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Promoting the Public Realm: A solution to COVID-19's impact on downtown cores

Introduction

In 2020, the Sars-CoV-2 virus, known around the world as COVID-19, spread globally impacting seemingly all factors of human life. Not only were healthcare systems under extreme stress, but social systems also deteriorated as many were forced to isolate themselves in their homes, unable to visit loved ones, friends, or co-workers for months or years. Economic systems collapsed as all transactions were put on pause, unsure of when businesses would reopen. Company leaders and staff had to quickly adjust the office dynamic to an online model, taking advantage of platforms like Zoom, and many others that emerged during the pandemic to continue team and client meetings, share work, and send the occasional joke to lift company morale. Three years since the beginning of the pandemic, businesses have continued to be impacted by the shift to remote working. While remote platforms such as Zoom are likely to be used for the foreseeable future, businesses and governments of downtown city cores are starting to witness what 'working from home' means for the urban environment, company culture, and junior workers entering the job market for the first time since the pandemic. While the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic was about two years ago, research is already developing on such implications for downtown cores. Working from home emptied downtown cores across the globe, as crowded spaces were sites for the disease, but even as the pandemic restrictions lifted, workers continued to work remotely for the flexibility it added to their daily lives.

During the Fall and Winter terms, I had the opportunity to work with the Toronto Financial District Business Improvement Area (TFDBIA) on producing their 5-Year Public Realm Strategy Document for 2023 – 2028 which, in previous years, has outlined the functional and aesthetic state of the public realm in the Financial District (Toronto Financial District, 2018). While keeping the main underlying goal of the document from previous years, my Internship partner, Cody Hale, and I recognized the unique and historic state Toronto and cities alike were in as they experienced record-low numbers of people working and visiting downtown cores. By viewing the impact of the pandemic it is understood that simply going back to the ‘way it was before’ is not an option, as our socio-economic environments have drastically changed. Thus, when working on the 2023 – 2028 Public Realm Document, it was important to not only outline that Toronto’s Financial District understands the impacts of the pandemic on the area but also take a promotional approach to the document’s content to attract workers, visitors, and businesses back to the area.

When creating the 2023 – 2028 Public Realm Document, it became clear that promoting the public realm post-pandemic would be vital to the area’s success. In response, this paper will apply this idea to a scholarly context by reviewing relevant literature to date. This paper argues that to sustain city centres post-COVID-19, advancing and promoting the public realm within downtown cores is extremely important. Additionally, three key focal questions will be answered to provide insight into how cities can take actionable steps toward maintaining city life and the businesses that rely heavily on foot traffic in downtown areas. Firstly, how has COVID-19 impacted the return of workers to cities' downtown cores? This is important to the understanding of why this is a problem that needs solving. Thus, the second question that will be answered is, what are the consequences of an ‘empty’ downtown core, will be answered. To conclude such

findings, the final section will ask what public realm strategies have improved work return in cities that could be emulated in other locations, like Toronto's Financial District. Each question will be supported by leading research and articles published before and since the pandemic.

COVID-19's Impact on Worker Return

COVID-19's impact on all facets of life has been astronomical, yet understanding such impacts is key for developing solutions to the problems our world now faces post-pandemic. This essay will restrict the analysis of COVID-19's impact to only urban-related issues of social and economic sustainability. Since pandemic restrictions have loosened, a significant problem various cities now face is getting workers and visitors back to what used to be the busiest areas of the city. Cities across the world that were once highly dense in terms of population of workers are seeing record low numbers of people in these spaces, impacting the livelihood and success of industries in the area like food and beverage, galleries, and tourist activities. In this section, the question, "How has COVID-19 impacted the return of workers to the downtown cores?" will be answered.

COVID-19 has impacted workers for different reasons, such as health vulnerability, city or workplace perceptions of the pandemic, income levels, and seniority or job tenure (Shaw et al., 2020). Crowded spaces, such as offices, were described as a hazard that should be avoided which caused high levels of stress and anxiety for those who worked in such spaces. In the context of the return-to-work environment, it is important to understand that the pandemic impacted everyone differently. For those who moved to remote work, many people adjusted and ultimately changed their lifestyle to match working from home. Those who made such adjustments but eventually had to return to the office felt heightened stress levels due to financial pressure, social isolation, fear of getting sick, or a threat of job loss (Shaw et al., 2020).

Furthermore, by the end of May 2022, about one-third (32%) of Canadians over the age of 18 tested positive for COVID-19 while another 8.3% suspect they had the virus but either did not take a test or had a false-negative result (Statistics Canada, 2022b). While this number is understated (due to unaware infections, false-negative tests, or a lack of self-reporting), the extreme nature of the virus is key to understanding why people are not returning to downtown cores, especially as 36.4% of those who had COVID-19 report that they still experienced symptoms at least three months after the infection (Statistics Canada, 2022b). Long-COVID-19 symptoms can have a significant impact on a worker's productivity or ability to do certain tasks (Gualano et al., 2022), thus return-to-work might be more challenging for certain people.

For those who were considered essential workers (hospital staff, and grocery store and pharmacy workers for example), their workplaces posed untenable risks. Many of these workers eventually were infected with COVID-19 and decided to seek other jobs or file for disability or unemployment payments instead of returning to such workplaces (Shaw et al., 2020). This has had extreme impacts on the success and livelihood of industries beyond only the healthcare system, such as food and beverage businesses, tourism activities, and other jobs hiring minimum wage workers, as many of these workers left their jobs during the pandemic for safety reasons, desires to change career paths, or were laid off. Layoffs largely occurred as businesses recognized the lack of revenue that would be generated during the pandemic as it shut down a majority of amenity-based businesses. Such realities struck many businesses in Toronto, with a total of 119,890 jobs lost and the largest hit experienced by the service industry at 46,100 fewer jobs (Toronto City Planning, 2021). Such loss to the makeup of the industry also caused 86.5% of restaurant businesses to experience a decrease in revenue in 2020, with over two-fifths of them experiencing a 40% or more loss in revenue (Sood, 2021). During the peak of the

pandemic, 51% of businesses were unsure of how long they could stay open before closing and filing for bankruptcy (Sood, 2021). Unfortunately, it was not long for many companies, as 2020 saw 3,480 (about 5%) establishments go under, the most significant decline since the statistic tracking started in 1983. It is also important to note that such closures and the eventual return to work impacted various groups differently depending on income, language, immigration status, social rank, and other socio-economic factors (Shaw et al., 2020). These statistics are important in understanding how COVID-19 impacted businesses and employment levels at the time, ultimately impacting the state of downtown cores.

Consequences of an ‘Empty’ Downtown Core

As businesses closed, many people also moved out of city cores to suburban areas where the work-from-home and life balance would be better. Brail (2021) measures such movement with post-office change-of-address forms and cell phone tracking data and found that either temporarily or permanently, COVID-19 accelerated the movement of households away from large urban centres. With such transitions away from city centres, urban cores have struggled to keep their customary vibrancy with less than 15% of workers returning downtown in 2021 (Brail, 2021), and only recently rising to 43% in February of 2023 (Altstedter, 2023). While workers are returning in such small increments, many cities are now preparing for the possibility that vacancies could be long-term, and some are considering repurposing office space for residential use, yet it is not an easy task (Brail, 2021). Since Toronto is ranked the fifth-least affordable housing market in the world, analyzing return to work patterns and utilizing such empty spaces will be extremely important. Another important consideration for the spatiality of the city post-pandemic is density planning. As cities began to push for more sustainable growth in recent years, building density became a solution many planners and city officials grabbed

onto. Increased density would consolidate essential services, reduce urban sprawl, and limit the need for gas automobiles. Half the world's population was living in cities before COVID-19, and such numbers were projected to rise to two-thirds by 2050 (Brail & Kleinman, 2022). The pandemic has significantly impacted these projections, as there is a growing importance for smaller cities and towns as remote workers look for an ideal work-life balance and factors such as air quality, rising costs, and lack of affordability have become serious considerations for those who no longer work in-person (Brail & Kleinman, 2022). What cities were once praised for, density, proximity, connectivity, and clustering, have since become almost an oxymoron, as during the pandemic these characteristics were also vulnerabilities.

While these are spatial implications of an 'empty' downtown core, there are also sectoral implications of an 'empty' downtown core. As discussed previously, COVID-19 caused significant losses in travel, hotel occupancy rates, retail services, and theatres and concerts, along with job prospects in each area as well (Brail, 2021). These industries rely on local foot traffic and their physical location for business success, unlike technology firms that were able to remain stable or even grow during remote work, thus it is these industries that most greatly feel the consequences of an 'empty' downtown core. While the impacts COVID-19 had on business in downtown cores vary per sector, it is important to understand such differences to develop solutions for bringing people back into these spaces.

Between both spatial and sectoral implications, there is an extremely interconnected nature between them and their spillover effects. The lack of office workers in central business districts, like Toronto's Financial District, limits the activity of other businesses and workers in the area (Brail, 2021). Specifically, the loss of high-income, 9 to 5 workers has resulted in a loss of jobs for those in various service industries such as cleaners, restaurant staff, and salespeople

(Brail, 2021). Furthermore, mobility patterns in cities were extremely impacted, as people chose to walk or drive places to avoid highly congested spaces where COVID-19 could easily spread. In October 2020, Toronto subway ridership was at 32% of regular levels (Brail, 2020), which has only since risen two and a half years later to 67% (Artuso, 2023). TTC CEO Rick Leary was quoted in Artuso's (2023) article articulating that ridership on Mondays and Fridays tends to be down, crediting the change to worker habit changes. Such lower ridership numbers have been attributed, by leading authors (Leanage & Filion, 2021), as a direct consequence of the work-from-home shift and 'empty' downtown cores.

It is also important to note that the consequences of an 'empty' downtown core are uneven across various individuals and groups. Specifically in Canada, pandemic job losses have been higher for low-income workers, as well as racialized groups continue to experience higher levels of unemployment compared to non-racialized people (Brail, 2021). This can be attributed to the fact that lower-income jobs are typically not offered in a remote setting (Brail, 2021), thus the reason such groups are greatly impacted by the fewer people downtown. Considering inequality in the consequences of an 'empty' downtown core is extremely important because such implications impact various people differently.

Public Realm Strategies to Sustain Downtown Cores

It has long been understood that downtown cores play a key role in urban sustainability, as made clear previously when discussing the consequences of 'empty' downtown cores, they support key economic activities and a city's ability to remain economically viable (Lashgari & Shahab, 2022). As society begins to move beyond the pandemic, the learnings from COVID-19 are becoming increasingly clear, as scholarly authors study not only the impacts of the pandemic but also how we can improve public space for future disturbances. Much of this work falls under

resiliency, which is defined as the city's capacity and ability to anticipate, plan for, mitigate risks, and seize the opportunities associated with environmental and social change (Island Press & The Kresge Foundation, 2015). Approaching COVID-19 as a learning opportunity to build a more resilient city by seizing the opportunities associated with the societal changes from the pandemic, this section will evaluate public realm strategies that have improved work return in cities which could be emulated in other locations, like Toronto's Financial District.

One of the most important aspects of resiliency work is understanding a 'bounce-back' versus 'bounce-forward' approach. Manyena et al. (2011) define 'bounce-back' resilience as which resilience and vulnerability are differentiated, and resilience is defined as the ability to strengthen existing structures and institutions against disaster as well as the ability to move on after disaster, largely removing the transformative possibilities of resilience and reinforcing the status quo. On the contrary, 'bounce-forward' resilience views disasters and disturbances as a catalyst for systemic change and focuses on community agency, adaptation, and evolution (Manyena et al., 2011). This is important when learning from the pandemic and its implication on the public realm in city centres, as cities have seen an extremely slow and reluctant return of workers and visitors to the cores. In fact, a mid-April 2020 survey in the UK found that a large majority wanted to welcome the change in lifestyle as permanent, while just 9% wanted a 'complete return to normal' (Honey-Rosés et al., 2020).

From the perspective of the Toronto Financial District Business Improvement Area (TFDBIA or BIA), the public realm is defined as "all publicly accessible space between buildings. This includes sidewalks, roads, laneways, parks and privately-owned, publicly-accessible open spaces," (Toronto Financial District, 2018). The BIA considers these areas to be vital in shaping the experiences of Financial District employees, residents and

visitors, arguing that it is the quality of the public realm that maintains the District's ability to attract and retain various industry players and employees (Toronto Financial District, 2018). During the pandemic and as the world exits such restrictions, various pieces of literature were written on how our relations with public space may change post-COVID-19, and if 2020 would be a defining year for a 'before and after' in planning and design. In June 2020, Rosés et al. published an article in an attempt to raise such questions as studying and research points for future literature. The authors address various questions, but the most prominent themes regarding how promoting the public realm could sustain city centres post-COVID-19 include the future of large public spaces, creating spaces where people feel welcome, comfortable and safe, and the potential of underutilized spaces as community gardens.

Before analyzing each of these themes, it is important to understand who the active attempts to promote the public realm are catered to within the city. In 2021, 320,460 people in Toronto were between the ages of 15 to 24, and the majority of the population (890,370) were aged 25 to 44 (Statistics Canada, 2022a). Understanding that the majority of the population encompasses young individuals, who likely did not have the financial means or job security to leave the city during the pandemic (unlike the 476,990 people that were aged 65 or older (Statistics Canada, 2022a)), is important especially as we consider who currently appreciates or needs in-person work and experiences post-pandemic. Recent graduates, while well-versed in how to succeed in a remote work environment, are graduating with fewer in-person interactions, networking opportunities, and industry experiences. Because of such, many are seeking hybrid positions, yet are met with considerations of location, quality of life, and work-life balance. Thus, when evaluating who improving the public realm would attract, this piece argues that it would likely draw the younger generations who are looking to grow their career in large cities.

In the first of Honey-Rosés et al.'s (2020) public realm improvement themes to draw workers and visitors back to downtown cores, the author discusses how many cities have large public spaces that have been created for large-scale events that could be transformed for better use. These spaces usually lack amenities such as benches, tables, or water fountains, and could be transformed to have such public offerings, attracting people to visit and spend time in those areas (Honey-Rosés et al., 2020). The main takeaway from the pandemic regarding the public realm and the use of open space is the value of flexibility. Spaces that can serve multiple purposes better sustain a variety of city life. Secondly, the urban designers and promoters of the public realm will need to create spaces where people feel welcome, comfortable and safe (Honey-Rosés et al., 2020). Squares, parks and alleys are all spaces that can be transformed for social interaction and time outdoors, especially as youth are becoming more accustomed to online isolation (Honey-Rosés et al., 2020) it is important to make such spaces as welcoming and safe as possible to encourage time outdoors. Furthermore, due to confinement during the pandemic, there have been increasing levels of multi-functionality, creativity, fluidity and adaptation in terms of the use of the public realm (Honey-Rosés et al., 2020). For example, cities such as Vienna, Boston, Oakland, Philadelphia and Minneapolis closed roads to allow pedestrians and cyclists more space within cities, while other cities have also changed the width of sidewalks, added more bike lanes, and allowed patio spaces to be moved on roads (Honey-Rosés et al., 2020). Such fluidity and multi-functional approaches to public space also need to be applied to demands for smaller green spaces and neighbourhood parks, as they serve as places of refuge from the loud and bustling city (Honey-Rosés et al., 2020). This is important in attracting workers and visitors back to the area, as many left the downtown core for suburban areas with more access to green space. This idea of using the public realm as green space

transitions into the third theme of Honey-Rosés et al.'s (2020) article which is the underutilization of rooftops or decks that are poorly equipped and not meeting their full potential. Community gardens can attract people back to an area as they allow for meaningful social and emotional connections (Honey-Rosés et al., 2020) without travelling to a park. While supporting sustainability, biodiversity, and the urban green fabric, gardens also provide stress relief, recreation, and cultural activities for the public either in the sky or on the ground (Honey-Rosés et al., 2020). The creation or financial support of community gardens can have a significant impact on worker-return numbers, as the quality of life while at work would be increased exponentially with easy access to green spaces.

Conclusions: Where does TFDBIA go from here?

While the creation of physical greenspaces might be challenging for TFDBIA due to authority over the actions in those spaces, examples from Downtown Vancouver BIA can be taken into account for how to approach the public realm post-COVID-19. As of June 2022, Downtown Vancouver opened what they called their Business Beautification Fund 2022/2023, where businesses could apply to the \$30,000 fund and use the money to improve the outward appearance of their stores (Downtown Vancouver, 2022). All of the money was awarded to businesses within the first three weeks of the launch, and the transformation images clearly show the positive impact the fund had on improving storefronts, ultimately attracting more workers and visitors to the area to shop. TFDBIA could also launch a similar fund, but instead for projects regarding urban public greenspace. Another excellent example of diversifying the reasons for people to visit downtown cores, especially in the heart of the Financial District, is to host arts and entertainment events within city streets, like Vancouver's Winter Arts Festival, as such events draw people from around the city as well as prove to various groups why the

downtown core is a place they would want to return to. Post-pandemic, creativity and flexibility within the public realm are trends that should be capitalized on to successfully attract people back to downtown cores.

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