

2020, escape from the city (and back)

There are those who say that in times of pandemic, the great metropolises will be emptied. Some, on the other hand, speculate that they will be able to take the opportunity to re-transform their neighbourhoods into more liveable spaces, with easily accessible services and a better quality of life.

We will go and live in the country, we will all work from home, we will stop meeting in public places: perhaps as a reaction to the uncertainty we are experiencing, the debates on the cities that will come after the pandemic are a kaleidoscope of utopian scenarios. For many, the pandemic is and has been an opportunity to reflect on the way we live and the spaces that shape our lives.

During lockdown periods, we spend whole weeks indoors and realize how the houses are designed as dormitories or a little more. We work and study from a distance feeling the lack of **dedicated spaces where we can learn and be creative together with our peers**. We shop online thinking about the daily surprise of the casual meeting on the street and the chat at the supermarket checkout. In short, we question our daily life and the spaces that host it.

Although the pandemic suggests that the places where we live are destined to change radically, **initial experiences of reactivation show that we often return to a normality far removed from utopia**. How then can we make our cities better than we left them before the pandemic? What are the fundamental challenges that, in the very long months of health emergency, emerged urgently for the places where we live?

The question is even more complicated when we consider the worldwide evolution of the pandemic: while Africa apparently resists the virus, Europe and Asia are trying to avoid a second wave of contagion and America is still struggling with the first. Faced with the multiplicity of places in which we dwell and the social challenges we face, **paradoxically the solution is to have no solution**. Instead, we have to inhabit a place by reading its challenges and discovering its resources, in order to identify possible horizons towards which to orient our cities.

This is the challenge that *Dialoghi in Architettura (Dialogues in Architecture)*, a laboratory of reflection on the relationship between space and society, faced since the beginning of the pandemic: with a virtual seminar, it collected experiences of how different cities, in the North and South of the world, faced the first phase of the health emergency. The world quarantine, which differs in time and form from country to country, raises problems and highlights contradictions that **question our way of living**, with themes in common between the North and South of the world.

The house is the space that most changes during the quarantine: it must be at the same time home, office, classroom, gym, even hospital for those in need of treatment. But the house is not identified only with the walls of the building: **there are those who can consider as home the small condominium in which they live**, taking advantage of the common spaces that can also be used in quarantine, and those who have to carve out a space for themselves in an overcrowded house.

In addition, not everyone can respond to the call from governments to stay at home to avoid the spread of contagion, either because of the need to continue working or because of the need to access **basic services that are not available in one's neighbourhood**. The community also plays a

fundamental role in addressing - together and not alone - the many material and non-material needs emerging as a result of contagion and economic recession.

Collaboration with neighbours becomes the tool with which to take care of the most vulnerable members of a community, self-produce basic necessities, or reactivate central spaces for the vitality of neighbourhoods, once we have really got over the emergency. The new normality that will come after the pandemic brings with it a transformative potential, even for our cities.

Observing the behaviour and experiments underway in different countries is essential to make our living places thrive again. **The new normality can also guarantee a better quality of life:** Paris, Milan, Barcelona and Bogotá are just some of the cities that, with the excuse of creating emergency bike paths, are transforming their public spaces and contributing to **neighbourhoods where basic services can be reached in a few minutes.**

The health emergency linked to COVID-19 makes it necessary to reactivate our cities, but it also gives us the unique opportunity to rethink the spaces in which we live and anticipate the great transformations linked to climate change and new economic models. In short, **once we are out of the pandemic we will not flee the city: on the contrary,** if we are courageous we will return to live in better homes and cities than we have known so far.