

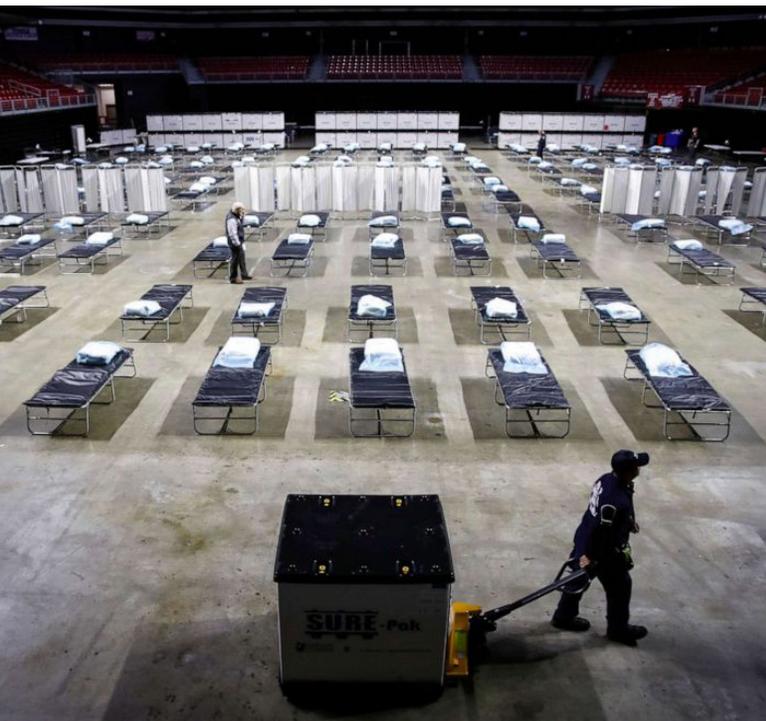
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A resilient system is **flexible**. In other words, it has alternative strategies. Are we **designing** and **building** for flexibility in our cities?

“Under the seeming disorder of the old city, wherever the old city is working successfully, is a marvelous order for maintaining the safety of the streets and the freedom of the city. It is a complex order.”

Jane Jacobs

The short answer to whether we are planning for flexibility in our cities is a simple ‘no’. At least, a ‘not enough’. Zoning regulations, land use patterns, and infrastructure investment in US cities are evidence of this. An arterial road serves one purpose and one purpose only, to connect people from Point A to Point B. But we knew this prior to COVID-19. What this crisis has emphasized, much like the other points I made earlier, is the increasing need we have to plan and build for flexibility. In the span of just four weeks, hospitals have been significantly transformed to accommodate an influx of new patients. We have read about sports arenas, hotel rooms, university dorms, libraries, and schools being turned into healthcare centers and food banks, while other single-use structures like parking decks continue to sit idle and empty across the nation. Flexibility is important not only in the short-term response of a shock, but also in the long-term mitigation of its effects. Think of entire businesses located in a concentrated area in a city having to close permanently due to COVID-19 as a potential long-term effect. Are city policies, regulations, and current infrastructure flexible enough to support other potential uses?



Temple University's Liacouras Center is set up as a field hospital for COVID-19 patients, March 30, 2020. Credit: Matt Rourke/AP, via www.abcnews.go.com

How much and in which ways this pandemic will shape the future of architecture and urban planning is still an open question. But before we go into designing new building typologies and new city policies to accommodate social distancing and health crises, we may want to remember that cities are complex organisms. The challenges we think we will face tomorrow may not be the ones we actually face, so to plan for flexibility may be one of our most resilient approaches to anticipate future shocks. Going back to the example I made earlier about car lanes being turned into bike lanes overnight in Bogotá, this would not have been as effective if the streets that were converted were not part of a larger, well-connected grid system supported by a variety of services. Well-connected, walkable, urban grids have proven to be flexible throughout decades, yet we continue to plan our cities as if their value was a thing of the past.

These are not revelations offered by the epidemic, but our current state certainly offers us the invitation to think of the city as a place capable of “complex orders” as Jane Jacobs would call them, like those offered by the flexibility built into our structures and frameworks.