Post-COVID Cities: Framework for Opportunity

Program Date: Wednesday, 8 September 2021, 12:00-2:00pm
See event page

Event Description:
This program is the third in the “Post-COVID Cities” series, hosted by the AIANY Planning and Urban Design Committee and the AIANY Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. “Framework for Opportunity” will recast lessons learned after 9/11 by examining the New York New Visions initiative, identifying present-day opportunities for a post-COVID NYC planning framework for outreach, coordinated advocacy, and partnerships.

Preliminary takeaways from Working Group meetings and Post-COVID Cities program series, presented in a public program.

Program Agenda:

Part I: Post-COVID NYC: A Framework for Opportunity
A synthesis of planning and design considerations, responding to systemic issues further highlighted by the COVID-19 crisis, based on issues identified in previous “Post-COVID Cities” programs.

Part II: New York New Visions: Lessons Learned
The planning and design community’s organizational response after 9/11 provides valuable lessons as we look to emerge from the pandemic as a more healthy, resilient, and equitable city.

Part III: Post-COVID Partnerships, Advocacy, and Beyond: A Springboard for Action
At this critical inflection point, as we prepare to emerge from the pandemic as a more equitable, resilient city and as a stronger regional network, the design and planning professions are well-positioned to lead the advancement of built-environment progress stemming from lessons learned during the emergency response to the pandemic.

Context: Building on the first two programs in the series (April 23, 2021 – NYC Perspective; June 10, 2021 – Reinventing World Cities) a working group of experts, along with an advisory committee composed of members of AIANYs Transportation + Infrastructure and Planning & Urban Design Committees, convened regular meetings to advance options and opportunities for a post-COVID NYC.

Overall ‘working group’ framing categories for Post-COVID Cities program series:
- Transportation -- Streets -- Mobility
- Land Use -- Housing -- Zoning -- Economics
- Sustainability / Resilience -- Climate / Environment -- Environmental Justice -- Public Health

In addition to the planning categories outlined, a fourth category called governance emerged as a critical consideration.
Post-Covid NYC - Planning Structure Analysis

Context: Below, a diagram representing the overall concept development process, showing arrival at a "hybrid-planning" model, identifies systemic planning challenges, planning categories, and "filters" through which issues accelerated and/or exacerbated by the pandemic crisis were understood and recognized as a potential for opportunity in near-term and long-term transformative recovery strategies, both with hyper-local, neighborhood-scale focus and with NYC as the central regional economic engine and global hub.

Post-Covid NYC Hybrid Planning Model - Key Characteristics

- Regional CBD connected to polycentric neighborhood nodes
- Linked to accessible public transportation and mobility networks
- Active, mixed-use, socio-economically diverse neighborhoods
- Equitable allocation of public resources to support economic opportunity
- Vibrant parks and open spaces in every neighborhood
- Integrated, efficient energy systems that support zero-carbon goals

Post-Covid NYC - Options and Opportunities

// REBALANCE LAND-USE / HOUSING AND ECONOMICS

- Increase land-use density in borough / regional hubs outside Manhattan CBD to support sustainable, transit-oriented development
- Eliminate single-family zoning city-wide to allow appropriate accessory units in single-family homes
- Encourage commercial and residential growth through public investment/private incentives in second-tier nodes and neighborhood hubs
- Balance central office occupancy with hybrid remote work options to provide flexibility and support of active, mixed-use neighborhoods
● Encourage office-residential conversion, where appropriate, to respond to commercial market changes while supporting affordable housing development and diversifying CBD uses

● Reinforce existing and cultivate new vital ‘main street’ commercial/retail hubs in all neighborhoods as they adapt to shifting work patterns

● Diversify the economy to reduce risk from over-reliance on dominant sectors
  ○ Prioritize support for social infrastructure networks – health care system, social service system, schools, libraries, community organizations – through investment in built environment assets and their connections
  ○ Support small businesses and retail uses with sustainable, mixed-use neighborhood development and support services
  ○ Support cultural and recreational job opportunities and experiences for the creative industry, residents, and tourists
  ○ Cultivate emerging innovation sectors through public policy strategies and incentives

● Remove barriers to the development and preservation of market-rate and affordable housing city-wide
  ○ Encourage market-rate housing development to relieve pressure on rents and home prices
  ○ Create and preserve affordable housing options for all eligible population segments
  ○ Enforce income regulations to ensure that subsidized housing serves those in need of it
  ○ Develop more effective housing voucher programs to ensure housing affordability and stability
  ○ Invest in energy-efficient rehab of all NYCHA public housing and support facilities

● Leverage community investment to counteract displacement while encouraging responsible development in all neighborhoods
  ○ Encourage community land trusts to provide community ownership and neighborhood value capture
  ○ Encourage community partners in development projects, requiring those with public funding

// FLEXIBLE PUBLIC SPACE / TRANSPORTATION

● Improve public transit service and coverage by reimagining system service model
  ○ Focus on reinforcing neighborhood hubs and increasing service to underserved neighborhoods by providing more reliable, flexible bus networks
  ○ Develop affordable, flexible mobility options (shared, on-demand, etc.) to supplement rail/bus transit
  ○ Harness communications technology to integrate fare structures and facilitate service access across range of public and private mobility service options

● Reimagine road/street network with a hierarchy of usage intensity, ranging from regional to neighborhood to hyper-local, ensuring access and service while preserving neighborhood safety and quality-of-life conditions. Focus on active streets that minimize vehicle impacts.

● Expand road pricing and other traffic management tools to discourage unnecessary vehicle trips, reduce traffic congestion, and provide funds for public transit

● Encourage flexible work schedules, where feasible, to reduce peak commuting congestion and utilize transportation infrastructure more efficiently
• Build on success of complete streets initiatives to rebalance usage of street and public space assets, according to city-wide and neighborhood-specific needs and priorities
  ○ Create and execute city-wide Streets Master Plan with mobility mode priority policy of pedestrians → bikes → emergency/service vehicles → public transit → commercial vehicles → private automobiles when designing streets, sidewalks, public spaces
  ○ Balance commercial use of public streets and open space through street management strategies, targeted regulations, and appropriate user fees
  ○ Implement freight delivery policies that balance consumer demand and business needs with quality-of-life protections. Develop infrastructure for rail, maritime, and micro-delivery options as an alternative to truck-based systems.

• Develop multi-functional public realm infrastructure that strengthens social capital while simultaneously mitigating the risks of climate change and flood risk
  ○ Expand and improve park spaces throughout the city, with a focus on equitable distribution of resources for planning, construction, and maintenance in disadvantaged communities
  ○ Support development of connected public open space networks, to include time-of-day usage around schools, markets, recreation, and culture
  ○ Engage local communities in park and open space design and programming
  ○ Balance active landscapes with the support and restoration of local habitats and ecological systems

• Apply public safety and security solutions for public spaces with consideration for inherent and unexpected risks, while maintaining high-quality design goals and outcomes
  ○ Create secure neighborhoods through proactive community engagement, outreach services, and equitable resource distribution
  ○ Develop solutions that are contextually and culturally sensitive
  ○ Utilize a broad spectrum of solutions, including physical and technological strategies, that recognize human dignity, right to access and assembly, and privacy
  ○ Avoid security practices that reinforce biases and erode positive community cohesion

// INTEGRATED ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

• Commit to leading-edge sustainability and resilience goals for existing and new development
  ○ Achieve net-zero carbon emissions by 2050 (or sooner - 2035?)
  ○ Transition to clean, renewable energy production and consumption
  ○ Build on and reinforce provisions of NYC Climate Mobilization Act (2019), including Local Law 97

• Rebalance public investment from over-reliance on climate mitigation to adaptation models
  ○ Revise zone district designations and preemptively acquire property to incentivize future sustainable, development above year-2100 flood levels
  ○ Develop strategies to relocate the most vulnerable populations to more sustainable neighborhoods
  ○ Invest in natural systems for ecological approach to physical development and landscape initiatives, including vulnerable shoreline areas

• Support a more circular approach to production / consumption cycles

• Incorporate comprehensive public health standards in public and private development
Prioritize environmental justice policies for new development / restorative development

// RESPONSIVE GOVERNANCE / PLANNING

- Encourage policies and programs that emphasize equitable and sustainable economic growth
  - Emphasize generational-targeted policies and programs to support families and community stability
  - Involve communities as primary stakeholders/partners to inform local and city-wide policies
  - Ensure that public resources and services are provided equitably according to neighborhood needs

- Encourage short-/medium-term PlaNYC-type process for interagency planning, implementation, and coordination
  - Use this process to coordinate ongoing topical plans against city-wide and regional principles
  - Establish responsibility for coordination in Mayor’s Office and implementation-focused agencies such as EDC and HPD
  - Institute regular, metric-driven public evaluation of policies and projects with course-correction adjustments
  - Encourage innovation by the public and private sectors
  - Leverage temporary responses to disruptions and disasters, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, to reimagine status-quo assumptions and policies

- Establish a more flexible, long-term comprehensive planning process that balances city-wide and community issues through incentives and regulation
  - Establish an iterative planning process that creates a city-wide framework of principles and goals; incorporates community input through locally-based workshops involving public, private and civic groups; and consolidates recommendations and strategies in a city-wide comprehensive plan.
  - Define short-term actions, medium-term strategies, and long-term scenarios
  - Update city zoning based on results of planning process
  - Establish regularly-scheduled evaluation/plan revision/development actions and strategies based on agreed metrics
  - Provide design and planning support to Community Boards, BIDs and other city or community organizations that have a role in shaping the city

- Reduce overly restrictive or counterproductive regulatory bottlenecks to support existing businesses and accelerate beneficial development initiatives that align with city-wide public policies

- Reorganize NYC’s sustainability policy development, budgetary, implementation and agency coordination responsibilities under the Mayor’s Office of Long-Term Planning and Sustainability

- Reform CEQR environmental review process
  - Coordinate environmental reviews with comprehensive planning goals to expedite approvals for preferred development initiatives
  - Require environmental impact disclosure documents to fully assess the underlying stresses / community impacts of climate and environmental factors, including urban heat island effects, and how projects would exacerbate them
  - Build mitigation measures upfront into large-scale planning, zoning, and development initiatives
• Ensure that “design excellence” is a core value in the development of future planning and design initiatives. Embed enhanced design quality assessments in public review processes, recognizing that successful planning, design, and development outcomes are based on authentic human experiences.

Next Steps
These considerations form the basis for developing an outreach strategy as we move into a period of administrative transition. The intent is to utilize this potential platform as a ground to further develop organizational partnerships with shared built-environment goals.

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END (draft 9/1/21)