



Virus and the City: Urban Experiences in Self-Isolation

Sabrina Stallone
April, 2020



The way we make sense of space has radically changed as a novel Coronavirus spread, with no clear end in sight. While our physical surroundings shrink and our affective geographies might extend enormously, how do we still make use of and perceive the cities with which we identify, that glue together our social networks, our structures of solidarity and dissent? With my doctoral ethnographic research delayed indefinitely, I can't refrain from thinking what the city as a receptacle and catalyst of social life brings into the analysis of global pandemics - or where it



falls short. Why and how does living in and representing the city still matter in times of solitary confinement and isolation? And how can this moment of crisis be used to rethink what we want our cities to be?

These questions reminded me of a vignette in James Holston's 1989 ethnography of Brasília. One of his interlocutors, having moved to the new capital from another Brazilian city, stated that one of the most profoundly shocking aspects of his new place of residence was its lack of street corners. He remembered his native city, in which he walked to the same corner every time he wanted to "meet a friend, pass the time, find a neighbour or hear the news" (1989: 105). With street corners replaced by residential cul-de-sacs or high-speed roads and traffic circles, urbanity, in his eyes, could not be recreated. The street corner stands as a node for information exchange, economic trade, and social interaction.

In preparation for my now postponed fieldwork, I articulated a gendered critique of the street corner as described in Holston's analysis, one indebted to a number of great feminist urban ethnographies that illustrate how, for LGBTQ+ folks and non-male bodies, the urban street corner can be a site of danger; and in most parts of the world, a site where a body's respectability is inevitably negotiated or challenged. But currently, the street corner has simply become fully unavailable, inaccessible. The spread of a viral disease, [as The New York Times has proclaimed](#), is essentially anti-urban. It simply leaves the corners of our sociality unused, and thus useless.

Holston describes the street corner as an aorta of urban life, but only within a web of relations. It gives vitality to the squares, shops and residences it punctuates, but it can only survive if the storefronts and apartment blocks are dynamic, permeable; only if the city as site of capitalist acceleration is not completely hollowed of its relational component. As political scientist [Carlotta Caciagli pointed out in the Italian Jacobin](#), in times like these, the urban public space makes us uncomfortable, we no longer belong to it and it no longer belongs to us. It becomes merely the connection of thousands of private spaces, which, once left, need to be returned to in the briefest time possible.



But it is not only the vitality of the producer-consumer coordinates that falters under these conditions, with cafés devoid of personnel and customers and corner store fridges humming unraided. [In an illuminating piece for Society & Space](#), Abdoumalig Simone and Michele Lancione ask how we can keep the infrastructures outside of our domestic confinements functioning and responsive for those who cannot afford to stay inside. That most of the service industry is on lockdown cuts into the livelihoods of those who do not directly benefit from remunerated labour, but from its ripples: those who populate the publicness of our cities at large, street vendors, sex-workers, the unemployed, retired, informal workers and dwellers, whose nodes come undone. These issues point to broader questions concerning the inequalities of liveable infrastructures:

Looking at the relationality of a street corner as a metonymy for urban experiences, especially through a gendered lens, can help us understand the interlinkages of city and sociality.

Consider the news headline about a women’s shelter in Zurich, regularly offering 24 beds to women in need, which had to go into quarantine on March 25 and block new intake after one of the temporary residents was tested positive with the novel virus. In a number of Swiss cities, there had already been a scarcity of sites of refuge or support for women prior to the crisis, with many a shelter at constant capacity (SODK 2019; Stiftung gegen Gewalt 2018). The lack of safe spaces – as well as the “coming undone” of potentially less safe, but essential nodes in the public space – in one of the most expensive countries in the world rearranges the urban geographies of women in need, driving them out of cities or fully keeping them in the confinement of precarious or abusive homes. Even in more diffuse cases of abuse, with inevitable job loss and the proverbial “second shift” at home abounding, lifetime earnings might never recover for single female earners or heads of family.

The publicness of corners and squares is the ground on which these inequalities unfold, but also where the city allots room to protest, contest, make oneself



heard.

As architect and planner Mohammad Gharipour argues, the democracy of public space is reflected in the architectural maximization of space in which people can stage independence protests, or later commemorate them (2016: 6). This definition points to the inherently relational nature of urban publics, as it does not only include the architectural emptying of a space for protest, but also its framing; its ability to become an arena, because it can be observed and entered, filled, from a range of vantage points and corners. The “contemporaneity” of cities, which includes in an Arendtian public sphere gathering to practice the relational performance of being political collectively, is officially inhibited, or at least severely limited in times of lockdowns and self-isolation.

In my hometown of Zurich, the local chapter of the feminist strike movement, assembled in preparation for and further fuelled by the National Women*’s Strike of June 2019, has relentlessly addressed the above-discussed gendered inequalities of the pandemic. While many of their actions have focused on the online dissemination of essential information (hotline numbers and mapping initiatives for precarised people), considerable urban protest has manifested around visible corners, bridges and walls, proclaiming calls to action and palimpsestically amending existing political discourse.

On March 26, a subchapter of this collective organised a wake on Zurich’s Helvetiaplatz, which it has dubbed “Ni Una Menos Square” as an homage to the homonymous Latin American movement against gender-based violence. The event, a ritual staged every Thursday night after the murder of a woman* somewhere within Swiss borders, served as a commemoration of a recent victim of femicide in Switzerland. The wake was attended by 22 women*, songs were sung, information shared and mutual encouragement was given, even across reputedly safe physical distance.

The square’s function as a public stage was perhaps diminished in its immediacy by the lack of passers-by and onlookers that usually characterize the



square; but its role was strengthened as a node of much-needed affective exchange between activists in a time where its conditions of possibility are impoverished.

Although the women* followed federal regulations concerning metric proximity, police in three cars surrounded them after 25 minutes and threatened to press immediate charges should the square not be vacated. The group broke up and quietly dispersed in different directions.

The images of these and more acts of protest were quickly disseminated online, emphasizing the localised trajectories of digital networks, often defined through their deterritorial reach. There is a ceaseless flow of words and symbols that abide by the solidarity measures of physical distancing while strengthening the voices of dissent; and those who observe the action from armchair sidelines, rooftop terraces and other thresholds feel included and, ideally, keep vigil over the rights to *their* city, and *the* city in general. The crisis thus might weaken the power of the street corner and the square it opens up to in their relational materiality, but it also gives us a much-needed stimulus to rethink what we want our urban contemporaneity to be, possibly making us reach beyond our languid roles of producers or consumers.

A city, as social constructivists have told us, is whatever we decide to deem as such. A lot of power is given to dwellers in that definition: In times of crisis, it is a power to be seized. With respect to the street corner and what pertains to it, Abdoumalig Simone and Michele Lancione call for an “undisciplined politics of inhabitation”, in which we ask ourselves not only what infrastructures do to us, but what we can do to infrastructures to attune them to our needs and sensibilities.

We need to stay alert when public health strategies start folding into political repression, and find dissenting tactics to keep the political pulse of our public spaces running even if it means circumventing the affect and effect of physical contemporaneity; we must fully summon the power of internet ecologies, and



pressure our municipalities to remain receptive to the actions of solidarity their citizens are setting up, at every corner.

I was talking to a friend a few days ago, on one of these digital “bumps into each other” that virtually echo that crucial element of our city experience. When exchanging bits of news about his urban experiences under self-isolation and mine, he suggested that we should hijack the lockdown of cities in the long run, make it our global strike demanding to rethink our futures; the biggest *détournement* in history. It’s indeed a great idea, one borne out of the thresholds from which we observe. And cities – even now – yield the relational infrastructures that we need to implement it.

References:

Gharipour, M. (2016). “Urban landscape: public space and environment in cities of the contemporary Middle East.” In: *Contemporary Urban Landscapes of the Middle East*. Ed. by Mohammad Gharipour. New York: Routledge.

Holston, J. (1989). *The Modernist City: An Anthropological Critique of Brazilia*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

SODK (2019). “Situationsanalyse zum Angebot und zur Finanzierung der Not- und Schutz-zunterkünfte in den Kantonen. Grundlagenbericht.” Bern: SODK.

Stiftung gegen Gewalt (2018). “Jahresbericht 2018.” Bern: Stiftung gegen Gewalt an Frauen und Kindern.