

Pandemic Urbanist Reflections by Kiara Nagel April 2020

In early March 2020, I was visiting my folks in upstate NY for the weekend and ended up quarantined with them. It's been two months now and counting. Among regular tasks of grocery shopping, cleaning and organizing the house, managing communications with countless loved ones, and trying to continue some of my own professional work from my bedroom/home office, my duties have also included escorting my father to weekly and now monthly cancer treatment at Sloan in NYC.



My shelter in place experience is taking place with two feisty and immune suppressed 70-year-old parents, in the house I was born in, the place I grew up and quickly absconded from at age 15 to seek out my own urbanist life. This unprecedented moment has brought me home. And at the same time, my home, my apartment and life in Los Angeles, where I have lived the last decade, remain so far away. At this point I am unsure when and how I will be able to return.

In the past, my urbanist practice was inspired by multiple “home” places. In each place, I was part of a network of relationships over time. I was able to move regularly between places, working in community, savoring time with colleagues or family, revisiting my favorite beach walk, a bakery in my best friends neighborhood or the riverside park my brother and sister always walk to where good conversations often happen. The places we return to over time, like great rituals and cultural traditions, shape how we make meaning of our lives and the world around us.

Now the distance between people and places feels vast. Yesterday I had to tell my 4-year-old nephew not to come any closer. Ease of travel is at a standstill, restaurants, parks, and schools are shut down, our right to assemble, work, and move between borders removed without question in one blow. The impact is not evenly distributed and racial and economic disparities are evident. Our response and recovery may require us to drastically shift our relationship to land, economy, and public life while maintaining values of participation, equity, and public health. I've always thought of good urbanism as being about ensuring a just and beautiful city and future for all. What lies ahead may be the greatest challenge we've ever experienced.



The pandemic experience is emotional, challenging and exhausting. Small increments of time can be small units of healthy action forward. Get up, shower, coffee. Try to advance some work, write, be creative. Walk outside, call a friend. Make dinner, clean the kitchen. Keep it simple, keep moving in tiny steps forward. Now that our daily footprint is forcibly smaller, we can practice new micro rituals as a way of training ourselves to become citizens of a new world.

What has felt most important during this time is not unlike the principles of urbanism we have been exploring for over a decade, even if they require a shift in form and function for our current reality. What has felt important to me:

1. The land we are on.
2. Our families, friends, colleagues and how we support and build relationships in our networks.
3. The food we eat and where it comes from.
4. The act of cleaning, caretaking and bringing in beauty.
5. Allowing room for surprise, fun, movement, laughter, celebration, grief and sadness.
6. Staying present and whenever possible trying to do the next best thing we can do.

The delicious intangible part of life is what I miss most right now: the hugs I long to give my nieces and nephews, laughter I share with a friend, seeing a new crush or a familiar lover in the sunshine on a summer day. These days I try to infuse part of each day with something delicious. The lovingly prepared meals we set out on our table or farm fresh produce a neighbor or friend drops off. And the creative ways people are inspiring each other and supporting others in this time. News of Italians

singing from their balconies, unison cheers for frontline workers, drive by birthday parties, and images of families recreating famous works of art with objects found around the house. These acts are small hints of something new emerging. We are reminded that we are human and alive and together while separated under quarantine.

But what does it mean to continue to practice good urbanism and work towards a just, beautiful and delicious life for all? For now it seems we must figure out how to hold our public life and solidarity from a distance so we rely heavily on technology and WiFi access to support us. But we can also support small farmers for food cultivation and develop new community-based distribution networks to feed and keep people connected to healthy food. We can caretake and protect elders and others who are vulnerable in ways that are fun and lifegiving. Let's make sure young people have what they need to develop, learn, connect, work and be creative. Can we ensure all workers are protected, paid a living wage, and able to care for their families and communities? Can we empty jails and detention centers as a way of prioritizing public health? Imagine nature becomes treasured, cared for and shared and healers, gardeners, grandmothers become revered and sacred people among us.

We have so much to learn and experiment with as we go forward in the months ahead. I'm eternally grateful that the [University of Orange](#) exists at this time. They have created a powerful community of learning and provided a political and cultural home for my urbanism work for over a decade. I have no doubt we will continue to explore ways to further our work and bring beauty, justice to our cities, networks, and public life. Let us meet there...and bring something delicious.



All images taken by the author during quarantine.