

## **From Analogue to Virtual: Urban Interiors in the Pandemicene**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper speculates on the potential long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the way we interact with each other in cities by focusing on the socio-spatial concept of the urban interior. How will our everyday life in cities change? What changes will be wrought on our informal encounters and our temporal occupation of places and spaces? What impact will future urban planning have on the way we move through, work and study in and act as individuals and collectives in our cities? In order to look ahead, it is worth reflecting on historical examples. Studying the ways diseases have influenced how we shape and design, control and govern, explore and occupy urban environments suggests that we will likely have to rethink of our cities in anticipation of future pandemics. No doubt, post-COVID-19, we will witness changes in urban politics with consequences in urban planning and design. We will see a continued impact on an informal level too, on how people interact and what sort of individual and shared activities they will engage with. Will public space become increasingly controlled, politicised or irrelevant for political expression? It is clearly too early to come to a conclusion, but based on the past and based on observations of already emerging spatial practices in urban settings, we can speculate upon what kinds of futures might emerge.*

*Keywords: urban interior, Pandemicene, spatial practices, future urban design, COVID-19*

### **Friday, March 13, 2020**

On Friday, March 13, 2020, the Formula 1 season in Melbourne was cancelled, a day before the competition was due to start. Across the world, the pandemic crisis could be witnessed unfolding with closures, lockdowns and cancelled events. Here in Australia, in Melbourne, Victoria, it seemed at first that the impact would be minor. The Italian Ferrari team received an exemption to leave Italy for the Formula One World Cup, and eager punters were flying into town for the event. Moving against the dominant tendency to keep calm and carry on as usual, at a preliminary press conference the reigning F1 champion Lewis Hamilton questioned why the competition was going ahead, remarked that "cash is king" (Lynch & Spitts, 2020, para. 3). Having recently arrived in Melbourne with my family from Germany, having just witnessed the devastations of the summer bushfires, I spent days in disbelief that a government could allow a gathering of such magnitude. More than a 100,000 people would be cramped each day into spectator tribunes to watch the world's fastest regulated high-power racing cars making their rounds. Following the withdrawal of team McLaren due to a team member testing positive with the coronavirus, the event was finally cancelled by the organisers ("Formula 1," 2020).

At the time, my eldest son was not convinced that the virus would be any different from the common flu. Schoolyard discussion, certain media outlets and relaxed comments by the Australian Prime Minister that he would be attending his favourite rugby league match that same weekend (Morrison, 2020), no doubt influenced my teenage son's opinion. Struggling myself to grasp what was happening I pointed out to him that the F1 event costs the local government around 60 million Australian Dollars and generates an enormous financial turn-over in the local economy, and that something truly radical must be happening for it to be cancelled.

After our children arrived at home the same day with all their schoolbooks, in anticipation of possible announcements of school closures over the weekend, we make the pre-emptive decision to keep our children home from school. It is only a matter of time now before things become more serious. From Thursday, March 12, 2020, I had been nervously participating in a book fair at the National Gallery of Victoria, which after the end of the fair, on Sunday, March 15, announced that the gallery would be closing to the public the next day. On March 13, 2020, on social media, I share a newspaper essay by Joachim Müller-Jung, which quotes the German Chancellor Angela Merkel stating that an estimated 60-70% of the population could likely become infected with the new coronavirus (Müller-Jung, 2020).

### **Monday, March 16, 2020**

Only three days later, on March 16, Professor Paul Kelly, the Deputy Chief Medical Officer in Australia, announced that in a worst-case scenario 50,000–150,000 Australians would die due to COVID-19 (McCauley, Bagshaw, & Harris, 2020). The same day a state of emergency is declared in Victoria, Australia. What does this mean? It means that we have entered exceptional times in which the state allocates to itself exceptional powers to protect the public health by restricting movements and gathering of peoples. Those arriving into the state will be kept under a two-week mandatory quarantine. First, non-essential gatherings of 500 are forbidden, then 100, then 10. Soon we will only be able to gather within our existing household unit and meet just one non-household member outside our homes. The young and middle-aged are trying to maintain their careful distance from the elderly, the ailing, and those with immune systems most susceptible to the virus. Strict rules and restrictions are implemented as a response to COVID-19. We stay at home and only venture outside as a matter of necessity. We follow the new paradigm of *social distancing*, reducing our physical interactions with others beyond the members of our household while staying at least 1.5 meters apart. On exiting the home, the rules of social engagement are fundamentally transformed. Dramatic scenarios are communicated by the hour, and as a result, politics and the behaviour of the body politic respond accordingly.

### **Sunday, March 22, 2020**

The State Premier of Victoria announces the closure of pubs, clubs, and cinemas on the evening of March 22, but the recommendation so far is to keep schools open. Our own kids have been homeschooling now for a week, and our youngest son's German school will move voluntarily to online teaching at the beginning of the coming week. Then it abruptly turns out that Victorian state schools will follow suit, framing the move as an early commencement to Easter holidays. Decisions are being announced in swift succession as anxieties for health and well-being in the large urban metropolis, that is Melbourne, mount, and as regional communities anxiously ask urban dwellers not to pay visits. In states such as Western Australia, the closure of regional borders—borders within the state—is enforced.

The university, where I have just commenced working, had already been holding emergency discussions about how to deal with students whose arrival from overseas would be delayed, specifically how to manage a mix of face-to-face and online teaching to accommodate those affected by travel bans. From early discussions

about whether it would be possible, even conceivable, to deliver a design studio remotely, the discussion subsequently shifted at a staggering pace to plans for a wholesale pivot to online teaching and learning as the seriousness of the pandemic escalated.

### **Monday, March 23, 2020**

The university campus where I work is effectively closed on March 23, 2020, and all security passcards are disabled. Access to buildings is now only possible where permission is expressly granted. Examples of best practice of how to teach under these extraordinary circumstances are shared, excel spreadsheets with long lists of available software resources and links to pedagogical examples from across the world begin circulating. Within the shortest amount of time conceivable, basically from one week to the next, staff and students find themselves communicating via video conferencing, sitting in on pre-recorded lectures, holding up their sketches, and models in front of webcams. Following a series of small steps, rapidly increasing in pace, with the ultimate decision to deny access to campus and university buildings, students and staff are deprived of the campus experience, daily encounters with peers, and access to workshops and many library resources. By now, online teaching and working from home has become the *new normal*. We greet our students online and prompt them to unmute their microphones for class discussions. Materials such as photographs, voice recordings and PDFs are uploaded and assessed asynchronously. As a PhD examiner, for example, I will receive a video of a virtual tour through an exhibition of creative works and a pre-recorded video presentation that I will be asked to assess. The discussion between the examiners and the candidate will take place in public, as usual, but that public will now gather in the virtual space of a video conference or a *webinar*, as seminars are now called. These are the controlled spaces in which we gather, and where only a selection of voices can be heard, while a broader audience is rendered mute, except for the Q&A function.

During the early weeks of the pandemic as the numbers of cases rise dramatically each day, we stay tuned to the radio, enjoying something of a revival in our household. In this way, we try to keep up with current development and to understand changing government edicts concerning the occupation of workplaces and public spaces. We are effectively entering a state of emergency.

By mid-March, shopping for food is increasingly connected to effects of anxiety and even panic attacks. We hear stories of elderly people too afraid to exit their cars in supermarket car parks, and

begging passers-by for their help. Regional towns are reporting that busloads of city dwellers have arrived at their supermarkets to raid the shelves. In our local supermarkets, we apprehend overflowing trolleys as people in survival mode stocked up. How much food does a family need to survive for two weeks? The curious phenomenon of toilet paper shortages, the less surprising disappearance of hand wash and disinfectant, followed shortly after by the emptying out of the shelves of staple and dry goods are scenes we all recognise by now.



Figure 1  
Empty shelves  
become a  
new sight  
(Photograph by  
author, 2020)



Figure 2  
Informal markers  
on the ground  
help to keep  
the required  
distance  
(Photograph by  
author, 2020)

Using the P-95 masks, we had originally bought to cope with dangerous levels of smoke in the air during the summer bushfire season, which raged across Gippsland, east of Melbourne, visits to the local shops became an ordeal. By April, and then May, people had visibly adapted their behaviour, lining up outside cafes for a take-away coffee while keeping their distance, not always at 1.5 m as required, but at least at an arm's length away. Markers made of tape appeared on the pavement in front shops to indicate where to stand in line outside, and then arrows and more lines of tape to demarcate adequate social distancing appeared inside grocery stores, as well as disinfection stations at points of entry, and the overnight appearance of often makeshift transparent screens between shoppers and checkout staff.

### **Monday, April 20, 2020**

By late April, already more than a third of the world's population had experienced some form of restriction of their movement by their governments (Buchholz, 2020). More people than ever before, at least in total numbers, have now experienced an impact on their lives as a result COVID-19. It is a world-historical event of such immense proportions, unprecedented in terms of its impact; it is impossible to know what will become of us in a post-COVID-19 world.

COVID-19 originated in Hubei, a virus presumed to have crossed species from a bat to a pangolin, to a global pandemic within a few short months (Davidson, 2020). I write this essay progressively from April to May 2020, watching as the total numbers of confirmed infections continue to increase globally, passing one million by early April (Rourke, 2020), and by the time I conclude this essay at the end of May, the total number is close to five and a half million (John Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center, 2020a). The total number of deaths passed the quarter of a million mark on May 5 ("More than 250,000 die," 2020), and at the end of the month stands at almost 100,000 higher. Currently, 188 countries or regions have recorded cases of the virus. On a global map it seems that only Antarctica remains untouched, even Greenland has a double-digit case number, according to the website of John Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center's website, accessed on May 8 and May 19, 2020. The rate by which new rules and regulations have been introduced and enforced has no doubt surprised everyone, more surprising has been how quickly populations have accepted and adapted to social distancing measures, staying away from events, social gatherings, and work.

The political response to the threat that a rapid increase in the number of cases would overwhelm even the best health system, with many people in need of treatments in Intensive Care Units, has been a staged response. Australians are familiar with staged responses to threatened crises in the form of the yearly bushfire warnings that are categorised in terms of the level of danger from *Green* to *Code Red*.

In a recent essay on *Discrimination, Governance and Trust in the Age of COVID-19* the sociologist Jenny Reardon, Director of the Science and Justice Research Centre at the University of California, Santa Cruz, a scholar of genomics and medical ethics, argued that the pandemic has been waiting for the right opportunity to emerge for a while now. She argues that “ecological disturbance and climate change, as well as the gutting of public health infrastructure and—public governance itself—amidst the ravages of hyper-capitalism” (in McNulty, 2020, para. 2), have much to answer for in preparing the ripe conditions for the virus and our capacity to adequately respond. She continues that this won’t be a temporary situation, but a persistent one. We are at the beginning of something that is likely to change our collective lives on every level of the socius. I get a sense of the enormous impact when I look at the many available infographics describing the number of confirmed cases and deaths across the globe. While the impact differs from nation-state to nation-state, as expressed in both total and relative numbers, no one knows yet how this will play out in a month, in a year, or longer. While the fascination in numbers, and charts, and attempts to *flatten the curve* characterise my attempt to grasp the dramatic scale of the global situation—which I cannot help but compare to the experience of watching the fall of Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre, New York, in September 2001, collapsing again and again on repeat across television screens—these numbers only give us a quantitative reflection of what is happening right now. What will the long-term impact be once we can better gauge the global after-effects?

Klaus-Dieter Frankenberger, a journalist at one of the major German newspapers, uses several analogies to attempt to grasp the scale of the likely impact of COVID-19. He concludes that the dramatic impact of this pandemic cannot be described by referring to any other event in our lifetimes. References to World War II, the Spanish Flu, or Pearl Harbor have been made, but all are inadequate in terms of global reach. Frankenberger (2020) does not outline what the changes might be, but he is convinced they will be dramatic and lasting. The world with COVID-19, the world in a *Pandemicene*, will be different.

### 430 BC to AD 1918

In order to speculate on possible futures post-COVID-19, it is important to cast a long look back at previous pandemics and their effects on the formation of urban interiors, on city planning, social etiquette, and behaviours of self-care and hygiene. Simply, what can we learn from previous pandemics?

In 430 BC, the Great Plague of Athens defined the end of Athens as a global centre of political influence (Kelaidis, 2020). For the Romans, wide-spread health issues were addressed by either relocating whole cities or draining the marshlands. Outbreaks of diseases either led to the conclusion that the chosen site was not sustainable for inhabitation, or else decisions were made to alter the landscape and natural environment to overcome the outbreak of diseases. Smallpox almost eradicated the indigenous population of the Americas in the 15th century with the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors. In the Caribbean, in 1802 Yellow Fever ostensibly marked the end of French colonization as armed forces mobilized to quell a revolution fell foul of a disease that the local population had built an immunity to, Napoleon was obliged to withdraw from Saint-Domingue (Marr & Cathey, 2013; Ross & Quince, 2020).

A great deal has been written about the Bubonic Plague, also known as the Black Death, especially its enormous death rates of 40% to 60% across Europe in its peak years between 1346-1353 (Benedictow, 2005; Jedwab, Johnson, & Koyama, 2019). Its local outbreaks are known to have emerged up until the 18th century. The fast spread of plagues and their economic impact on medieval societies was called by Benedictow (2005) in the title of his essay as “the greatest catastrophe ever.” It led to major societal shifts, including the rise of a working-class and the decline of the nobles, which resulted in a rise in average wages for labourers. It is common knowledge that the death rates in cities were much higher than in the rural areas, due to the higher density of populations. Healthy people stayed inside, in quarantine, and others moved away to more rural locations; while the layout of cities during the late medieval ages, according to Keith Lilley, changed to “idealized and geometrically ordered plans” (Lilley, 2010, para. 24). This morphological shift was mainly due to an increase in the practice of land surveying and legal administration, while the underlying processes remained much the same as during the Medieval Ages (Lilley, 2010). It took until the 19th century, with the growing influence of developments in modern medicine and medical science, until public health management established itself and moved toward the modification of cities as a direct response to the threat of disease (Lopez, 2012). With the growth of cities due to



industrialisation in the 19th century, workers were located in close proximity to industry, which “led to great population increases and densification...cities were not well suited to these numbers and epidemics of diseases” (White & Langenheimer, 2020, p. 37) spread.

During the 19th and early 20th century, the introduction of modern sanitation and sewerage systems, together with other infrastructural developments such as access to clean water, improved the public health in cities. Up until then, urban rivers such as the Thames in London operated much like open sewers, often leading to outbreaks of cholera (Lerp, 2016; London sewerage system, 2020). Thomas Southwood Smith (1788–1861), a physician and early sanitary reformer, argued that providing ventilation and sunlight to houses would improve living and health conditions in housing (Lopez, 2012). Improving the airflow and light as well as the housing stock was also one of Baron Haussmann’s arguments for the radical reshaping of Paris (1852–1870) (White & Langenheimer, 2020). Alongside general improvements of sanitation and the opening up of boulevards to ease the flow of traffic, he created new quarters where apartments had access to sunlight and proper ventilation. This was as much an aesthetic design approach as a visual statement that advanced society and state in Paris and France at the time (Lopez, 2012). At the level of the individual building, legislation through codes and imposed standards was another approach to improve buildings, and thereby to attend to health issues (Lopez, 2012).

Through these means cities increased their resilience to the spread of disease through urban planning and design, codes and standards, however, it is surprising how recent these developments are, considering that the supply of freshwater to individual households was only achieved in the early to mid-20th century in the developed world (Lopez, 2012).

What becomes clear is that in order to address public health, a variety of changes were made over time, ranging from governance to infrastructural projects. Though many diseases have lost their global impact due to the improvement of public health, one should not forget that many diseases have become endemic. While they are better controlled, we have been obliged to learn to live with them, exerting ongoing efforts to reduce their impact.

While the plague had its peak in Europe and Asia, which it held in its grip for around 400 years, it has become endemic, and even now outbreaks can be witnessed in countries across the world, including Peru and the US (Barford, 2015), though antibiotics developed in the 1940s have helped to reduce the death rates. The COVID-19 pandemic might never be eradicated, and it might very well become

endemic, which will mean we will have to get used to living with it, as we do with so many other diseases (McElroy, 2020). Following the 1918 influenza, the SARS outbreak in 2002, the Flu pandemic H1N1 in 2009, and Ebola in 2014, the current Novel Coronavirus, and let us not forget the yearly seasonal flu with between roughly 300.000 and up to more than 600.000 deaths worldwide (Ries, 2020), it becomes clear that this is unlikely to be the last pandemic. As the frequency of newly emerging viruses increases, circulating with ease along globalised trade routes, accompanying the transport of peoples, goods, and resources, the world would appear to have entered a new era. Welcome to what is now called the Pandemicene, a name that accompanies a global sense of the urban interior we collectively share as we pass the virus along, from hand to mouth, from city to city, from nation-state to nation-state. The Pandemicene is a large-scale, geo-political moniker that joins others, such as the Anthropocene, the Capitalocene, the Petrolocene, the Chthulucene (Crutzen, 2006; Grudin, 2020; Haraway, 2016; Moore, 2017). All of which is to say that the current pandemic cannot be extricated from the climatic and environmental crises we are suffering today (McNulty, 2020).

### **Friday, May 15, 2020**

According to a psychological study undertaken in Germany in 2017, ninety centimetres was the average distance maintained when encountering strangers in the street (Bender, 2020). The social distancing of a kind already composes part of our relations with others. The questions are: How will the temporary changes during the current pandemic become lasting ingrained habits, social norms or even policed rules—just like running a red light in a car or wearing a bicycle helmet in Australia? Will anyone go to work with a cold anymore, or even with a cough and the sniffles? Most likely not. The Australian Chief Medical Officer, Dr Brendan Murphy, said on the 27th April 2020, that even after social restrictions ease, we will have to permanently change how we interact (Doyle, 2020). There is no guarantee that it will, or that yet another pandemic will not simply intrude in time. If at all possible, it will take years to overcome COVID-19, with the only hope at the moment being a vaccine and global immunisation programs.

Until then, new social rules will have to be practised and will likely be enforced. Amongst them are simple, often small everyday practices of frequent hand washing and disinfection, sneezing protocols, the wearing of face masks as well as social distancing. The authorities will keep on reminding us about how we should adapt to the new viral state of affairs. Governments have already taken to communication through media, and authorities are communicating

new rules now by ending SMS to personal mobile phones, by the use of large advertisement billboards, and by placing Vehicle Management Systems on major roads and in public parks. Inner cities have been deserted, people are avoiding going to the shops and to work. Companies have closed their buildings and sent staff to work from home. Twitter has recently proclaimed that its employees can work from home *forever*. Universities have pivoted to teaching online, and groceries are increasingly delivered to your door. Now people walk around their neighbourhoods and appear in larger if dispersed numbers in local parks. In New York, as Spring arrives, the parks are spilling over as too many people go to find some reprieve, taking a break from their self-isolation routines. The city has started to close some streets to vehicles in order to widen the footpath and allow people to maintain their distance while outdoors. In Brooklyn, the Green-Wood Cemetery is seeing more people enjoying walking by themselves (Hickmann, 2020). One frequently observes yoga or kick-boxing practice, strength and fitness regimes outdoors, not just in parks, but in any patch of green that is available. People take video conference calls on their front terraces, sitting in their front yards or even on the footpath, leaning against trees or walls.

The city, the squares, and the shopping malls are deserted, while the parks have become the dining room and the office, the fitness club, and the cafe. Formerly practised commercial activities have shifted to a private practice undertaken alone or with one companion outdoors, as visitors cannot be invited home (Lembke & Ochs, 2020). Social activities outside one's family or household unit have disappeared and can even be prosecuted, at least for the time being. We must restrain from greeting friends with a handshake or a hug when we chance to encounter them outside the supermarket or in the park. This will have a considerable impact on our interaction with each other in public as well as our relationships to public places. Ultimately, we will begin to consider our cities in a different light. Our ideas about and imagination of what a city can be will have to adapt. What cities will be able to provide, what we are willing to contribute, how we will spend time at work, in shopping malls, in restaurants, and cafes might change too, post COVID-19.

Some of the changes are welcome ones, though this no doubt depends on your point of view. In a headline, the Australian newspaper *The Age* anticipates that "Car Parks (will be) out, footpaths and cycling lanes in as city prepares for post-COVID commuter" (Jacks, 2020). This is followed by a statistic showing that cycling has increased between 200% to 800% on popular city trails. On average the number of cyclists had tripled across the surveyed cycle paths in order to avoid public transport options (Jacks, 2020). Melbourne

follows Milan, which will introduce an urban makeover, “reallocating street space from cars to cycling and walking, in response to the coronavirus crisis,” which “includes low-cost temporary cycle lanes, new and widened pavements, 30kph...speed limits, and pedestrian and cyclist priority streets” (Laker, 2020, para. 5). These are currently temporary and short-term changes, somewhat easy to implement and then to reverse again. But the kinds of discussion we should have ought to address the long-term impact, especially where this intersects with our ongoing ecological crisis.

Asked about the impact of the pandemic on city development, Michele Acuto, Director of the Connected Cities Lab at the University of Melbourne, points out that any changes will also have to consider the challenges of climate change—an agenda that has fallen off news headlines for the time being (Klaus, 2020). One way the discussion had turned was that real estate agents had seen, a higher interest in rural properties, a move to smaller cities, and urban sprawl seems to be on the agenda. Acuto warns that where concerns about climate change would direct us toward densification efforts in urban contexts to avoid land and resources hungry sprawl and alternative move toward smaller regional cities, or urban expansion “would have to go with much better connectivity of public transport” (Kalus, 2020, para. 20). He continues to argue that “What should change the decentralization of services, better managing of supplies, nets of smaller entities in food delivery, for instance—is different from what will. Will market forces sway the things we do towards what’s marketable and economically profitable versus saying this clearly is a call for redundancy in public health and public transport?” (Klaus, 2020, p. 20). Will we be able to implement ongoing change in the face of our ecological crises, after demonstrating that the *unthinkable*, the shutting down of global travel, the hibernation of complete economies, is possible at least for some time? One side effect so far is that we have proven our ability to implement radical change, which suggests that we have the collective political capacity to apply similar measures in response to the impending environmental disaster (Milman, 2020).

### **Friday, April 20, 2007**

In the past, I have discussed the kinds of participatory strategies that might counterbalance the increased commercialisation of urban spaces (Douglas & Hinkel, 2011; Hinkel, 2011a). At this moment, public health implementations have brought public life in large parts to a standstill and made informal practices in urban settings close to impossible, which begs the question of how designers can continue to work with the urban interior.

In 2007, with a collective of researchers at RMIT University, Melbourne, we formed a group dedicated to the investigation of urban interiors. The events, workshops, and symposia we convened, subsequently resulted in an edited book entitled *Urban Interior: Informal Explorations, Interventions and Occupations* (Hinkel, 2011b). Here I defined the urban interior as those spaces and times that challenge any neat distinction between private and public modes of existence. Importantly, the project of the urban interior is one that is left open-ended, available to reinterpretation depending on the circumstances that confront us. As I wrote at that moment “The space between the urban and the interior is one that continues to unfurl, requiring that one interrogates the productive interplay at the threshold where it is not possible to say whether one occupies a realm of privacy or publicity, a space on the inside or outside, a collective or individual moment” (Hinkel, 2011b, pp. 6–8).



Figure 3  
Mobile Variable  
Message Signs  
(VMS) in local  
parks remind us  
to follow social  
distancing rules  
(Photograph by  
author, 2020)



Figure 4  
Subverting  
existing systems  
as an artistic  
practice (Artwork  
and photograph  
by author, 2011)

What will become of our urban sphere, our shared common spaces, our informal gatherings, our urban interiors in the future, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis? Informal urban interiors have already been re-invented so as to enable our encounters with others, friends, and strangers alike, in new ways. The definition of what composes a public is being experimented with before our eyes through such simple props, such as Perspex screens and via mobile Variable Message Signs (VMS), through ready-to-hand materials like tape to demarcate crosses, lines, and barriers in grocery stores, while the thresholds between interiors and exteriors of cafés and restaurants have been re-gigged to enable a take-out logic for the very survival of the small business. We can observe the urban interior taking on new forms all around us. In times of crisis changes which would under normal circumstances take a long time, have been expedited and implemented in quick and often hasty ways—the shift to working from home for a large part of the workforce being one example today, the re-spatialisation of small businesses such as cafés and grocery stores being another. What is currently a peremptory act aimed at maintaining public health may well become an enduring trend toward working remotely or at a careful distance from our urban others.

### **Tuesday, July 25, 1837**

The possibility of communicating and staying in touch across times and geographically distant places was enabled through the development of electrical telecommunications nearly 200 years ago. In 1837, two men, an inventor and a scientist, stationed in Camden Town and Euston Station respectively, passed a telegraph message from one to the other, though this was just one experiment among a whole series of others that had been emerging alongside experiments with the uses of electricity ("The first electric telegraph," 2016). By now, advanced modes of telecommunications are perceived as commonplace, we live in an information society. An array of online communication tools has come to support the formation of online communities, as well as remote work and education. Simply to say that the urban interior extends beyond material milieu connecting diverse communities, such as become acutely felt during these times of COVID-19.

Snapchat, Facebook, WhatsApp, Facetime, Skype, and the current pre-eminence of Zoom, to name some of the most common applications, have facilitated ubiquitous and perpetual communication through the sharing of images, texts, and videos. Video conferencing, the ability to see someone's face in an online conversation or meeting, being able to read their facial

expressions, has improved the perception of being connected or sharing the same space, even while embodied sensation feels deprived or somehow extenuated. Face-to-face meetings IRL (*In Real Life*) have moved to online face-to-face meetings. The emergence of Amazon and eBay in the mid-1990s had already shifted the habits of consumption, and the pandemic has only increased such habits, for those who still hold a salary. For those who are so privileged, the convenience of ordering something from the comfort of a living room couch, choosing virtually from a stock of goods theoretically accessible from across the globe, had already dramatically transformed shopping habits. During COVID-19 online shopping is the only lifeline many shops have left, even habits of everyday shopping from the local Deli or supermarket has increasingly moved to online ordering and door-to-door delivery in order to avoid the social distancing dilemmas of entering stores. As a consequence, even more, commercial outlets have considered closing down their brick and mortar stores to move their businesses online (Chalmers, 2020).

#### **Thursday, April 23, 2020**

Similarly, the concept of play, spending time with friends, has moved to play online and on gaming platforms, trends I have become aware of through my two sons. The excitement of spending time away from home while at home, in imaginary worlds, undertaking acts that one would not be able or allowed to undertake in *real* life is another pre-COVID-19 trend that is now expanding. What we can learn from these game environments is that online environments open up new opportunities for imagining other kinds of event spaces. The popular online game Fortnite, for instance, created its first one-off virtual event, a rocket launch, in June 2018 (Hernandez, 2018). On April 23, 2020, more than 12.3 million people entered Fortnite's gaming environment to witness a "record-breaking virtual video game concert featuring Grammy-nominated rapper, Travis Scott" ("Travis Scott," 2020, para. 3). Billions of people have tuned into major events on television in the past, with an estimated 3.5 billion viewers at the 1996 opening of the Atlanta summer Olympics ("1996 Summer Olympics," 2020); however, the difference between online gaming and television needs to be stressed. In online games, your experience is one of participation in an event, rather than passive viewing. You can move through space, and with the help of devices like VR goggles, you can become immersed in the spaces of virtual events. This logic of the spatiality of the urban interior keeps the urban inhabitant in the presumed comfort of their home.

### **Monday, July 6, 2020**

A week ago, it was reported that more than 500,000 people have died from COVID-19 and more than ten million have been diagnosed positive. While in some countries, like Australia, Austria or Israel, restrictions have been eased and instead of an elimination strategy a suppression strategy has been politically chosen, numbers are rising in the US, India and Brazil. While I discuss the impact of COVID-19 on my own everyday life, social distancing is a luxury the working class does not have (Prose, 2020). When India announced its three-week lockdown, many feared "that hunger may kill many like us before coronavirus" (Singh, 2020, para. 32). Now, three months later, India has the fourth-highest number of infections, though in terms of mortality its death rate of 1.38 per 100,000 population compares well next to the highest death rate of 66.50 per 100,000 population in the UK (John Hopkins University Coronavirus Research Center, 2020b).

Over the last months, social distancing has become the new paradigm, and yet despite this, we have witnessed people coming together to protest on the streets. The Black Lives Matter marches, in the US and around the world, call for action against police brutality and against the social profiling of African Americans by the police. In Australia, First Nation's people suffer similar concerns. The Black Lives Matter marches on June 6, 2020, have been named by many, including the New York Times, as potentially the largest movement in the US ever. More than half a million protested one day alone in nearly 550 places across the US (Buchanan, Bui, & Patel, 2020). It is surprising and at the same time encouraging that people continue to use the public realm to demonstrate, exposing themselves to the risk of both infection and police violence.

### **Saturday, July 20, 2027**

In seven years, the sabbatical year in the biblical sense, from now, 190 years after 1837 and twenty years after 2007, the most far-reaching changes following the acceptance of the Pandemicene as a new global logic have taken place in our education systems and our work environments. While previously many workplaces accepted some flexibility, offering an allowance for working from home, important meetings were usually still held face to face. The sharing of the same physical space was considered necessary for the maintenance of collegiality and line-management. Now offices and similar desk-work environments have, by necessity, shifted to online environments, where one could be anywhere, at one's home-desk, or out for an isolation walk. Observing the opportunity



for the cutting of costs of office rentals and real estate, companies have realised that the office space, or designated desk, is no longer a necessity for work—from hot-desking to no-desking at all. Office real-estate prices have been plunging. By providing less office space with the accompanying reduction of costs and inherent risks of commuting, behavioural changes have led to the obsolescence of the office typology (Gujral, Palter, Sanghvi, & Vickery, 2020). There are similar murmurings to be heard from the education sector, where the efficiency and scalability of online courses have been accepted as the new norm. Now, the most prestigious universities across the world have fully pivoted to online teaching and learning, celebrating the sophistication of their online curriculum. The pressure on available teaching spaces and lecture theatres has been relieved, and the number of enrolled students has exploded; students who might well be sitting anywhere in the world, drawing on the specificities of their own local environments for virtual classroom tasks and discussions.

What is lost are direct human interactions. While the formal exchanges, such as structured meetings and lectures, might be similar in off-line and online environments, the space for informal interaction and exchanges, the spontaneous sharing of ideas, quick check-ups on progress with others, incidental encounters, are no longer supported. Now the only meetings taking place are the scheduled and prepared meetings. Attendance rates in lectures have gone through the roof and participation in seminars at universities have increased, as students can easily *zoom in* rather than travel from home to university. Increasingly, students tune in to multiple lecture sites simultaneously, gleaning concepts and images here and there, patching together strange educational packages. Zoom bombings have waxed and waned, and we still sometimes find ourselves in the wrong Zoom meeting by accident, much as we once discovered ourselves in the wrong lecture hall or tutorial room. Security protocols have increased. While the bodily experience of others, the sharing of intimate spaces, is for the most part lost, the development of communication technologies has expanded allowing us to hold work meetings in virtually the same *experienced* space, while sitting in our homes, occupying a shared space in virtual or augmented realities. Similarly, taking part in an event in the space of gaming environments, Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality environments and tools has pushed the limits of what it means to be together while physically apart.

This has upsides, such as less travelling, which means streets have been given over to walking, cycling and roller-blading. There is less congestion on public transport, less air pollution—emissions during

the COVID-19 lockdown gave the earth a chance to take a breath—and a lesson was subsequently learnt. More time is saved for family or to re-learn laziness, lack of productivity, and how to get out of bed later. The morning peak for water and energy has shifted to the later hours as data from different cities clearly demonstrates (Millionen Menschen, 2020). What had seemed impossible or unacceptable in the past, pre-COVID-19, has become normalised. Just as wearing a facemask at the outset of the pandemic caused unease, by now the face mask is not only socially accepted, even expected, it has become a new fashion item.

Our urban interiors have become mixed reality interiors, collapsing the private and the public sphere, rendering them near indiscernible. The acceptance of video conferencing and the replication of analogue contexts, such as the pedagogical space of the design studio, is being perfected by VR and AR research ventures. Students, guests, colleagues, and friends meet in augmented and virtual environments wearing VR goggles, projecting AR images, coming to terms with the feel of data when it begins to take the shape of a designed form. There remains a general uneasiness about the self-secure auto-isolated bubbles we have meanwhile composed around ourselves. The diminution of the accidental, the loss of the unexpected, and the moderation of uncomfortable encounters with others produce the urban interior as a safe and buffeted space, cocoon-like. Chance encounters with others are edited out or else carefully curated in highly controlled virtual spaces. Those who have caused disruptions or discomfort in the past are no longer able to enter our spaces anymore, or else their intrusions are controlled. We have increased our bubble-like existence in the world, pushing the political and societal spheres we foster on social media even further into our spatial experience. At the same time, physical spaces are becoming more and more controlled by our public authorities in the spirit of providing public health and security, while virtual and data spaces are controlled and monitored in the name of cybersecurity. Are there opportunities available for rethinking our spatial relations amidst the local and global urban interiors we share? Will we embrace the virtual realm much as we once related to the physical spaces in cities? Will the Black Lives Matter marches turn out to be one of the last political statements enunciated in the urban public realm? Will we come to fondly remember political protests on the streets as a thing of the past? It might well be that the shaping of political opinions had already relocated to cyberspace with the global proliferation of Web 2.0, for better and for worse.

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