

SHUT DOWN OR ADAPT? PANDEMIC-ERA INFRASTRUCTURE IN A DIVIDED CHICAGO

In Chicago, COVID-19 revives themes raised by an earlier disaster: the 1995 heat wave, which, like the coronavirus, caused the most suffering in the most vulnerable neighbourhoods. It also revealed that resilient infrastructure – both social and physical – can profoundly improve outcomes. As city officials walk a line between shuttering city life and adapting to the challenge, creative approaches to infrastructure can make Chicago stronger in the face of disaster.



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As Chicago confronts the COVID-19 crisis, its experience recalls the patterns raised by an earlier disaster. In July 1995, the city experienced a week of sweltering temperatures of up to 41° C which combined with high humidity to push the heat index to 52°C. Roads cracked, cars broke down and the electrical grid buckled. Hospital systems were strained, vital social services taxed and by the end of the heat wave more than 700 Chicagoans had died (Klinenberg, 2002).

The geographic manifestations of the heat wave revealed Chicago's fault lines – but also its assets. Poor and African American and Latino neighbourhoods suffered the most. But certain poor neighbourhoods fared much better than others, a fact sociologist Eric Klinenberg attributes to their strong "social infrastructure": community organisations, useful public spaces and relationship-building institutions that enabled neighbours to support each other in a crisis.

Amid the coronavirus pandemic, Chicago faces the challenge of adapting its infrastructure – social and otherwise – to meet the needs of the moment. The city's response has charted a careful, sometimes contradictory path. As it repurposes some infrastructure to meet current demands,

it struggles to figure out how to use other assets, and has preferred to shut down public spaces than to alter them.

The city's approach reveals the fine line leaders must walk between suppressing and exploiting features of city life and the challenge of thinking creatively about city infrastructure in the effort to build a more equitable, functional and humane city out of the pandemic.

Mapping the crisis

Chicago, a city of 2.7 million people, is divided between a relatively prosperous North Side and the more economically mixed South and West Sides, with areas of concentrated, racialised poverty – what one writer

calls “Manhattan smashed against Detroit” (Semuels, 2018).

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The coronavirus pandemic, like the heat wave a quarter-century earlier, has put African American and Latino residents, and residents of the deindustrialised South and West Sides, at far greater risk than North Siders and those the city categorises as “white” – defined by the US Census Bureau as people who identify as “having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa”. Latinos – people with roots in Latin America – are four times more likely to test positive than whites. Thus far, African Americans have died from the disease at nearly three times the rate of whites, while Latinos have died at nearly double the rate of whites.¹ As of the end of May, the city had over 42,000 confirmed cases

of COVID-19 and 1940 deaths, nearly half of whom are African American.

Economic circumstances force more residents of the South and West Sides to leave their houses in spite of stay-at-home orders. Residents of these neighbourhoods are less likely to have jobs that can be worked from home. A media report from early May found mass transit boardings dropped upwards of 90% in several North Side “L” stations, but only around 60% in sta-

1. The latest data for Chicago is available on the city's official website: <https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/sites/covid-19/home/latest-data.html>

tions on the South and West Sides (Ramos, 2020). For residents with few mobility options, transit continues to serve a vital role.

As elsewhere, the virus, which at first raised alarms about the dangers of a globally interconnected economy with hypermobile workers, appears to have left those segments of Chicago's workforce relatively unscathed (Legrain, 2020). Most of Chicago's wealthiest neighbourhoods have low case rates, undoubtedly bolstered by residents' ability to work from home, while the neighbourhoods with the highest case rates are mostly the working class and struggling African American and Latino neighbourhoods on the city's western edge. Among the city's globally interconnected – the Loop – rates are among the lowest in the entire city. Those at the top of the global city's hierarchy have experienced low rates of infection relative to the service workers at the bottom.

Adaptation versus suppression

Chicago's mayor, Lori Lightfoot, and Illinois governor J.B. Pritzker responded swiftly to the crisis relative to other US cities. The Chicago Department of Public Health issued a shelter-in-place order on March 18th, when the city had only 122 recorded cases (Cherone, 2020). As in other cities, non-essential businesses were shuttered, restaurants limited to kerbside service and non-essential trips restricted.

Essential infrastructure was adapted to meet the needs of the moment, as it was in the past. In the aftermath of the 1995 heat wave, the city built strategies to keep vulnerable people safe during heat waves, including cooling centres and plans for outreach to vulnerable residents. During the coronavirus, it transformed McCormick Place, the gigantic lakefront convention centre, into a field hospital for COVID-19 patients. Fearing an outbreak among the city's sizable homeless population, it rented out hotels to serve as makeshift homeless shelters (Freund, 2020).

Public transit underwent what in normal times would be considered radical changes. Whereas in New York City, MTA officials cut service as ridership dropped – leading to dangerous crowding – Chicago's CTA committed to maintaining service levels even as ridership dropped precipitously in an effort to keep riders safe. Advocacy organisations also pushed the CTA to institute rear-door boarding on buses to better protect drivers and stopped enforcing bus fare payment.

Its "infrastructure" of philanthropies adapted, creating large emergency response funds for nonprofits and response teams to bolster neighbourhood social infrastructure.

But the city government took a different approach to its public spaces. From nearly the start of the lockdown, it approached public space as a potential vector of disease, shutting much of it down rather than adapting it. On March 26th, the Mayor closed the Lakefront Park system, the city's largest network of parks and a vital off-street route for bicycle commuters. It also shuttered the popular 606 Trail, providing no alternate route for either. As a result, cyclists and other park users complained that the decision deprived them of safe infrastructure for essential transportation (*Chicago Reader*, 2020).

If the city's initial approach to public space was suppressive, it was

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leavened by a clever social media campaign urging residents to avoid going outdoors. It promoted hashtags such as #StayHomeSavesLives and #WeAreNotPlaying. Most effectively, it embraced a popular internet meme featuring a glowering Mayor Lightfoot, binder in hand, transposed over images suggesting outdoor enjoyment: the mayor glaring at smiling parkgoers, at a television graphic of a sunny weather forecast, at Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (Hernandez, 2020). Some residents placed photographs of the vigilant

mayor glaring from apartment windows beside signs urging passers-by to #StayHome. The humour softened the edge of a policy approach that almost reflexively considered public space both a threat and an expendable luxury.

For residents for whom such spaces were luxuries, the message was clear and sensible: stay home. But for those in crowded housing, with small children, or who, by virtue of circumstance, had to continue to go outside and navigate public space, it offered less.

The city had justification for its wary approach to parks and other public spaces, having little information on how easily the disease could be transmitted outdoors. But its policy marked Chicago as somewhat outside the mainstream of other large cities, whose leaders have asked how public spaces can be reimagined to meet residents' transportation, physical and psychological needs. Across the United States and Europe, city leaders are seeking to create more public space; many have exploited their street networks to create routes for safe, socially distant travel and to forestall an expected crush of car traffic once lockdowns lift. Some

cities have widened off-street trails and carved out new bike lanes from traffic lanes. “Open streets” or no-through-traffic streets for pedestrians and cyclists, serving as safe, socially distant transportation routes, have appeared in cities across the United States and the world.

Towards the future

Chicago was slow to embrace this creative approach to its streets for fear of encouraging outdoor congregation. But city leaders have recently begun to re-open public spaces, including some parks, and open streets—albeit mainly for outdoor dining and recreation, not transportation.

Such an approach may be a small step towards aligning the city’s treatment of its public spaces with that of its public transit, its convention centres and its hotels – treating well-managed public spaces as a vital resource and potential asset. A more intentional effort to provide safe walking and cycling routes that meet the needs of vulnerable neighbourhoods – alternatives to buses, trains and cars – can also bolster community life at a time when social ties are as important as ever.

As Klinenberg’s study of the 1995 heat wave illustrated, resilient neighbourhoods with strong social networks, support systems and adaptable infrastructure are likely to fare better than those without such advantages. The pandemic poses a similar challenge and calls for action. As Chicago transitions from crisis management to planning the future, the essential components of city life – transit, parks, streets – can serve as the building blocks for a more resilient, more equitable future.

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