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Why Cities Will Bounce Back Post-Coronavirus



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I write about risk and resilience both personal and professional.



Will our superstar megacities bounce back from this pandemic? GETTY IMAGES

Is the coronavirus pandemic actually the death of the city or will our superstar megacities bounce back brighter than ever? Experts have debated the issue without consensus, so I decided to go directly to a leader who is not only an expert on cities, but also on what makes them resilient to shocks like the Covid-19 pandemic. As the Founding Principal of Resilient Cities Catalyst and the former President of 100 Resilient Cities, Michael Berkowitz has made a career of assessing what ails cities and how to free them from

those constraints. Does he think it's possible to get out of a challenge as big as this?

The current trend doesn't look good for dense urban environments. New York and San Francisco showed [declines in net arrivals in excess of 20%](#) this summer, while suburbs, exurbs and smaller cities like Jacksonville and Salt Lake City saw increases. To face down this challenge, they will need to develop resilience, which Berkowitz defines as the “capacities cities have that allow them to survive, adapt and grow in spite of—and sometimes because of—the threats they face”. He does think that “cities will go through some transition”, but that this isn't “the end of dense city living”. Prior to the coronavirus exodus, cities were generating [80% of global GDP](#) while housing just 55% of the world's population. That's a level of productivity that is hard to walk away from and so is the investment that has been made in these urban centers. Even in the middle of this mess, Berkowitz observes that “the rate of urbanization is not declining globally” and that when we finally “break transmission of the virus...we will need cities as generators of wealth, innovation and culture to help us out of the post-Covid recession”.

How will urban living need to change in order to continuing generating growth? As someone who responded to the events of September 11, 2001, Berkowitz personally witnessed New York City's bounce back from that low point and the return to skyscraper offices, something many never thought possible at the time. In the ensuing 20 years, the world has changed in many ways, especially in the realm of technology. Berkowitz concedes that remote work will “change the shape and nature of our cities somewhat”, but that certain professional groups may benefit including the “creatives, innovators and makers” who have “stronger incentives” to work collaboratively and in person. It was creative ventures like the [Tribeca Film Festival](#) that helped lower Manhattan bounce back after 9/11 and others soon followed. These same groups also stand to benefit from the likely drop in commercial real estate prices and can use that opportunity to restore vitality to city centers that have been struggling with [luxury blight](#) for years.

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A cultural renaissance would also encourage residents to return in search of excitement and that will change the residential market, too. It will likely begin with an initial plunge in prices that would free up opportunities for previously priced-out groups to move in. “Immigrants, the middle class and poor should experience some break from cost of living in the world’s largest and most expensive cities,” observes Berkowitz. City leaders will need to focus on “meeting the basic needs of their most vulnerable, developing good governance with multiple stakeholders at the table, promoting diverse and equitable economies with a solid middle class jobs base, supporting cohesive communities where neighbors check on neighbors and all underpinned by sustainable multiuse infrastructure”. Berkowitz adds that “all of those capacities help cities respond to, recover from and grow in the face of risk and adversity”. By doing so, they build resilience. The challenge will be to deliver this support in the face of an eroding tax base and budget shortfalls. There is likely to be acute short-term pain, but for those who stick it out, the rewards will be worthwhile. The resulting movement of people will generate novelty and lead to innovation. The positive effects will ripple out into the greater economy as companies will follow talent wherever they are.

Any crisis also presents an opportunity for change, and not just in the realm of public health. As we look forward, leaders should consider how we can build back better and more sustainably. Berkowitz has used his work with city leaders to “change the way cities approach their risks and opportunities so that they can see every project as an opportunity to create more inclusive governance, deliver more equitable outcomes, improve climate impacts and deliver more sustainable solutions”. This is exactly the outlook that is needed now for cities to pivot for a post-pandemic world.

We've already seen successful and popular examples such as the removal of outdoor dining restrictions and the closing of streets to allow for more outdoor space. Even before the pandemic, [Paris](#), [Bogota](#), and [Vancouver](#) set an example for how city leaders could drive positive change with initiatives like car reduction and greenspace. "The resilience dividend is when you take action for one reason, in this case better recreational access during the pandemic, and realize other benefits," says Berkowitz. "All of these build the capacities we associate with more resilient cities and it's the kind of thinking and action we will need from our cities if we are to recover from Covid-19 and better prepare for the next crisis, whether that's a climate shock, civil unrest, or a public health emergency". With an improved strategy for resilience, the future of cities really can be bright. Our leaders need to stay focused on the vision to help us get there.



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