
COVID-19 Impact & Policy Bulletin 4

Public Realm:
New Attitudes and Adaptations

29 September 2020

Introduction and Overview

This is the fourth Bulletin summarising discussions within the World Cities Culture Forum about the impact of COVID-19 and policy responses.

It draws on information shared between member cities and additional research and analysis covering:

- How world cities are responding to COVID-19 – in support of the cultural sector and culture's role in recovery
- Key challenges & opportunities for culture
- City actions & innovations
- Emerging patterns & regional variations
- Questions for city leaders

It is designed for: WCCF member cities; to inform broader global discussion on how best to respond to COVID-19; and plan for recovery and reinvention.

Pandemics have reshaped cities throughout history. COVID-19 has shifted attitudes to the use of public space and cities have adapted with unprecedented speed. Some of these changes are becoming permanent presenting opportunities and risks for culture in cities.

For inquiries please
contact:

Genevieve Marciniak:
Genevieve.Marciniak@
worldcitiescultureforum.
com

For more information:
www.worldcitiescultureforum.com

How COVID-19 is affecting public realm and culture in cities

COVID-19 has changed how we use public realm

Mobility

Less movement between places; more within places.

Hyperlocal

Even as lockdowns lift we stay close to home.

New activities

Activities have shifted from private, indoor to public, outdoor spaces.

Access

Disadvantaged neighbourhoods are often poor in public space.

Cities have adapted with unprecedented speed

Infrastructure

Rapid roll-out of new infrastructure, particularly for active travel.

Temporary uses

Rapid switching of use to meet urgent needs.

Regulation

Permits and taxation relaxed.

Confidence

Incentives to encourage people back into public realm.

Opportunities and risks For culture in cities

Engagement

Culture can make the public realm more welcoming and accessible.

Culture in neighbourhoods

Hyper local. Cities are bringing culture to citizens directly

New spaces

Imaginative uses create new, often outdoor, cultural venues.

City centres

Organisations dependent on visitor and tourists are hit hard.

COVID 19 changes public realm use...

Mobility is down

- [A study by Gehl](#) looks at use of public space in Copenhagen and three other cities in Denmark. It shows less movement from residential districts to city centres, or between residential districts, but people are still moving around their neighbourhoods and using public realm.

Public realm site for new activities

- With indoor venues or household visiting restricted, outdoor public spaces take on new importance for [socialising](#) and even work.

We have become hyperlocal

- Even as lockdowns lift, people are using local services more. This can be seen most clearly in attitudes to [shopping](#) or working from home: pre-pandemic only 13% of Germans or 11% of Italians [worked remotely](#).

But access is unequal

- The pandemic has heightened inequalities. Disadvantaged citizens, with less space at home, also often have [less access to local public realm](#).

Cities respond with unprecedented speed

New infrastructure that would normally take years is delivered in weeks

- Milan's [Piazze Aperte](#) scheme started in 2018, but was accelerated during the pandemic.
- It transformed 15 spaces in the city into public and cultural spaces using tactical urbanism: simple elements like street furniture, plants, asphalt art.
- Very fast as a result: 3 months planning; 15 days construction. A second stage will make changes permanent.
- Community co-design with a design team in the City of Milan integrating design thinking and aesthetics.

There are strong reactions for and against - cities must be brave and communicate positively

Cities respond with unprecedented speed

Imaginative use of temporary space

- San Francisco [opened the Presidio golf course](#) to the public during a 'shelter in place' order to help with demand for public space and alleviate risks of crowding.
- Vilnius turned Lithuania's largest airport into an [outdoor cinema](#).

Regulation of public space is relaxed

- Businesses have been allowed to take over pavement space and parking spaces in cities including [Rotterdam](#), [Madrid](#) and [Paris](#).
- In Italy, a national decree included a tax exemption on public space for bars and restaurants until October.
- Berlin has granted permits for new, independently-organised [open-air events across the city's green spaces](#).

Incentives build confidence to re-enter public spaces

- UK [Eat out to Help Out](#) provided discounts to over 100 million restaurant meals in August.
- Japan [Go To scheme](#) 2 million domestic tourist trips subsidized since July.

Opportunities and risks for culture

Bringing culture to neighbourhoods

- With people spending more time close to their homes, cities are bringing culture closer to them.
- [Cultura Puerta a Puerta](#) in Buenos Aires delivers books to the doors of those over the age of 70.
- In Helsinki, the [Art Gifts](#) app allows cultural organisations to organise intimate live performances, bringing culture to public space next to where people live.

New spaces are opening up for culture

- In the US, [Back to the Streets](#), began pre-COVID-19 but galvanised during pandemic. It matches artists, sponsors and business owners to create new public murals across the country.
- The Greenwich and Docklands International Festival was the UK's first [full live arts festival](#) after lockdown, took place at 19 outdoor venues in London, including bringing events to residents' doorsteps
- In Sao Paulo, bus stops and other signage have been used for photography and art exhibitions.

Culture makes public realm more accessible

- As COVID-19 adaptations become permanent, culture can help new public spaces be more accessible, welcoming and used by all citizens. Cities have used imaginative interventions in the past.
- [Piano City Milano](#) features piano performances from, streets, squares and balconies, including more reclaimed or unexpected spaces and venues
- Examples of how culture can engage people in the public realm:
 - Rome's [OperaCamion](#) took performances to neighbourhoods on the back of a truck.
 - The Hong Kong [Museum of Art on Wheels](#) takes a truck of interactive games developed from museum collections to neighbourhood spaces across the city.

City centres face exceptional challenges

- Many significant cultural institutions are key place makers in city centres. With workers, visitors and tourists staying away, they face major challenges.
- Support schemes are in place in many cities focussed on major institutions. Arts Council England, for example have a [loan scheme](#) with a minimum application of £3 million.

Questions for city leaders...

- People are staying local: how do we manage the impact on city centres?
- The 15 minute city: can we provide people's cultural needs within their neighbourhoods?
- The need for public space has highlighted inequalities: what does equitable access look like?
- Winter is coming in the Northern Hemisphere: how do we adapt to colder weather?
- Infection rates are increasing among the young: how do we provide safe space for young people?
- Adaptations have been quick: how can culture help make them sustainable?

About World Cities Culture Forum

The World Cities Culture Forum is the leading network of senior policy-makers from 40 world cities providing global leadership on culture.

We are a collaborative network of influential city leaders championing culture across urban policy.

City members share experiences, develop knowledge and grow leadership.

This bulletin is part of the WCCF programme for 2020-21:

Response, Recovery, Reinvention

1. **Response** – Phase one responds to the current crisis cities are facing through weekly briefings, webinars, virtual events and analysis bulletins
2. **Recovery** – Phase two adapts and extends our existing programme to answer the central questions about recovery for culture in cities
3. **Reinvention** – Phase three looks to the future of culture in cities. What have we learnt? What are the new opportunities? What does city leadership look like?