boundary (in red) and constituent local authorities



Data sources: Westminster parliamentary constituencies (December 2018 - ONS), local authority districts (December 2018 - ONS), and combined authorities (December 2018 - ONS)

# Urban Psychology and Urban Design: Transforming Cities After COVID-19

## Key takeaways

1. COVID-19 is a psychological as well as a health and economic pandemic. Resilience must also therefore be framed within an emotional context, which will have a bearing on the success of other health and economic measures.
2. The pandemic has impacted cities and disadvantaged communities hardest, where mental health was already twice as bad on some measures than in non-urban areas. Any policy response must work in these places if it is to work anywhere.
3. The importance of urban areas will not reduce as a result of COVID-19, and in some ways they may become more important. But the things that people value about cities, their expectations of amenities such as green spaces and active travel infrastructure, and the way they interact with them, has already fundamentally changed.
4. The impacts of COVID-19 – including lockdown, social distancing and a widely-felt desire for a reset of the economy – all have significant implications for urban design. A re-energising of urban design is required, which will only succeed if it takes a psychologically informed approach to understanding shifting behaviours and values.
5. A growing movement towards an “urban psychology” – better understanding the links between person and place – was taking place before the pandemic, and must now be resourced and connected to urban design, prospectively adapting the interdisciplinary practice of the Bauhaus for the modern day.

## 1. Introduction

Urban mental health is worse than non-urban, and has deteriorated further due to COVID-19, which has hit cities and communities experiencing deprivation the hardest. Cities will not reduce in importance following the pandemic, but the experience of lockdown will likely create a value-shift in the things we attach most importance to, and what we want from our cities in the future. Deprivation is a key driver of poor health outcomes on all measures, particularly where people are living in run-down conditions, but we must be careful about how we create change and avoid fracturing critical socio-cultural networks in regeneration processes.

A reinvigoration of urban design is therefore critical to enabling cities to succeed. Urban design thinking will be most powerful if it is combined with an emerging new “urban psychology”, which itself should be supported and resourced

to help everyone, and particularly vulnerable communities, live better lives in our cities. Seeing cities through the lens of psychology offers new possibilities for understanding how cities impact on us, and us upon them. While there have been notable attempts to address this, psychology remains a largely untapped resource for urbanists. This policy briefing focuses on the urgent need to develop such an approach in the light of COVID-19, in particular a more psychologically-informed urban design.

## 2. The mental health challenge for cities posed by COVID-19

COVID-19 is a health and economic pandemic, but also a psychological one, impacting profoundly on mental and emotional wellbeing. A universally shared experience of isolation, the paradox of being “alone together”, rubs painfully against the grain of human need for contact. Loneliness and “aleness” are

not the same thing, however. The latter may be a positive choice, giving time for reflection and calm, whereas loneliness is perhaps defined by a lack of choice.

Before COVID-19, a growing “loneliness epidemic” was already recognised in the UK. The Commission on Loneliness, set up by Member of Parliament Jo Cox, before her untimely death, found that nine million people in the UK experience loneliness (Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness 2017). It is associated with a 50 per cent increase in mortality from any cause, comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day, and considered more dangerous than obesity.

The paradox of city life is that loneliness is worse in densely populated urban areas than non-urban (Henning-Smith et al. 2019). That is not to accept a fantasised idyll of village life – loneliness can be just as damaging in rural areas – but far more people live in cities in the UK, where loneliness is hidden by the crowd, heightened by the contrast of apparently universal social interaction.

Loneliness might not be described as a mental health condition, but it certainly impacts on mental health, and there is a deeper issue at play in cities in this respect. Mental health is generally worse in urban than non-urban areas, twice as bad on some measures, with higher prescribing rates for anxiety and depression. As architect Suzanne Lennard observed, “if we had deliberately aimed to make cities that create loneliness we could hardly have been more successful” (cited in Rao 2018).

We need to be clear that cities are not the problem, and can instead be the solution to broader issues of community wellbeing. Tackling such urgent and interconnected challenges as climate change, social cohesion and inequality has to work in cities if it is to work anywhere. The same can be said for mental health.

### **3. Deprivation is a major concern for Liverpool City Region, but beware the obvious solutions**

The reasons for worse urban mental health are not entirely understood. What is clear is that higher levels of poor mental health are, like most other health issues, closely associated with deprivation, itself higher and more concentrated in cities. This is particularly an issue for Liverpool City Region (LCR), rated in 2015 as having the highest deprivation levels of any Local Enterprise Partnership area in England, with persistent multiple deprivation worsening in a number of places since that point (Liverpool City Council 2020). Antidepressant prescribing rates are 60% higher in some parts of the LCR than the UK average, and two LCR local authority areas have some of the highest levels of people living with mental ill health in the UK (Dunn 2016).

We are only just beginning to understand the intimate connections between place and mental wellbeing, but strong evidence is emerging of the links between poor physical environments and poor mental health. This includes higher rates of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in deprived areas, resulting not from a single incident, but rather from the “slow violence” effects of living in poverty in a run-down place.

We should be careful, however, not to make assumptions about demolition and spatial restructuring as a panacea. Evidence emerging from new applications of psychology, including neuroscience, tells us that intricate and delicate social networks are woven around built environments, which are incredibly important to people who have scant resources. In fact, these networks are amongst their most important resources, allowing informal support for childcare, loans, basic safety, a sense of belonging and stability. When regeneration displaces people in a manner that ignores them, the

results can be catastrophic for mental and physical health. US urban psychiatrist Mindy Fullilove has described this as “Root Shock”; a literal destruction of someone’s world as they know it, even if it were imperfect (Fullilove 2004).

#### **4. Urban Psychology offers new insights from which the LCR can benefit**

It is astonishing then that psychology is not at the heart of urban policy and place making. With notable exceptions, it has rarely been considered, impoverishing an urban toolkit which could be deeply enriched by even a casual stroll through the different branches of psychology.

This is changing. Psychologists, urbanists, planners and economists are starting to work together, developing an “urban psychology”. Based on a publication exploring the links between psychology and cities (Landry and Murray 2017), Europe’s first Urban Psychology Summit took place in June 2019, supported by the Heseltine Institute and the British Council. This was a major milestone along this journey. Highlights from the summit have been published in a special edition of the [\*Journal of Urban Regeneration & Renewal\*](#), concluding that there can be no regeneration unless there is first a “regeneration in support of life itself” (Boyle et al. 2020).

In a post-coronavirus world, utilising urban psychology has never been more important. A start has been made, but we now need to double down and place more effort on leveraging this resource for those who live in cities, and here in the UK, indeed in the LCR, we could lead the way.

To misquote Mark Twain, talk of the death of cities has been greatly exaggerated. The idea of the UK’s 55 million urban population suddenly upping sticks for suburbia or the countryside seems

logistically improbable, and is simply not a choice for many. Major investors and employers are if anything showing increased interest in cities’ highly skilled, hyper-local labour markets, around which they can build shorter supply chains, reducing reliance on complex global links which have been disrupted.

Cities are not going anywhere for the foreseeable future, but that is not to say they will not change. The experiences of lockdown, for example living in a high rise without access to open space or basic amenities, will change the things that we value about cities, and what we demand from them. Ideas like Mayor of Paris Anne Hidalgo’s 15-minute city, or the architect Richard Rogers’ 2km neighbourhood – where the basics of life are within easy reach – are likely to resurface. The value we attach to open space and greenery, already well-understood as life enhancing, will increase.

A reassessment of our relationship with the urban outdoors is already happening: access to shared space within and alongside buildings, pedestrianisation, wider pavements, and narrower roads, are just some components of the built environment undergoing enhanced local scrutiny. Having spent prolonged periods within them, we are also likely to attach more value to the quality of internal spaces within our homes and what we can see from them, including good urban vistas.

#### **5. Urban design for excellence in the everyday**

There is therefore both a massive challenge and opportunity for urban design to respond not just to the impacts of COVID-19, but to reach deeper beneath the surface of the human-urban interface to increase the quality of urban life immensely in ways that arguably we should have done long ago.

**Figure 1:** Liverpool parklet design



(Source: [Liverpool City Council](#))

An example is [Liverpool Without Walls](#), a collaborative project between Liverpool City Council, Liverpool BID Company and Liverpool Chamber of Commerce, who have been supported by Arup and Meritsem Design to reimagine the urban landscape through the prism of social distancing. This ongoing project is creating a series of parklets, allowing the hospitality for which the city is so renowned to re-establish itself in the open air – see Figure 1.

Our future focus should not be on urban design as window dressing for those that can afford it, or iconic buildings that can feel remote. Instead we must achieve pragmatic excellence in the everyday cityscape, and here the evidence tells us, design really matters. Schools that are easier to learn in, hospitals where design and views of greenery help people heal, housing that is a home in a

neighbourhood that is a community, and spaces – many more public spaces – that will be the new iconic emblems of far-thinking City Regions like Liverpool.

Urban design is already capable of delivering this. Through the work of the former Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), as well publications like the *Urban Design Compendium* (Llewelyn-Davies 2000), much evidence was advanced for what does and does not work in revitalising city spaces. So why aren't we already there?

Just as we started to become fluent in urban design, recession and austerity hit. With few exceptions, urban design fell off the government policy agenda at a time when we really needed it – good design ultimately saves public money in the long run rather than costing more.



High Line Park, New York (Credit: [Simon Bak](#))

Our understanding of how the built environment impacts on emotional and mental well-being has increased greatly in recent years, for example through the work of the [Centre for Urban Design and Mental Health](#), as well as the rise of a new wave of urban psychology. This psychologically informed approach has not yet made its way into the mainstream of urban design, and if we are serious about addressing the quality of urban life post-COVID, bringing these strands together has to be a priority.

## 6. Do we need a Bauhaus-style vision to drive change?

2019 was the centenary of the founding of the Bauhaus in Weimar, Germany, perhaps the world's most influential design movement, which impacted on cities immensely. As part of the [Bristol Future City Festival](#) we staged an interactive event and posed the question: if the Bauhaus had not been closed down by

the Nazis, or if we were to reinvent it now, what would it be doing?

The answer is that it would have shifted from looking at individual objects and buildings, to the whole of a place, using its unique inter-disciplinary methods to bring together artists and designers, but also psychologists, planners, economists, geographers and others.

Our cities are at a watershed moment. They are not in danger of disappearing, but issues of quality and deprivation which already dogged them have been heightened by COVID-19. The cities that successfully address this and make quality design commonplace are those most likely to pull ahead of the pack. A "Bauhaus Now" approach would help, perhaps not as an institution, more a movement or collective of institutions, coupled with a concerted attempt to create a psychologically informed approach to the way we design our cities.

Walter Gropius, the Bauhaus founder, believed beauty in the built environment to be a human right for all; as important as any other freedom (MacCarthy 2019). That's a great guiding principle for bringing urban design back onto the policy agenda in a big way, but we must go further.

A beautiful environment may be a partial antidote to the mental and emotional stresses of city life in a post-COVID world. To make real progress however, the understanding psychology brings to the table has to extend into local social and political processes. Citizens must own, and therefore co-produce their environment, in a meaningful way, with the designer as interpreter and mediator of needs and desires, not sole visionary.

Local democratic leadership is far better placed to deliver this change than national level institutions. In Liverpool and its wider City Region, as in some other urban areas in the UK and elsewhere, we can already see that leadership in action, with the potential to go further and lead the way for others.

Combining political and social processes with urban psychology can be an incredibly powerful tool to address many challenges in our urbanising world. Not just the impacts of COVID-19 on city life, or even the effects of poor quality place making on communities experiencing deprivation, but how we can all inhabit our cities with an increasing and long-lasting sense of ease.

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