

22 June 2020 bulletin

Coronavirus, communications and the built environment

#07 Towards multiplicity of place

[ING's seventh](#) fortnightly intelligence publication explores the long-term effort to make the built environment's physical fabric more representative and supportive of the diverse and changing populations living in them. Previous bulletins have dedicated sections to [culture](#), [creativity](#), [collaboration](#), [networking](#) and [content](#). Inequality and environment are long-term interconnected themes that have been elevated as people explore sustainable recovery – our next edition will focus on climate. The impacts of COVID-19 continue to accelerate existing change, however, there are also instances of divergence. These bulletins provide brands, organisations, and cities insights into the key narratives transforming the world's most valuable sector. Get in touch for feedback or a chat.

AN UNEVEN WORLD

The impact of COVID-19 has accelerated access to hard data on how inequality affects life chances in cities globally. Early in the pandemic it was clear that older people are [disproportionately affected](#) with death rates [three times higher](#) for those in their 50s than in their 40s; in South Korea, Spain, China and Italy contracting COVID-19 for those over 70 was fatal for [20 to 30 per cent](#) of cases. Mortality rates in men are also [significantly higher than in women](#) and scientists are exploring the impact of sex and gender on COVID-19 risk. African Americans are [twice as likely](#) to succumb to the pandemic as the rest of the population, with [similar findings](#) for Black and Asian ethnic groups in the UK. Germany found that while the pandemic spread to wealthier areas first,

the impact on poorer neighbourhoods becomes [disproportionately larger as the pandemic lasts](#) given structural safety advantages aligned with higher incomes. Up to [1.6 billion children out of school](#) may have long-term [impacts on inequality](#), [increasing obesity](#) and [food poverty](#), limiting [social mobility](#), and [entrenching existing advantages](#) – particularly in [higher-income families](#). Creative use of [outside space](#), [rethinking school curricula](#) and [tutoring for disadvantaged children](#) may become increasingly important; in many countries the increase in public space from closing roads to traffic, new parks and urban squares will be championed for health reasons, however, [social inclusion](#) will increasingly be referenced too. Expect easily adaptable and productive public space to become more central to how cities frame recovery. Initiatives like the gifting of land for public use may be an important part of opening up more inclusive spaces.

While lockdowns and the [decrease in new cases](#) coincide in many European nations, [more than two times¹](#) as many global cases are being reported daily than at the end of March as the pandemic spreads to parts of the world previously less affected. A [new outbreak in China](#) has raised [second wave fears](#), however, [transmission growth](#) is likely to move to parts of the world less reflected in global markets². This may [reverse progress in extreme poverty alleviation](#), likely increasing the focus on

1 Some of the increase is likely due to better testing capability.

2 Eritrea, Benin, Suriname, Mauritania, Nepal and Botswana are currently experiencing confirmed cases doubling [in 11 days or less](#).

inequality reduction measures. Economic growth, which appears [less effective](#) for poverty alleviation, will increasingly be supplemented; communicating social value alongside economic value will become increasingly important. More built up and denser places continue to offer a [higher quality of life](#) and urbanisation reduces the [burden of infectious disease](#). However physical, social, and [economic](#) barriers undermine access to this, placing cities as the most important innovators not only for COVID-19 recovery, but in responding to long-term inequality.

INEQUALITY AT HOME

At a behavioural level, [unity](#) in communities has been flagged as an important aspect of adhering to government guidelines, especially as the UK [further relaxes lockdown](#). A possible review of [pension affordability](#) and how to finance pensions may open up the debate around inter-generational fairness, particularly given the COVID-19 is expected to enlarge the existing [rise in child poverty](#). Poor quality housing and [inadequate provision](#) may have accelerated the pandemic in the UK and made recovery chances less robust; insufficient housing provision [slows economic growth, dampens productivity and increases inequality](#)³. Poor quality housing and urban realm design [undermine London's resilience](#), making it vulnerable to crisis, either through a pandemic or climate change. Integrating new housing, land and infrastructure may get significant attention as government focuses on using construction to bounce back. This may include efforts targeting [green space inequality](#).

[Mandating facemasks on public transport](#) provides some positive messaging around transport as [usage tracks to its highest levels](#) shortly ahead of non-essential shops reopening. COVID-19 [expands](#) upon [existing travel risks](#) for disadvantaged groups. Masks may become [more widespread](#), with the

UK's contact tracing [app](#) and [systems](#) not necessarily providing [sufficient quality data](#) to geographically pin-point transmission risk. Expect the government, mindful of how the pandemic has been handled, to seek a higher quality exit from lockdown with a recovery that aims to benefit every part of the country. However, the increased focus on *social* inequality may conflict with the government's simpler *geographic* levelling up messaging.

A government-backed [clinical trial](#) has found [an available treatment](#) for COVID-19, while a [new UK human vaccine trial](#) joins about a dozen already underway. [Sewerage monitoring](#) will be used to detect new outbreaks; expect smart buildings to attempt to integrate more ways to collect data on the health of occupants. Government has also extended the ban on evictions from the end of this month until [end-September](#), however, there is risk that any pause in rent may leave [residential tenants](#) with a longer-term [debt burden](#).

The [merger](#) of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development may impact how the UK interacts with global programmes, but retains a commitment to spend 0.7% of national income on aid projects. At a global scale, two-thirds of global inequality is due to [differences in average incomes between countries](#).

Ongoing action plans may make some government departments among the UK's most inclusive employers, however, this has required in-house advancement, growing access to diverse networks, and generating job specifications more relevant to target communities. However, the acceptance that inclusion is an important aim within government employment policy, including a focus on BAME communities, may be counter to the need for a [new review on racial inequality](#). There may be enough evidence already. With the pandemic [lowering average pay levels](#), which only [recently surpassed pre-2008 levels](#), and BAME groups

3 See also [Barker Review 10 Years On](#)

[more likely to be made redundant](#), we may see initiatives around the [quality of pay](#) expanded to include resilience by diversifying job opportunities for underrepresented and/or less advantaged communities.

COMMUNICATING SOCIAL CHANGE

COVID-19 has exacerbated inequality and the way we understand it. As lines for food banks in the USA [stretched for blocks](#), in [South Africa for 4km](#), and [The Trussell Trust](#) reported an [89% year-on-year April increase](#) in the use of food parcels in the UK, data and content has highlighted the effect of the virus on already fragile communities, individuals in low-paid work, and BAME and BIPOC populations. Unprecedented levels of public spending have been employed to counter the impact for the most vulnerable, and pressure groups have called for an urgent enquiry into the impact on certain communities to mitigate the ongoing effects of the virus.

Against this backdrop the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis ignited a series of heated protests which began in large American cities and spread around the world. [Black Lives Matter](#) is a global, grassroots movement to ensure every Black person has the social, economic, and political power to thrive. The protests in the USA – and the concurrent social media activity – are notable for their catalytic quality. In a few short weeks they have ignited discussions which have sped up the action lobbyists and activists have sought for years – arrests have been made, policy changed, major figures have resigned, [statues have fallen](#), and companies have pledged new levels of diversity goals. COVID-19 is certainly a factor in the speed of societal transformation in both the UK and USA and runs counter to the policies of incumbent governments. Rapidly moving public sentiment is converging to highlight inequality in other areas – Pride Month focusing on the intersectional issues around race and sex for instance.

COVID-19 will likely accelerate long-term efforts advocating for representation in the built environment too. Tragic disruptions encourage people to take stock of what needs to change and may also make long-term challenges like inequality more visible, particularly given that some communities have been disproportionately impacted.

The [Stephen Lawrence Trust](#)'s work is established in the UK and focuses on highlighting inequality in the built environment on the basis of race through surveys, education, mentoring and other initiatives like partnering with [recruitment specialist Urban](#). The [Accelerate programme](#) from Open City and The Bartlett has been running for several years and involves dozens of major UK architecture practices. In real estate [Women Talk Real Estate](#), [Real Estate Balance](#), and [BAME In Property](#) are lobby groups for widening representation. [RESOLVE](#) and J Project are BAME-led architecture practitioners who wrap architecture in with activism. [Black Females in Architecture](#) increases the visibility of black and mixed heritage females within the built environment. In the USA architect Dong-Ping Wong has assembled a [live list of BIPOC architects](#) for use by developers and to make cross-country connections.

What the last few weeks have provided is a rare moment of international solidarity – each of these organisations and practitioners has used the moment to re-articulate their purpose and the prevailing issues in the sector to a much wider audience. Marcus Rashford's success in a summer extension of the free school meal voucher scheme is a [great example of a campaign](#) which uses a moment of public concern around inequality. Rashford used a powerful combination of building political and public will by drawing on his lived experience of poverty and discrimination and pushing the issue beyond political point-scoring. A credible and authentic messenger with a simple request, he relied on acute timing, social media, and the

mainstream press to sway opinion and apply pressure. Social change is most effective when campaigns are able to positively influence a range of channels and audiences.

Representation is a key goal of many of the groups invested in the built environment. NY-based architect Dong-Ping Wong has his office in Chinatown. With one in four Asian Americans living below the poverty line and a lack of representation in the media and creative industries, he sees architecture as a [potentially powerful community service](#); in this case a community centre designed to represent community content and introduce youth to a wider network of future possibilities. The Stephen Lawrence Trust's [Connecting People and Places](#) project asks questions around how BAME communities can have more of a voice in the planning and design of cities. This supports Historic England's work to enrich understanding of the buildings and places that are important to our shared national history, ensuring histories and places benefit from diverse and dynamic narratives. It documents heritage important to BAME communities and involves a new generation of architects from BAME backgrounds.

VOICE

The built environment, like all other sectors, has a shared responsibility for addressing inequality. [Designing for diversity](#) and creating a culture of inclusion will require going beyond [representation](#) and proactively tackling [racial bias](#). Language is also key: design and architecture seldom communicate the broad range of complex perspectives found in cities. [New Architecture Writers](#) supports emerging BAME designers. Some publishers are actively supporting content to [illuminate voices often excluded from the mainstream](#), providing opportunity for richer built environment narratives.

Expect cultural institutions, libraries, and civic buildings to become more expansive,

critical, and accessible with their cultural offerings. Reflecting on our [cultural capital](#) and the voices and experiences captured in our [cultural institutions](#) may become a key part of identifying wider histories and voices. [Cambridge University's 'decolonisation'](#) campaign has added to a [long-term](#) international discussion around race and representation in [education](#). More recently, the Royal College of Art has started to explore [diversifying design history](#) and the role cultural institutions have in supporting change. Efforts to use education to tackle inequality and learned prejudice may significantly impact the rationale applied when considering what gets built and by who.

[The Brixton Project's](#) upcoming [Windrush Day 2020](#) demonstrates how public-private collaborations may create a sense of unity and help educate about racial injustice. Combating inequalities may require a wider awareness of the impact of power in shaping the built environment and innovations to actively share this. As the built environment navigates recovery, listening to underrepresented and excluded communities may become increasingly important to achieving meaningful change.

BUILT ENVIRONMENT: WHO DECIDES WHO DECIDES?

Cities are sites of intense layering of time and space, enabling some of the most diverse histories on Earth, but also often more able to [respond quickly](#). Inequality, however, can concentrate who has access to the built environment, limiting urban vitality and the city's capacity to know its shifting people. A complex global debate around [erasure](#) versus [reinvention](#) of built objects, [spaces](#) and [naming](#) is not new: urban dynamism and the change that supports growth comes from a city's ability to absorb greater nuance, celebrate diverse identities, and accept more complex histories, which may be counter to simpler, national, framings. Cities around the world,

which have positioned tolerance and diversity as central to their brands and success in recent decades, will need to show this in their physical fabric, with heritage protection no longer sufficient to close down arguments around change. Reviews of memorials representing the radical disenfranchisement of people in cities across the world like [Singapore](#), [Manchester](#), [Boston](#), [Cape Town](#) and [London](#) will likely lead to questions about who should replace them and [with what](#). [Recoding](#) what these symbolic objects represent or using the space to celebrate more diverse voices may, however, be slowed by underrepresentation in the built environment sector. The response of leaders may help unlock a generation of diverse talent who may not otherwise have thought the sector attractive.

PLANNING IN INCLUSION

Women and BAME practitioners continue to be underrepresented within planning and other built environment professions. RIBA's latest survey on the UK's top 100 practices shows people from BAME backgrounds make up fewer than [11% of registered architects](#), less than the year before.

The RTPI's latest [planning profession](#) report found that 41% of planners are women, that 4% are from BAME backgrounds, and that the Global Financial Crisis may have disproportionately affected women in the profession. The same may be true for BAME practitioners, however, the data's small sample size made it less possible to differentiate the impact from annual variation. COVID-19 may present a similar challenge across the sector, increasing the need for organisations to consolidate inclusion efforts. The RTPI launched [CHANGE](#), its ten-year action plan to make the planning profession more diverse and inclusive in January 2020, focused on increasing representation within the profession.

Smaller organisations, such as [Public Practice](#), a social enterprise launched in 2017 to improve

the quality and equality of everyday places by building skills and capacity within the public sector, are targeting improvements in representation. Its recruitment process is designed to promote equality, diversity, and inclusion. Of 123 Associates placed within a local authority over the past two years, 23% are from BAME backgrounds and 62% are female. Public Practice's R&D outputs are focused on developing more inclusive planning consultation models. Akil Skafe-Smith's "[Pop Down](#)" project looked at how local authorities can facilitate meanwhile uses to establish long-term community benefit. Hana Loftus' "[Growing Villages](#)" looked at co-creating simple design principles with local communities to support inclusive, sustainable growth.

The "intend to publish" version of Mayor of London's new [London Plan](#) seeks "to build on the city's tradition of openness, diversity and equality, and help deliver strong and inclusive communities". Emphasis is placed on early and inclusive engagement that will feed into the design characterisation studies, masterplans and design codes that will replace the density matrix as the measure by which design proposals are assessed when the plan is adopted.

The new London Plan also encourages greater diversity in the homebuilding industry, with new and innovative approaches to development encouraged to offer alternative pathways into housebuilding. Projects funded in recent years include [RUSS](#) – a Lewisham-based Community Land Trust, inspired by the [Walters Way self-build community](#) in Forest Hill, which in 2018 received £988,000 from the Mayor's Innovation Fund to build 33 homes on [council land in Ladywell](#). Community-led housing projects in London are supported by [Community Led Housing London](#).

Spaces used by the LGBTQ+ community are also given prominence in the draft London Plan, with boroughs instructed to draw on

the forthcoming Cultural Infrastructure Plan to assess and develop their cultural offer, and consider how this serves young people, BAME groups and the LGBTQ+ community. The number of LGBTQ+ nightlife venues in the capital fell 62% in the decade to 2018, a decline documented in detail by [Ben Campkin and Laura Marshall](#), at the UCL Urban Laboratory and The Bartlett. The Mayor's [LGBTQ+ Venues Charter](#) is intended to act as a practical tool for developers, venues and pub companies to sign up to and show their commitment to the LGBTQ+ community in London.

As cities digitise and new layers of technology are added to urban design and management, efforts will need to go into ensuring that the [concentration of production](#) and skills doesn't act as a further barrier to diversity and less resilient city-making, and that data is used to reduce inequality.

MARKET RESILIENCE

In Switzerland, women marched against the [gender pay gap](#); with women underrepresented in political and economic leadership across the world from [Japan](#) to [Jordan](#) and pay parity [not expected before the end of this century](#). An ethnicity pay gap, particularly affecting migrants, remains a challenge in the [UK](#), [Canada](#), [Germany](#), and in many other countries increases the risk of inequality becoming intergenerational and entrenched. The [recent progress of women on US boards](#), may have increased gender diversity, but [not ethnic diversity](#); or necessarily helped reduce inequality. Expect more calls for solidarity between all underrepresented groups and for reporting to become more widespread and integrated.

North American and UK leadership teams tend to perform better in [gender representation](#); Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia Pacific perform better for representation of minority ethnicities. More diverse executive teams experience

[above average profitability](#) – with cultural diversity a stronger indicator of the likelihood of outperformance. Expect [more organisations](#) to connect recovery plans with resilience and inequality strategies, and with [talent attraction and retention](#) as younger generations [expect tolerance](#) and [action over messaging](#).

High streets in smaller UK locations seem to be [recovering more quickly](#) than in larger cities. In the previous recession, major centres tended to recover fastest; this change may see secondary centres catching up, reducing the inequality between places. Plans to use [apps to connect customers with local shops](#) and capitalise on 'buy local' sentiment may add an extra layer of support against global competition. However, parts of the world will recover more quickly – some airports are listed as [safe](#) and the German office market may be [ahead of peers](#) – and this may increase inequality between places.

FINAL THOUGHT

In a world with possibly too much information, the [information-action ratio](#) may be helpful. We know everything about that which we can do nothing about, and we know nothing about that which we can do everything about. Listening more to more diverse people may provide unexpected answers.

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