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# A Brilliant Opportunity To Reinvent Cities

**Urbanization experts share lessons from the coronavirus pandemic and offer insights on the future of work and the return – or not – to the office**

The future of work and the future of cities are intertwined – as they always have been. Traditionally, people have been magnetized to urban centers as they offer an abundance of work opportunities, culture and unique experiences.

But when lockdowns were enforced around the world to halt the spread of the coronavirus, and business leaders realized that technology-enabled remote working is a viable – and cost-effective – alternative to office life, it triggered a debate about the role of the physical workplace and, in turn, the meaning of cities.

In mid-2020, there were reports of an urban exodus, or reverse-migration, from the world's leading cities, including London and New York. Some argued that, with theaters, galleries and other art venues closed, along with restaurants and bars – some permanently – and with brick-and-mortar retailers struggling, many city centers have lost their soul.

However, with coronavirus vaccines being made available in 2021, business leaders must now make smart decisions about the future of work. Will a return to the office, and the city, boost innovation and growth, and how could – and should – cities be revived, redrawn and revolutionized?

To answer these vital questions about the future of cities, the Art of Smart moderated an insightful discussion between experts **Barrie Barton**, Co-Founder of Right Angle Studio in Australia – established in 2005 to “understand and improve life in our cities” – and, UK Cities Director of global design, engineering and management consulting company Arcadis, which has 350 offices across 40 countries.

Below are the key themes, takeaways and predictions from the discussion. For more expert analysis and predictions to help business leaders make smarter decisions, the full 45-minute conversation is available to view [here](#).

## **COVID-19 fallout exposed problems within cities and societies**

**Barrie Barton (BB):** The coronavirus pandemic has taken an X-ray of society and shown us where we are sick. It's also like a time machine and has taken us forward to where problems that were latent are now acute, whether that's deep-rooted social inequality, or the glaring reality that, to be successful, businesses need to be good at generating clicks. There has been a lot of panic merchantry and directionless responses to what the pandemic means – and there's danger in that. Now, with vaccines on the way, we find ourselves at a point where we can go back to how things were. It would be lazy to snap back to urban tropes that don't serve us well. If we go back to how things were quickly – as with happened after the September 11 attacks – it would be a huge failure. As a society, we have this unique point to take stock, look at what's worked and what hasn't, and move forward to address some of the fissures.

**Peter Hogg (PH):** The pandemic holds the mirror up to a really unattractive picture of social inequality. I believe that as a community and as a society there is a genuine drive to change that. It won't happen overnight, but there will be a seismic shift to the point where it is no longer morally acceptable to turn a blind eye. One of the things we are beginning to see in London and most cities in northern Europe is a fresh approach to climate change because

of the pandemic. We are moving from soundbites to action. I don't think we are going to see a radical disassembly of cities, or a frantic move to change the physical form. The central business district and retail areas will still remain, and evolve. I think the significant change all organizations are going to need to respond to is how they use their force and capabilities to take positive steps to address climate change.

## **The rise of the 15-minute community?**

**PH:** I believe we are going to see a trend where big cities become more polycentric and less hub-and-spoke. We might see developments – like new towns – that take place outside the urban area, but support the urban area. They might be the nucleus around which new cities grow. There are some risks [with the 15-minute community] but there are some benefits, and Arcadis is exploring that model with an open mind.

## **In praise of cities – and why their appeal will endure**

**BB:** Cities are the greatest triumph of our species. Great cities are liberal, tolerant and experimental. I'm fascinated by how they evolve and what they offer their inhabitants. However, cities don't improve organically, or naturally. We need to invest our money, time and intelligence to try and lead them to a better place.

**PH:** Cities are here to stay – don't write them off as dying stars. Humankind's desire to agglomerate, to come together, to grow, to focus, to build on each other's achievements will remain undiminished. I think what we are going to see is a move towards cities having to be a great deal clearer about what they have to offer to their citizens and communities, and also other cities and countries. Because a city is not a thing on its own: it's part of a very complex ecosystem of other cities and communities. If you want to continue the vibrancy in your city you have to keep that connectivity going.

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**We don't need to rush into decisions about the future being radically different – we can watch for a while longer and we can adapt intuitively and incrementally.**

Barrie Barton  
Co-Founder  
Right Angle Studiod



## A unique opportunity to rethink cities – people must be at the center

**PH:** For a city to work well, you've absolutely got to understand the people, the community, the way in which the organism that is the city actually works and functions. If you can't nail that, you're dead in the water. So that, for Arcadis, is a fundamental focus of our design and engineering work: to make sure that we've really captured the essence of what a city is, how its communities work, how its citizenry works, how its business community works, how its governance and civic infrastructure works.

## Beware the urban exodus – regional dream or nightmare?

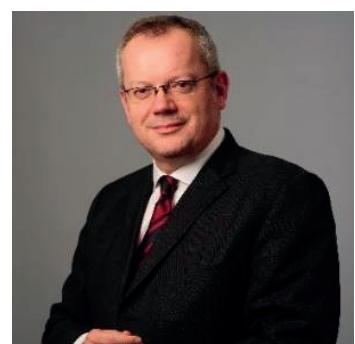
**BB:** In Australia, one of the key trends has been the regional shift: people moving from wealthy city neighborhoods to regional areas of the country for lifestyle reasons. It will be interesting to see whether people, to their horror, realize that when they decamp to a beautiful small town like Byron Bay it is hopelessly inadequate for many reasons. You lose your connections, the financial opportunities they provide, and the level of culture is reduced. The regional dream might prove to be a nightmare. I think there will be a large swathe of people heading back to the city with their tails between their legs, realizing it didn't work out.

**PH:** You need to be really careful about betting the farm on a mass exodus from city centers. In the UK, we are seeing some of the more prosperous, middle-class Londoners looking to move away, but you must think about the social inequality that drives. It hollows out cities so that they become places of the left-behind, inhabited by people who are economically and socially trapped. Right now, the dream locations outside cities are experiencing a rise in house prices, but they simply can't cope with a mass influx of people with high expectations of broadband speed, family facilities and social infrastructure.

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**Within the next 20 or so years some of the biggest megacities in the world will develop in Africa.**

**Peter Hogg**  
Director of Global Design  
UK Cities



## Awesome power of collaboration showcased during pandemic

**BB:** One of the great long-term consequences of the pandemic is the proof of concept of collectivism: if we act together we can achieve exceptional things. Millennials and younger generations have always considered themselves to be part of a global community because

they have been weaned on social media. If we can apply that drive and discipline to matters like the environment and sustainability, we can achieve great change. We need to start thinking beyond ourselves, where we live, to create the sort of future that we need. We need to be concerned with the lives and the fates of people living on the other side of the planet. And we need to be thinking about the decisions we're going to be making now, in the post-COVID-19 wash-up, that are going to have the greatest impact on people who are yet to be born.

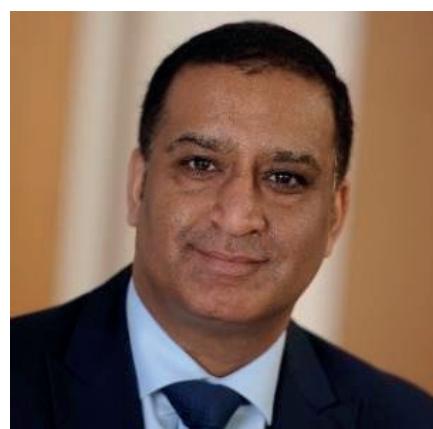
### **Take your time: advice to leaders about their commitment to cities**

**PH:** Business leaders must recognize the value of city centers; they are hyperconnected, with great transport links, there is access to high-quality talent, and world-class academic institutions. There is a tremendous opportunity to repurpose city-center office and retail space into clean technology research and development facilities, for example, or hyper-clean manufacturing facilities. There is a great future for cities if we embrace this change. They can be reinvented, and this is why we should encourage those in power to hold their people close and bring them back into cities and continue that growth of cities.

**BB:** I would say to business leaders: don't panic. You can 'trauma scroll' through the news on any second of the day and listen to your consultants who tell you that "this changes everything", but it doesn't. This is actually a slow-moving beast. Our cities evolve organically, over a long period. So we don't need to rush into decisions about the future being radically different. We can watch for a while longer and we can adapt intuitively and incrementally. Finally, I believe that the role of businesses in the future will be less about profit; it will be about looking after people, creating opportunities to be healthy, and contributing to social equity.

## **Viewpoints from Crowe**

### **Dinesh Jangra, Partner and Head of Global Mobility Services, Crowe UK**



"Remote work has gone mainstream. It has gone from city centers to suburbs and rural areas, and across multiple time zones, too. Some of this was already happening, but, absolutely, the pandemic has been an accelerant. Our workforces are distributed like never before. Organizations need talent to thrive, but that talent, in turn, also needs environments that help them thrive as individuals. As we return to the workplace, we expect talent will want to

protect certain aspects normalized in the pandemic, such as exercising every day and spending more time with family. Additionally, there is a yearning to socialize, co-create ideas and innovate together. Cities and offices enable this like nowhere else. A boom in new ideas and hospitality setting demands could be on the horizon as people, organizations and societies re-connect in person. The hosts will be our great cities. A shifting balance is to be expected. In future, the five-day office worker could be a three-day office worker.

An in-country worker could be a cross-border remote worker. We've seen a boom in international remote working over the past year. It brings complexity and risk – we have identified 50+ risks to consider – but it kept work moving, things got done, but it wasn't ideal. Weariness and inefficiencies are clear, the yearning to be together is stronger than ever. As we move forward, hybrid remote and office patterns will create win-wins for employers, employees, families and societies."

## Hector Garcia, ILP, Crowe Mexico

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"I applaud the idea of the 15-minute community, but it seems a bit utopian for some regions – especially in Latin America where, even in the middle of the pandemic, more than 2.5 million commuters have been using the Mexico City metro system daily, for instance, as many jobs cannot be performed remotely. What seems evident is that workplaces will not have the same need for available space since their teams will be living in mixed environments between home and office. If you used to have an office for 100 people, now you will surely need room for 60 percent of that number, at most. This opens the door for the design – or redesign – of workspaces so they can become catalysts for productivity, creativity and the empowerment of those who work there. Also, the office of the future needs to try to create the best possible human experience – socially and technologically, and so on – with a great emphasis on collaboration. After all, that is what a workplace has meant for years: a place where a group of people get together and develop an idea that will create lasting value."