

## TRANSFORMING SMALL SCALE PUBLIC SPACES IN THE POST-PANDEMIC ERA

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**Maria Grigoriadou**

*Associate Professor, Department of Architecture, Faculty of Engineering, Democritus University of Thrace, Greece*

[magrigor@arch.duth.gr](mailto:magrigor@arch.duth.gr)

**Dimitris Polychronopoulos**

*Professor, Department of Architecture, Faculty of Engineering, Democritus University of Thrace, Greece*

[dpolychr@arch.duth.gr](mailto:dpolychr@arch.duth.gr)

### **Abstract**

*The COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to bring about significant changes in the transformation of urban public spaces. It has had a profound impact on both indoor and outdoor public areas, causing widespread damage to various socioeconomic aspects of daily urban life, given their close connection to these spaces. The rapid spread of the pandemic across countries in Europe and around the world has disrupted public life in outdoor spaces, revealing the inadequacy of our previous design approach in dealing with such challenging conditions. It is important to note that this pandemic is not the first, but rather the latest in a series of four deadly pandemics since 1918. It is evident that the last pandemic arrived at a time when Europe had little concern for the effects of urban density and the role of mobility in the spread of infectious diseases. The combination of urban density and mobility exacerbated the situation, particularly in the early stages of the pandemic. Desperate attempts to manage the situation in large public spaces, which were originally designed with a different perspective, resulted in absurd and almost dystopian scenarios that disrupted social life and communication. The sense of freedom associated with open public spaces was replaced by fear and strict restrictions.*

*“So, a crucial question arises: what measures are necessary for urban environments to adapt to such situations as the above? Is it possible for unconventional designs or innovative technological solutions to preserve the essence of human interaction and social life?”*

**Key words:** COVID 19 pandemic, post pandemic era, small scale urban spaces, resilient urban design, network of public spaces, urban landscape

### **Introduction**

The pandemic could be a major agent of change for urban public place's transformation. COVID-19 has strongly affected the life of public places, both indoor and outdoor, also caused serious collateral damages in many socioeconomic aspects of urban daily life, as it was essentially connected to these places.

As this pandemic situation has an extremely fast swept across the countries throughout Europe and all over the world, it became everywhere the main cause for the disorganization of public life in the outdoor places, also pointing that we were out of place in the way we designed so far the city outdoors, to deal with such harsh conditions. It is true that the COVID-19 pandemic sparked one of the biggest dislocations we're seen worldwide. However, this did not make much sense, if we consider that this pandemic is not the first, but the last of four fatal pandemics in the past century since 1918. More specific, the flu influenza pandemic

H1N1 (1918-1920), known “Spanish Flu”, had high mortality for young individuals. It took place during the World War I, that helped the 1918 to spread. The flu caused at least 50 million deaths worldwide, according to CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). During 1957-1958 the flu influenza pandemic H2N2, known as “Asian Flu” emerged in East Asia just for one year. The estimated number of deaths was 1.1. million worldwide. The 1968 pandemic (H3N2 virus 1968-1969) first noted in the USA. The estimated number of deaths was 1 million worldwide. Most excess deaths were in people older than 65 years. (Fig. 1, 2) The most recent pandemic in history before COVID-19 was the 2009 H1N1 Pandemic (H1N1pdm09 virus). Globally, 80% of virus -related deaths were estimated to have occurred in people younger than 65 years old. On August 2010 the pandemic ended. However, the virus continues as seasonal flu virus every year. The estimated number of deaths were 200.000. (Past Pandemics archive, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,2020)



*Fig. 1. Spanish Influeza, Walter Reed Hospital, Washington, 1/11/1918*

Source:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/local/retropolis/coronavirus-deadliest-pandemics/>



*Fig. 2. Danes suffering from influenza occupy beds in temporary sick quarters set up in a gymnasium, Copenhagen, 1957*

Source:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/01/flu-vaccine-for-hospitals-epidemic-1957>

We must have also in mind that “in 1666 the term pandemic was first used to describe a continuously spreading disease in a country. Furthermore, the words epidemic and pandemic were used broadly and often alternatively in many social and medical contexts during the 17th and 18th centuries.” (Sampath, Khedr, Qamar, Tekin, Singh, Green and Kashyap, 2021)

### **Pandemic Spread and Public Space**

We can argue with certainty that the last pandemic has arrived while there was no a significant concern in Europe about the effects of urban density, as well as the increasing mobility in the spread of infectious diseases. These two parameters, urban density and mobility, worked together, making things worse, at least in the early stages of the pandemic.

We can even claim that some critical issues concerning the daily life of cities, such as the rapid increase in urban density in recent decades and the growing need for mobility by means of public transport, are directly related to the spread of a pandemic. We should even keep in mind that, when we have a combination of these two urban parameters, then the dynamics of their effect on the spread of a pandemic presents an exponential increase with often unpredictable rates of change. Research conducted at the beginning of the spread of the pandemic is of interest. The risk of transmission of the virus on public transport was highlighted by studies that investigated the risk of infection by occupation. Characteristic are the results of a study carried out in Norway, while nurses, doctors and dentists, bus and tram drivers were found to have the next highest risk of COVID-19 during the first wave of

infection (Magnusson, Nygård, Vold, Telle, 2020) Another study reported that cities with high-use public transportation systems had a higher per capita incidence of COVID at the beginning of the pandemic. The data used to model the association between mass transit adoption and COVID-19 incidence rates were gathered from the NHTS and the COVID-19 Data Repository by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University (JHU). Between the beginning of JHU's data collection period, January 22, 2020, and May 1, 2020, a total of 837,811 cases were recorded. (Thomas, Mohammadi, J. Taylor,2022).

### **Large public open spaces during the pandemic COVID-19**

The desperate attempts to handle the situation in large public open spaces designed with a completely different perspective of use, created almost ridiculous or post science fiction situations that literally broke down all human social life and communication. Feelings of freedom in open public space were replaced by fear and strict restrictions.

A critical example that is worth mentioning concerns on an inspired park with remarkable design by landscape architecture office, James Corner Field Operations, the Domino Park in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York City (Fig.3). In this case we have an unexpected vital transformation in the way where the open space continues to contain social life and activities. Any activity, not only couldn't support some kind of real communication but instead of this brings out the feeling of fear and social distancing. Concentration of people, in a vice versa situation, highlights the separation and isolation of people instead of communication.



*Fig.3. Domino Park, New York, before the pandemic covid - 19*

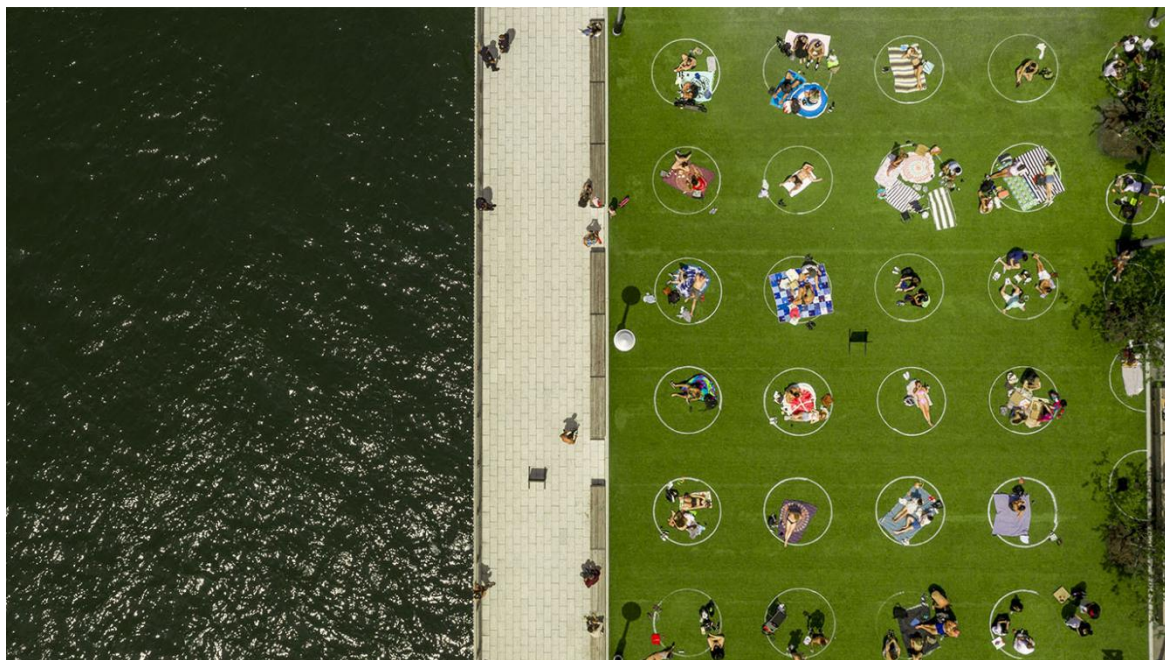
*Source:*

<https://www.archdaily.com/914548/domino-park-james-corner-field-operations/5ca8cfa4284dd113c9000bc3-domino-park-james-corner-field-operations-photo>

As it concerns Domino park's history, it is first designed before pandemic. Inspired by community input and the site's rich history. As the first phase of the transformation of the 11-acre former Domino Sugar Factory, the five-acre park celebrates the history of one of New

York's most iconic industrial waterfront sites. Sustainability and resiliency measures was central to the design, construction and ongoing management of Domino Park.

During the pandemic of last years while any kind of social life collapsed, public spaces around the world were trying to find ways in order for safety measures to be implemented. An innovative idea came from Domino Park, by introducing a series of painted social distancing circles. This strategical urban design intervention ensures that people are following recommended proper social distancing procedures recommended by the CDC and government. (Harrouk, 2020) Domino Park has been accessible to the public ever since the summer of 2018. In order to encourage safe park visitation practices, during the pandemic, the park has recently implemented closed "social circles" in its open public space. The project generates a series of chalk painted circles on the green Field. The intervention puts in place 30 circles: each circle is 8 feet in diameter and set 6 feet apart (Fig.4). Immediately famous with the visitors, the social distancing rings "took a few \$.99 cans of white chalk paint from the local paint store, 2 people, and 4 hours" (Harrouk, 2020)



*Fig 4. Domino Park, New York, during the pandemic Covid - 19*

Source: <https://www.archdaily.com/940244/domino-park-introduces-social-distancing-circles-to-adapt-to-the-covid-19-crisis/5ecabcc3b35765790d000388-domino-park-introduces-social-distancing-circles-to-adapt-to-the-covid-19-crisis-photo>

The idea has since been replicated in many parks in USA and around the world.

Another worth mentioning example, concerns on a very similar outdoor intervention for social distancing took place at almost same time in Toronto. This time, with a more complicated structure of a 3 dimension circle that provides an almost complete isolated environment, giving an opportunity of a mass yoga training, as every person who participates in the yoga classes gets their own private dome.

The new pop-up intervention installs 50 private, clear, frameless, geodesic domes in the open spaces of Toronto, Canada. Standing with over 7ft tall and 12 ft wide, each and every dome offers participants with over 110 square feet of private, heated space. (Balaram, 2020) Every dome offers a temperature control system, that could cool or heat the interior. The temperature inside the domes can reach over than 100 degrees Fahrenheit, depending on weather conditions, inside the dome a warming greenhouse-like atmosphere would be created. In contrary, dome temperatures have a level of adjustments using cooling fans (World

Architecture Community, 2020). The project aims to bring Yoga and fitness workouts safely, to an outdoor setting, while respecting social distancing measures, in order to prevent the spread of coronavirus disease (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Private geodesic pods for yoga training, Toronto Canada, 2020

Source: <https://torontolife.com/life/inside-lmnts-outdoor-studio-where-torontonians-can-practise-hot-yoga-in-geodesic-pods/>

From the other hand, a restaurant in Amsterdam installed tiny individual compact greenhouses along the waterfront, where visitors could dine, while remaining separated (Mauk).

The University of São Paulo (USP) carried out the research *Emoções Momentâneas* (lit. Momentary Emotions) to measure how the pandemic was changing the relationship of individuals with public spaces in São Paulo. Because of the lockdown, people are starting to think about decongesting outdoor space at the neighbourhood scale, valuing pedestrian mobility. Small areas and green squares, which can be reached on foot or by bike, prove to be a place to maintain physical and mental health (Garcia, Duduch, 2020).

### **Microplaces vs large open public spaces**

So after all, the critical question continues to remain: what really does the outdoor city life need to be prepared for a pandemic? Does it really need weird design or extreme inventive technical solutions to be able to maintain the joy of human communication and social life?

This paper argues the potential benefits that small outdoor spaces then called “micro places” can give in a post pandemic situation, working as “urban pockets”. “Micro places” in contrast to the large, central outdoor places of the city, where there is inevitably a huge concentration and density of people, both in the use of space and in their public transportation, to and from them, smaller spaces at a neighborhood level, might have strong advantages. They also enhance a development of a collective responsibility of the community, on a small scale, where individuals, especially the younger and the older ones, are usually well known

with each other. On the other hand, we should not ignore the fact that a walkable city, where citizens can get to a small public outdoor on foot is much more effective in reducing dispersion, as we already know very well that in cases of pandemic the transmission of the virus is directly related to the kind and the conditions of mobility. These micro-places, working as urban pockets represent a new kind of development that can capture the genuine experiences that many still seek urban fabric, walkability, great arts and architecture, and the social energy characteristic of bigger cities.(Schubert)

Under these conditions, for the renewal of outdoor networks after pandemic, we need to rethink certain key points, as it is important to introduce and upgrade new technologies throughout a smart mix of virtual and physical space, especially for younger ages and teenagers, enhancing a new augmented reality (AR). Through these practices we could potentially create alternative forms and new community activities for art and culture, at the neighborhood level, more resilient to future situations, avoiding at the same time the chaotic gatherings of crowded and noisy extra-large scale (XL) urban places.

A "Micro – place" refers to everyone's daily life. By creating these places, an expression, of a new attitude towards a new ecology and a fluid social space, reveals, while any micro place could be considered as network's intruder into a dense urban tissue.

In any case a "micro-place" needs to reverse the given negative conditions of the existing space, from one hand by creating a familiar green environment for communication or relaxation and from the other hand by producing actions and instant information, which dynamically redefines the identity of spaces.

The conceptual terms of "package", "minimal", "ephemeral", "eco-friendly", next to the meanings of "interactive communication" and "instant information" might be considered as strong parameters, which lead design processes into a "micro place" framework.

Are micro places a new concept or just a rethinking on the urban condition, which at the same time looks back at forgotten urban values?

Great theorists, designers and urban planners of the past century emphasized the importance of pocket spaces for daylife. They connected them with a special dynamic concerning for the development of social life, and also with characteristics, which allow the growth of multiple urban activities. At the same time those small urban spots are strongly connected with this peculiar spirit of "locus" of the neighborhood, where they are sited.

During the past century a number of references concerning the importance of creation and preserving those small urban spaces revealed, from "City Planning According to Artistic Principles" (Camillo Sitte 1899) to Christopher Alexander, Kevin Lynch, Aldo Rossi and further more Bernard Tschumi. For Aldo Rossi the last century strongly affected the destruction of neighborhood relations, as well as the progressive absence of small urban spaces. The major argument for Rossi was the hard dissociation between dwelling and work space. He also connects the above with an extreme and sudden dissolution of medieval city structure. (La Architettura della città, ch. 32 the scale of the city)

Without any intention to diminish the contribution of other great theorists, it is necessary at this point to refer to the writings of Christopher Alexander, which are maybe the most distinct reference, concerning the significance of small public spaces. Mostly in the "A Pattern Language" Alexander mentions that "one of the greatest problems in existing communities is the fact that the available public life in them is spread so thin that it has no impact on the community".

He also remarks that people seek out concentration of other people whenever they are available. "to create these concentration of people in a community, facilities must be grouped densely round very small public squares which can function as nodes"(Christopher Alexander "A Pattern Language" ch.30 Activity Nodes) and he writes out "to keep the activity concentrated, it is essential to make the squares rather small, smaller than one might imagine.

A square of about 45 x 60 feet can keep the normal pace of public life well concentrated" and also argues that, to create intensity of action, the facilities must be placed in a cooperative manner, attracting the same kinds of people, at the same times of day. Advice us to "Create nodes of activity throughout the community, spread about 300 yards apart but first identify those existing spots in the community where action seems to concentrate itself. Then modify the layout of the paths to bring as many of them through these spots as possible. This makes each spot function as a "node" in the path network". At the chapter 124 Activity pockets, he mentions that "surround public gathering places with pockets of activity – small, partly enclosed areas at the edges, which jut forward into the open space between the paths, and contain activities which make it natural for people to pause and get involved."

Alexander explains at the chapter "Public outdoor room" more detailed how small public spaces generate this essential concentration. He says: "there are very few spots along the streets of modern towns and neighborhoods where people can hang out, comfortably, for hours a time" and he also argues that "for some reason there is a temptation to make public squares too large. In modern cities, architects and planners build plazas that are too large. They look good on drawings; but in real life they end up desolate and dead. Our observations suggest strongly that open places intended as public squares should be very small...When the diameter gets above 70 feet, the squares begin to seem deserted and unpleasant. The only exceptions we know are places like great town centers, teeming with people" (Christopher Alexander "A Pattern Language" ch.61 Small Public Squares).

It is almost impressive that all the above historical approaches in nowadays, almost fifty decades after, they actually seem to be reference for future proposals and rethought of urban conditions under new extreme conditions of pandemics, energy crisis and human isolation.

### **Microplaces networks as urban activities receptors**

Coming up today it is necessary also to focus on these proposed micro urban places, mainly in conjunction with the new contemporary urban activities, as Bernard Tschumi mentions that "space cannot be dissociated from the events that happen in it" (B. Tschumi, "Architecture and conjunction" – ch. "Space events")

A point for the following argument might be considered the fact that in contemporary cities a number of activities, (which traditionally used to take place in enclosed, controlled and well organized building spaces, such as sport buildings, museums, concert halls, etc) seem to be transferred gradually into smaller scale outdoors intruding the city streets (Fig. 6,7).



Fig.6 and 7. Street sports

Sources:

[https://www.c40knowledgehub.org/s/article/15-minute-cities-How-to-develop-people-centred-streets-and-mobility?language=en\\_US](https://www.c40knowledgehub.org/s/article/15-minute-cities-How-to-develop-people-centred-streets-and-mobility?language=en_US)

<https://www.redbull.com/my-en/greetings-from-paris>

Those activities gradually transforming to street sports, street art, street music etc. and they can be described by more or less informal and participative procedures. A street sport is about getting young people, who hang out with “nothing to do”, involved in sport given the name “urban sports”. One of the advantages is that a very little gear is required, and that the sport can take place anywhere, and at any time. Street soccer and golf, skateboarding, stunt biking, roller blading and rock climbing wall can be considered the most common urban sports. These new “fields”, extremely small in scale form urban points – nodes of a broader expandable network inside the city. Such spaces could be small side-walk fragments, small in-between spaces among multi-storey buildings, building flat roofs etc. They host in an alternative way urban events and they stand opposite the expected well organized controlled spaces. For example, today it’s more popular than ever among artists (installation artists, performance artists, video artists, graffiti artists, sculptures, etc.) The concept that the city itself might function as a transformable open exhibition space, a kind of living archive. This way is followed by the argument that the art must not be limited in strict boundaries or enclosed museums, but it is necessary for any kind of art to be inseparable part of everyone’s daily life. The most famous street art activities are graffiti, street stencil, sticker art, wheatpasting, street poster and video projection (Fig. 8,9,10).



*Fig. 8 – 9 - 10. Street Art*

*Sources:*

<https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2017/jan/10/uk-first-country-recognise-parkour-sport>

<https://www.outdoordesign.com.au/news-info/creative-street-art-placemaking/4940.htm>

[https://www.floornature.com/media/photos/38/10467/levalet\\_streetart\\_france\\_15\\_minutes\\_of\\_fame\\_1.jpg](https://www.floornature.com/media/photos/38/10467/levalet_streetart_france_15_minutes_of_fame_1.jpg)

Another aspect of micro places seems to concern on the city, ecology dimension in a way of protestation against the gradually environmental degradation and the absents of neighborhood green places. During the decade of 70's, "Pocket parks" were the origination of contemporary street mini parks. They were invented as design products by inspired landscape architects, but now they might be seen under another broader view, while they involve much more the habitants themselves as active members of an environmentally concerned community.

Today pocket parks intend to be created, owned and managed by local people anywhere in the neighborhood or alongside the street almost instead of a parking seat.

All these vivid small spaces are also defined by an intense network communicative ability, and that's because the users themselves, mostly young people, use a variety of mobile gadgets, which enforce the concept of virtual networks and instantly communication in a way, not yet clearly defined, as the specific technology is under a constant development.

While new urban activities are being transferred to the streets and situated into small city corners, become part of an informal spontaneous occupation or furthermore an outcome of a participative design approach, when people have the opportunity to redesign space in cooperation with the municipality.

In this framework it's a difficult task to describe the creation conditions and evolutionary process of micro places, by using the common terminologies of the past. On the contrary, it's more convenient to borrow new terms from other scientific areas. For example, in order to describe the creation of a "micro place", we can use terms, such as "space setup", as they contain the idea of intrusion and installation in an existing "urban hardware". Furthermore, by considering the possibility of constant future changes, which describe the micro urban places, terms such as "space update or new versions" etc. could be used.

## **Conclusion**

All these, attempt to reverse the fact that as the urban life changes much faster than the old static urban tissue, it is engaged inside the existing urban patterns.

In this point it is necessary to highlight the displacement from the "object space" to the "relational space", a space which could be defined by changing relations and partly expected forthcoming events. The relational space comes as a conceptual supplement of the absolute urban space. It might be seen as a kind of a significant space of completed and stable objects, where the emphasis is given to the group of the open procedures, rather than their produced objects. And according to this, there is a stronger importance in the establishment of potential relations, rather than the constructed objects themselves. The object is not completed, but it remains open to the changing events.

All the above might have an effect not only on the design, but also on the decisions of what we attempt to design and why. The influence might be also significant on the educational approach for urban design and planning. It is obvious that the micro places are characterized from a fluidity that makes them sensitive and vulnerable to the surrounding environment.

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