

Public Outdoor Space and Covid-19

Symposium: 24 – 25 June 2021 - Wageningen University

Proposal from HvA Research team – ‘From prevention to resilience’ research project

Authors: Giulia Gualtieri and Boudewijn Boon

Other team members: Frank Suurenbroek and Martijn de Waal

Format: Presentation

Focus themes: Theme 3 session: ‘WHAT LESSONS CAN WE LEARN FROM THE CURRENT PANDEMIC?’

Session: Friday 25th of June from 10:00 to 11:30 (CEST)

Title

Covid-19's impact on public space: trends in Dutch cities as perceived by a Community of Practice

Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, public spaces are being redesigned and revalued. In the ZonMW project 'From Prevention to Resilience', we aim to understand these changes both in the short term, mapping the more ad hoc responses to the pandemic in public space, and in the long-term, exploring how public space can promote urban resilience with an eye on future shocks and stressors. Here we report on a series of interviews several partners from the community of practice involved in the project. The aim was to get an initial understanding of trends concerning public space during COVID-19 in cities in the Netherlands. Based on the interviews, we have identified two main trends. The first trend concerns the rapid shift towards soft mobility, reflected in the increased pedestrian activity in residential urban areas; people started to walk and cycle more to commute and relax. The second trend refers to the increasingly versatile use of green outdoor places, attracting a more diverse group of users than before the pandemic. We suggest the identified trends help in looking ahead and considering the roles that public space can play in post-COVID cities. More specifically, they feed into two of the research goals that drive the 'From Prevention to Resilience' project. First, the trends help in anticipating needs and responses during future pandemics, and, as such, they offer initial handles for urban designers and planners to pro-actively create public spaces accordingly. Second, the trends enable us to look beyond COVID-19 and consider the resilience of cities and their neighbourhoods in a more integral manner. In particular, the trend towards greener public spaces invites us to look at resilience from both a social and ecological perspective, acknowledging their potential to enable versatile use, foster social cohesion, and contribute to the goals of climate adaptation and biodiversity.

Interviewees:

- Diana Krabbendam and Emiel Wolf, The Beach
- Charley Fiedeldij Dop, Pakhuis de Zwijger
- Boen Groothoff, Amsterdam municipality
- Judith Lekkerkerker, Almere municipality
- Annelies Bloemendaal, Almere municipality
- Henk Snel, Zwolle municipality
- Like Bijlsma, Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency
- Sarah Chekh Ibrahim, Breda municipality
- Filippo Lodi, UNStudio | UNSx
- Beata Giermasinska,

Keywords:

Research-through-design; public space trends; pandemic; community of practice; neighborhood resilience.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, public spaces are being redesigned temporarily and sometimes more permanently. Furthermore, people's use and perceived value of public spaces are changing. In the ZonMW project 'From Prevention to Resilience', we aim to understand these changes both in the short term, mapping the more ad hoc responses to the pandemic in public space, and in the long-term, exploring how public space can promote urban resilience with an eye on future shocks and stressors. Besides our research goals, we are also developing actionable tools for professionals in urban design and planning for promoting resilience in urban neighbourhoods. A cornerstone of our project is the community of practice involved, which brings together researchers, design agencies, municipalities and housing organizations. Here we report on a first series of interviews that we conducted with several of these partners, in which we aimed to get an initial understanding of trends concerning public space during COVID-19 in cities in the Netherlands. Based on the interviews, we have identified two main trends. The first trend concerns the rapid shift towards soft mobility, reflected in the increased pedestrian activity in residential urban areas; people started to walk and cycle more as a way to commute and relax. The second trend refers to the increasingly versatile use of green outdoor places, attracting a more diverse group of users than before the pandemic.

Increased soft mobility — Interviewees indicated a shift from more vehicle-based mobility to local soft mobility during the pandemic. Nearby outdoor environments offered people the possibility to move and escape their home confinement temporarily. In this way, a more prominent 'radius of action' emerged around people's homes. Citizens performed more of their daily routines within their neighbourhood, including recreational walks, shopping and other leisure activities. Also in the context of working life, daily walks among colleagues become a new form of meeting, whether online or in person. By walking through their neighbourhood, people are (re)discovering their environment, seeing its potential, and growing a sense of connection with particular places. In light of this trend, municipalities reacted by trying to limit or control the walking and biking flows in particular areas that became too crowded, with solutions such as demarcations and informative banners, as well as more technical solutions, using crowd data to share traffic predictions on an openly accessible online platform.

More versatile use of green spaces — Interviewees also described how public green spaces nearby people's homes had become better recognized for their role in mental health during times of pandemic. Issues in households related to crowdedness and poor liveability indoors became more prominent, making public green spaces more attractive to them. Activities that would otherwise happen indoors were increasingly relocated to public environments, particularly in green spaces. This adaptive response also affected the public green spaces and their use, creating green hotspots that brought together a more diversified group in terms of socio-economic status. One example is how open-air dining became popular also in colder months and offered a safer way to socialize for a broader population. Another example is how sports activities moved from indoor clubs to parks. Green public spaces have thus shown to be versatile in their possible uses, in ways that we did not consider possible before. As green spaces became more crowded, some municipalities have started articulating ambitious objectives to develop higher-quality green infrastructures. From their perspective, green spaces are more than a pleasant décor; they also contribute to social cohesion in neighbourhoods, as illustrated by citizen's engagement in community gardens and local food production. Various municipalities also actively engaged their citizens in participatory activities to create greener environments.

We suggest the identified trends help in looking ahead and considering the roles that public space can play in post-Covid cities. More specifically, they feed into two of the research goals that drive the 'From Prevention to Resilience' project. First, the trends help in anticipating needs and responses during future pandemics, and, as such, they offer initial handles for urban designers and planners to proactively create public spaces accordingly. Second, the trends enable us to look beyond COVID-19 and consider the resilience of cities and their neighbourhoods in a more integral manner. In particular, the trend towards greener public spaces invites us to look at resilience from both a social and ecological perspective, acknowledging their potential to enable versatile use, foster social cohesion, and contribute to the goals of climate adaptation and biodiversity.