

For the Love of Cities – 2020 and Beyond

I am known as the “City Love Guy” and it is my job to be relentlessly positive about cities, towns, villages, burbs, exurbs, etc. So, it is not typical for me lead with a negative, but here goes. 2020 sucked. Let’s just say it. By any objective measure it was an awful year: The pandemic, the senseless deaths of George Floyd, Breona Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery (and many more), job loss, economic turmoil, stress, isolation and political divisions that run so deep they seem to draw blood. When something is awful, human nature wants to move quickly past it and try to forget it. However, I think it does us all a disservice to simply brand 2020 an “awful year” and move on from it like a bad smell.

This past year has been hard. Things will likely get even harder before we emerge at a new equilibrium point that feels “normal” again. While it is hard, now is a time to think about what trends and opportunities have come out of 2020 and what lessons we have learned.

“Fleeing the City”

In 2020, there emerged an idea that cities were receding and that the suburbs and rural areas were going to see major population growth moving forward. Some believed that the pandemic unleashed an anti-density wave that will move more and more people away from bigger, denser cities. Certainly, there was short-term evidence of that during the pandemic’s height in 2020 as story after story highlighted people moving out of cities like New York for suburban locations. New York was one of the hardest hit areas during the early days of the pandemic, so it makes sense that many, especially those with the economic means, might look to move elsewhere.

Even before the pandemic, the popular rise of urban living that began at the onset of the 2010’s had significantly slowed, especially in large metro areas. The Brookings Institute noted that population growth in those major metros slowed to a low of 0.55% in 2017-2018, down from a high of 1.01% in 2011.ⁱ Growth in highly dense urban cores also fell from highs of 0.8% in 2015/2016 to 0.1% in 2018/19. The pandemic further fueled this trend and, in many cases, accelerated the process.

Some, such as author and “Suburbanist” Joel Kotkin, have suggested that this trend will also be enhanced by the option to telecommute to work, as people leave urban environs for suburban areas. The pandemic and remote working are huge factors, but Kotkin and others argue that the middle class has exited these cities because of their inability to deal with issues such as homelessness, quality schools and crimeⁱⁱ. Kotkin describes the situation by saying “the politics have gotten crazier and crazier.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Because the urban/suburban divide has a long history in racial terms, it is hard not to see this thinking through a racial lens. Couple it with President Donald Trump openly saying in the summer of 2020 that he wanted to move affordable housing and affordable housing requirements out of the suburbs^{iv} so that suburbanites would “no longer be bothered or

financially hurt by having low income housing built in your neighborhood”^v and you see the racism and fear mongering laid bare.

All this led to a popular narrative of people “fleeing” the city for suburbs in the wake of the pandemic. Certainly, there has been an upswing in people moving from the largest cities. I believe we will see a general loss of urban population once we sort out the latest census data. But to suggest that people are “fleeing” cities vastly exaggerates the trend and I believe misapprehends a more obvious factor. I think they are running from the expense of urban living.

Unemployment and economic uncertainty will nudge some to look for less expensive housing options, or they simply need to follow jobs out of urban areas where many companies were downsizing their office space requirements and encouraging more remote telecommuting to work. Others, such as families with kids, will decamp to suburbs and rural areas. But families with kids or families on the pathway to having kids were already on the road to leaving the city. Families with children move from urban to suburban areas for multiple reasons – space, access to what they perceive as better schools and how about the most basic reason of all – cost. Kids are expensive. Living in urban areas is expensive too. Something has to give, and most conscientious parents will choose their kid over their loft every time.

Elderly populations more susceptible to health issues will similarly look to less dense options. However, the forces that drove them into the city after they became empty nesters – too much space, walkable communities, less maintenance and upkeep of dwelling and more social offerings, will likely lead many (perhaps even most) to stay in place.

The net result is that some will leave, cities will get a bit younger and more equitable. The economic pressures of reduced office space requirements for companies and increased availability of housing will make some, maybe even most, cities more affordable. More affordable is synonymous with more open and more fair. That is a very good thing. This influx of new residents will bring new ideas, new talent and new opportunities to cities. They will also bring new demands on their cities and communities as the tectonic shifts of 2020 play out in urban design, development and investment.

Lessons Learned - Design Matters

One of the key lessons learned during 2020 was the importance of quality design and planning. We realized that no matter how well designed and decorated our homes and apartments are, they are not ideal for long periods of enforced isolation. “Third spaces”, not home, not offices, ranging from coffee shops, restaurants, libraries, retail districts, arts venues and parks, make our personal spaces work. They complement and interact with our personal space as we historically moved seamlessly from place to place. When all the coffee shops, restaurants, malls, gyms and civic buildings are closed, the importance of the remaining spaces becomes even more obvious.

Green Spaces Matter

When we started the initial lock downs, the first thing we did was clean. Then we organized, and when we could not do any more of that, we went outside to find some areas that weren't closed. In doing that, we rediscovered the importance of our local neighborhood and our parks and green spaces. Passive parks, often overlooked and taken for granted, became essential infrastructure for people all over the world.

People not only walked, they rode bikes. Bike shops and the bike industry saw record sales^{vi} and depleted inventories for 2020. Cities invested in pedestrian and cycling infrastructure and made some temporary changes into permanent elements^{vii} as people realized that we can design for something other than the car! I saw more people riding their bikes, couples and families in particular, than ever before. Certainly, having fewer cars out helped to make that feel a bit safer, but people who had not ridden a bike in years dusted off that old cruiser and found something fun, healthy, social and cheap!

Emotional Infrastructure

Not only was there a run on bikes, there was literally a run on dogs! Dog purchases and adoptions were at all time highs with shelters and breeders setting up waiting lists for dogs^{viii}. This came as no surprise to me as I had written in my last book about the importance of dogs to our emotional infrastructure. Dogs have been filling the gaps in our emotional infrastructure for a while now as they are a cure to so many of the negative aspects of our communities. They are companions against loneliness; they are our personal trainers that get us off the couch to go for a walk; they are the external locus of our attention when we get too self-centered; they are the social ice breaker that helps facilitate connections with other people (oftentimes other dog owners); they are the unconditional love we all need; and they are a fantastic excuse to put down your phone, close your computer and go play!

I learned a new word in 2020: enochlophobia – the fear of crowds. The pandemic made us fear each other. Who has the virus? That person is not wearing a mask! A sneeze has become an act of aggression against us. Past crises have made us fear things like air travel, certain ethnic or religious groups or even sex! But we could manage those fears with some accommodations. This crisis attacked the very roots of our social system and rebuilding our sense of community will take time. In a year that stressed our physical, psychological and emotional limits, it is no wonder that our parks, bikes and dogs became even more important to our overall health and wellness. Moving forward, we are going to demand better emotional infrastructure -- dog parks, trails, bike paths and bike lanes. Cities need to recognize the importance of these often-marginalized elements of our communities, support those connections with meaningful policies, and invest in this necessary emotional infrastructure.

Cities Carried On

In the midst of all the madness of 2020, cities, for the most part, carried on and got stuff done. Trash got picked up. Parks got their lawns mowed. Police and fire service was not interrupted. Christmas decorations were put up. In my home of St. Petersburg, the city took advantage of less traffic and did some much-needed maintenance on city streets. Under ordinary circumstances, those repairs would have been disruptive and angst-inducing to drivers and to local businesses where they were occurring. Some new street scaping also happened in our downtown. Medians and flower boxes appeared and several stop lights were replaced with stop signs. Work continued on our major downtown project, the new Pier, and we had a successful, soft launch of The Pier on May 30, 2020. The city did not stop.

At the state level, Governors were in tough positions. They were forced to enact sweeping policies that blanketed their entire states. These policies were far more likely to be overreaching for certain areas and even insufficient for others. Cities had the advantage of hyper-local responses that were tightly tailored to their populations and their circumstances. I have heard from friends and colleagues around the country (and even around the world) how pleased they were with how their respective cities handled the crisis. Even those who grumbled about lock downs and stay-at-home orders were ultimately complimentary of their cities. Because cities do not have the luxury of being partisan and not getting stuff done.

The same is not true for federal and state government. Sadly, it seems that many state responses fell along partisan lines, which truly damages and further divides us. If we cannot agree and work together on something as vital as health and safety, it only further erodes our confidence in higher levels of government.

The winners in this will be the cities. Because the city was the entity that actually mattered when the shit hit the fan. While state and national leaders bickered and held press conferences, mayors, council members and city managers rolled up their sleeves and got to work. Our relationship with our places was brought into sharp focus and tested this past year. I believe that relationship is better and stronger because of it.

We are the Community

While our cities did their best to carry on, we learned another corresponding lesson: We are inextricably connected to each other. We use the word community a lot; it becomes a catch-all phrase that sometimes means us, sometimes means them and sometimes means all of us. In 2020, as we divided ourselves into polarized political camps, we were faced with the overwhelming realization that we could not separate ourselves no matter how hard we tried. The pandemic, the virus knew no distinctions and while some fought the idea of mask mandates and lockdowns, they could not escape the overriding reality that we were all connected and responsible for each other. My actions impacted others, just as theirs impacted

me. That is, by definition, the nature of community.

In ordinary times, we tend to think of the idea of community/city/town as an external construct. We obey the law, spend our money, pay our taxes and in return the community/city/town provides an overall framework that allows us to not worry about police, fire, sewer or trash pick up. In ordinary times, we have the luxury of not having to think about community. The past year has been nothing like ordinary. The result has been a stress test on ourselves and our communities. We have seen how fragile it all can be. An invisible threat brought life on Earth to a near standstill. In that collective pause, we slowed down and our world got smaller. And I believe that was a good thing. We talked to our neighbors (at a distance), we rode our bikes and walked our dogs. We discovered or rediscovered our neighborhoods and our role in them, which is that we are part of the neighborhood and part of that small community. We are the caretakers and owners of the neighborhood and what we do matters. Our actions make or break the community in small ways. The city is the overarching construct, but the neighborhood is us. Let us not forget that as things return to a semblance of 'normal' and the daily demands of life once again demand our attention.

The lasting gift of 2020 will be that hard lessons make us better, stronger, more appreciative of the small, ordinary things and hopefully more patient and appreciative of each other. Some say hard times makes for hard people. I suppose there is an argument for that. My challenge for us all is to not use the excuse of hard times to become hard-headed or hard hearted. Tough is OK; tough gets us through challenging times. But a hard, closed heart does no one any good – not you, not your family and not your community. Let's take a lesson from our dogs and live and love unconditionally. Let's play when we can, nap when we are tired, bark less, sit and listen more and remember that just being able to be with each other is the greatest gift of all.

Peter Kageyama is the author of *For the Love of Cities; The Love Affair Between People and Their Places*, the follow up, *Love Where You Live – Creating Emotionally Engaging Places* and his latest, *The Emotional Infrastructure of Places*. He is Senior Fellow with the Alliance for Innovation, a national network of city leaders, and Special Advisor to America In Bloom. He is an internationally sought after speaker and facilitator specializing in “bottom up” community and economic development.

His new book, *For the Love of Cities REVISTED*, will be published in 2021.

ⁱ <https://www.brookings.edu/research/even-before-coronavirus-census-shows-u-s-cities-growth-was-stagnating/>

ⁱⁱ <https://reason.com/video/will-new-york-ever-recover-from-covid-19/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/07/29/trump-housing-policy-low-income-suburbs-386414>

^v @realdonaldtrump (Donald Trump) I am happy to inform all of the people living their Suburban Lifestyle Dream that you will no longer be bothered or financially hurt by having low income housing built in your neighborhood... 12:19pm July 29, 2020 <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1288509568578777088>

^{vi} <https://www.npd.com/wps/portal/npd/us/news/press-releases/2020/cycling-industry-sales-growth-accelerates-in-april/>

^{vii} <https://sdotblog.seattle.gov/2020/05/07/2020-bike-investments-to-accelerate-including-20-miles-of-stay-healthy-streets-to-become-permanent-in-seattle/>

^{viii} <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/08/12/adoptions-dogs-coronavirus/>