

WORDS BEYOND THE PANDEMIC: A HUNDRED-SIDED CRISIS

Coord.: José Reis
A collective work by CES

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Centro de Estudos Sociais
Universidade de Coimbra



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YEAR 0 A.C.: MUTATIONS IN THE URBAN HABITAT

Nuno Grande

I have witnessed several debates on the possible mutations in the urban habitat resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Only over the course of this year 0 a.C. – as a humorous colleague calls it –, will we begin to understand cities better after-COVID, in light of the urban dynamics we knew b.C.

Some say that nothing will change substantially: we will go back to business as usual, and reality will just be a little worse, a little more iniquitous for the elderly, the chronically ill, the homeless, etc. Others describe a path to urban dystopia, in which we abandon the dense cities, the collective facilities, the massified public spaces, in search of a cocoon where we can isolate ourselves, amongst family and (tele)work, between fear of “the other” and obedience to “their” (the State’s) health surveillance. In this post-apocalyptic vision, the year 2020 will end in 1984 – that of George Orwell.

A third vision states that this is the opportunity to achieve what until now was only an ecological utopia: the end of natural resource predation and the immediate decarbonisation of the planet, which has clearly benefited from our months of confinement.

Considering the resilience of cities, there are no certainties, but I have a feeling that we will witness a variable combination of these visions. The neoliberal urbanisation will certainly take advantage of the polarisation of positions: here and there, there will be a new sprawl, motivated by the escape of the most sceptical to isolated regions (ironically saving them from desertification?); here and there,

new neighbourhoods and buildings, better adapted to the green economy, will be announced.

I am more interested in the options of those who will continue to militantly live in the dense, cosmopolitan, conflictual city. Only there will it be possible to build the alternative in which I believe: a city which shares, in space and time, an intersocial, intercultural and intergenerational cohesion. As an inhabitant, one will have room for one’s confinement (if needed), but in the remaining common residential areas – halls, patios, terraces, gardens – uses and costs will be shared with one’s neighbours, based on fair value (cohousing); at work, if possible through a better articulation with inhabiting, collective resources should also be more shared and optimised (coworking).

In the public space, pride of place will be given to pedestrians and soft mobility (e.g. cycling), while reinforcing public transport and the safe, shared use of private transport (e.g. eCar-sharing). Collective facilities will be suitable for everyone but adaptable to the isolation and treatment of each person in the event of new pandemics.

This flexibility will be applied not only to space but also to qualitative (not quantitative) time, based on the partitioning of work modes, schedules and commuting, avoiding useless displacements and peak hours. This alternative will be a step towards the requalification of the urban habitat, but, above all, towards a renewed “right to the city”.