



INTERVIEW

IN CONVERSATION WITH

**GREG CLARK**

# Pioneering the Post-pandemic City

**COVID-19 has forced urbanists to rethink the cities of tomorrow. Prof Greg Clark CBE, Group Advisor, Future Cities & New Industries at HSBC, Chair of the Connected Places Catapult, and Moderator of the World Cities Summit Mayors Forum, has advised more than 250 cities, 50 national governments, and global corporations across the developed and developing world. In this interview, he envisages the possible post-pandemic future for cities.**



| *Image: Centre for Liveable Cities*



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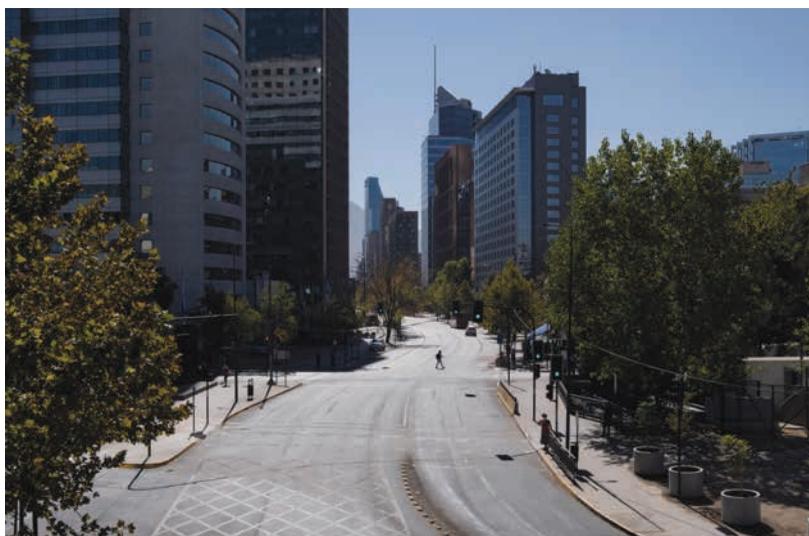


**COVID-19 has hit cities hard. Do you expect this “new normal” to change cities’ identities as magnets for talent, investment, and people seeking opportunities?**

I think that the fundamental attraction of cities remains the same. Cities are places where people can enjoy shared services and amenities, rich experiences and interactions, and where invention and innovation can flourish in creative spaces. The pandemic is accelerating some trends such as digitalisation and decarbonisation. The net effects in our cities are likely to include:

- More digitalised activities within our cities, and an associated fast-growing distribution and logistics economy that brings new land uses.
- More choice for people to decide where to live, how to work, and when and how to travel. People will adopt flexible work arrangements where available and make decisions on where to live accordingly.
- More opportunities to reinvent the role of city centres, with greater emphasis on the experience, habitat (residential), and innovation economies, and less emphasis on commuting, consumption, and the corporate economy.
- Greater agility in our cities, with wider use of digital platforms to create places that are more engaging and flexible. Digitalisation will reinforce the role of place, not replace it.

Overall, we are likely to see more hybrid cities and lifestyles, where the city becomes both a physical space and a digital platform, with the two interacting in dynamic ways.



A deserted downtown road in Santiago, Chile, during a new COVID-19 lockdown in April 2021.  
Image: Alberto Valdes / EPA-EFE

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### **What is your view on how a “green recovery” and other opportunities can help cities recover economically from this crisis?**

It is important to use the pandemic to accelerate a transition to net zero carbon cities. Cities that are healthy for humans are also good for our planet. The pandemic has been an unintended experiment in lower-carbon living, with the surprising conclusion that many industries were able to remain productive while also reducing emissions. How much further can we take the decarbonisation imperative now that we know this? I see six examples of what will be needed next in a green recovery:

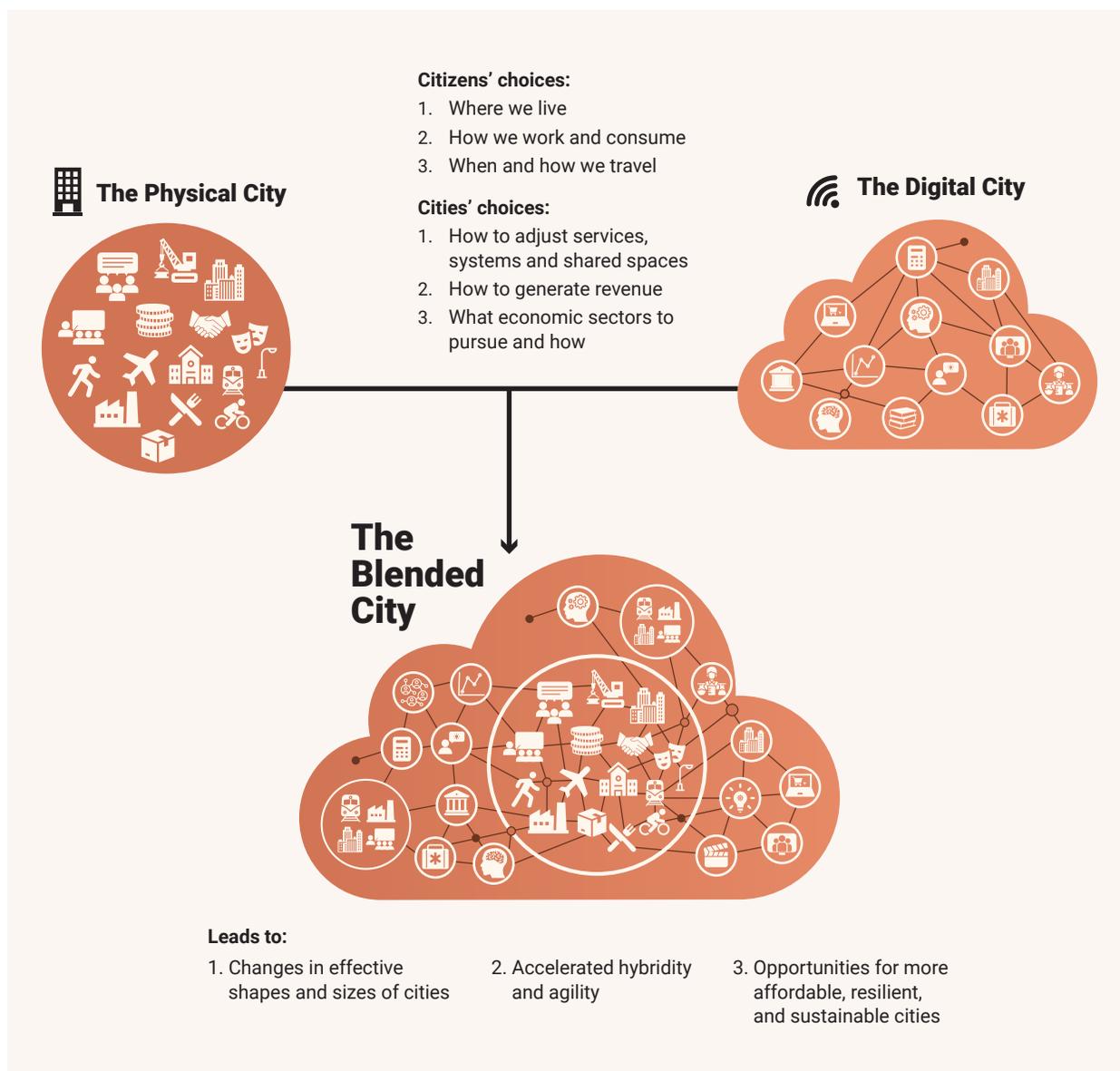
- **Clean energy:** A move towards clean energy in urban systems. For example, a pronounced shift from fossil fuel-powered vehicles towards Electric Vehicles.
- **War on waste:** Continued focus on waste reduction, especially in the areas of water, food and medical supplies where the pandemic has revealed inadequacies and inequalities.
- **New urban mobility:** A greater use of multi-modal and active transport, and incentives to keep journeys in fossil fuel-powered vehicles to a minimum, or to eliminate them fully.
- **Green buildings:** Building Information Modelling technologies and platforms will enable buildings to be more energy-efficient, and to eventually become net energy producers.
- **Urban farming and nature-based solutions:** More focus on food production within cities, or closer to them, with urban agri-tech emerging as a new cluster.
- **Accelerated circularity:** The circular city is a mix of multiple urban systems which become increasingly integrated and interdependent, so that waste is reduced or eliminated, and resources are continually used. For example, a shift towards carbon-capturing building materials such as timber.

Each of these will be an exciting part of the post-COVID-19 world. I foresee that sustainable finance will help to fuel these transitions, and numerous digital platforms will emerge that will both incentivise citizen behavioural change, and help to model the first examples of personal carbon accounts. Green finance and platform technologies will continue to foster new business models in cities that will accelerate decarbonisation.

**You have spoken of “Blended Cities” that are likely to emerge within the next two decades, where as a result of digitalisation, cities become both a place and a service. Please tell us more.**

There is no zero-sum between digital platforms and the physical city. Digitalisation simply means cities becoming more hybrid. Too many voices are prophesying “the end of the city” as a result of COVID-19 and the rapid digital acceleration. I don’t see that.

Whenever new technologies have emerged over the past century, people have predicted the death of cities. But on each occasion cities have grown stronger, utilising such technologies to reinforce the value of proximity, physical interactions, and shared systems, services and spaces.





A couple working from home in March 2020 as New York City sought to curb the spread of COVID-19.  
*Image: REUTERS / Caitlin Ochs*

Technologies reinforce the power and efficiency of cities, but they also oblige cities to adjust. We need to recognise that while technology enables us to optimise physical space, it does not replace it.

The “Blended City” describes how the hybrid “physical-digital” world can change our lives. The uptick in digital connectivity will allow more people to choose where and how to live and work, and when and how to travel. At the same time, cities can be made more intelligent and responsive. Cities will become more digitalised in terms of space, mobility, amenities and utilities, and more hybrid in consumption, services, entertainment, education, and gatherings. This “Blended City” is a combination of the “City as a Service” and the “City as a Place”.

We have seen versions of this emerging in recent years, with people working remotely from locations favourable to them. For example, living in Philadelphia while retaining a New York City-based job or business. Similarly, new visa schemes for tech engineers, doctors and start-up entrepreneurs now make it possible for them to work simultaneously in more than one city. By accelerating digitalisation, the pandemic has extended these kinds of opportunities to a wider range of people, across more countries and markets.



The pandemic is starting to play a “sorting” role, separating the things that still need to be physically done in cities from those that do not.



Eventually, I think this will mean that many more cities can become “cities by subscription or membership”. These are cities where you don’t have to be permanently based, but you can serve your clients, own a property, start a business, or make investments. If digitalisation allows us to be in two places at once, it enables us to be members of more than one city. Fast-growing cities in countries with smaller populations, such as those in the Gulf, Caribbean, and the Baltics, may adopt these models rapidly.

One important implication is that cities will need to reform their financial systems to capture revenue from the value that is created digitally, as well as physically: they will need to be able to charge their “virtual citizens” in addition to their “physical” ones.

### **What could this mean for the future of top-tier “Global Cities” such as London, New York, Paris, Tokyo and Singapore?**

Global service sectors such as finance, law, consulting, media and information technology, which fuelled the rise of many of these cities in the 1990s and 2000s, are likely to be the most disrupted by the rise of flexible work. It will be important for these global cities to adapt and embrace new opportunities, and not lament the reduction in corporate jobs.

The pandemic is starting to play a “sorting” role, separating the things that still need to be physically done in cities from those that do not. Nonetheless, there are exciting opportunities over the next few years for these cities, in:

- **Innovation:** Cities will continue to host innovation if they make the required changes. For example, by shifting towards innovation economy sectors such as the life sciences, regenerative medicine, and creative media production, where face-to-face proximity is often needed, and by developing innovation districts in places where demand from corporate jobs may be reduced, such as central business districts.
- **Experience:** To reinvent city centres affected by digitalisation and flexible work, cities will need to better curate and combine arts and culture, heritage, education, entertainment, dining, retail and public space into a mix of surprising and spontaneous attractions, using digital platforms to enhance their appeal.
- **Habitat:** Growing the resident population of cities is an opportunity to underpin urban amenities and retain vitality while also making efficient use of space and services. One option for many people is not just to work from home, but also to live nearer to work. Where buildings are convertible, we will see more of this. At the same time there are opportunities for smaller urban centres to develop co-working spaces and mixed-use districts that support work and leisure near home. With many people having been in “lockdown” during the pandemic, these new patterns have yet to emerge. But they will.

- **Agility:** More spaces will perform multiple purposes. Some homes will become primary workplaces. But the larger trend will be for buildings in city centres to become more versatile. By day an office or shop, by night a bar or art gallery, or even a live performance venue.
- **Talent attraction:** Cities will increasingly compete to attract top talents and skilled workers, drawing them with special visas, incentives, and flexible live-and-work models available in a “Blended City”.
- **Digital platforms in physical space:** A new logistics economy driven by digital commerce is emerging in cities. The growth of home delivery and its related mobility systems, the rise of data centres, fulfilment centres, dark kitchens and collection hubs, and their links to infrastructure webs, present new opportunities for cities to re-engineer space. One key issue is how to both enable these digitalised services, and also protect public goods such as safe pavements, clean air, and mobility flows. These new activities will need to address their own externalities and I expect to see new regulations requiring them to do so.



Dark kitchens, like this one in Singapore, produce meals exclusively for delivery.  
*Image: The Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reprinted with permission.*



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### **How can cities in developing nations, which are growing rapidly and struggling to find the resources to adapt to the pandemic and other major disruptions such as climate change, cope in the long-term?**

The pandemic has different implications for people living in cities in developing nations. COVID-19 has made the link between human health and housing conditions more visible, as people in the worst quality housing have been the most impacted. This is not a function of density per se, but about housing quality. Hence, in Latin America, Africa, India and ASEAN, I expect to see new initiatives emerge to tackle housing quality and inequality, as well as other urban systems like healthcare and water. These investments require fiscal power, not only from national governments, but through cities generating their resources and partnering with the private sector.

The pandemic will also accelerate the shift in population growth from very large cities to medium-sized cities. It is thus critical to prepare the latter for this through infrastructure investment and effective, sustainable planning. The largest cities in developing nations were often unprepared for rapid population growth. Sustainable urban development is easier to manage and achieve while population growth is occurring rather than afterwards, once patterns of informal settlement and transport have set in.

Post-pandemic, many developing nations will try to manage an overall system of cities, rather than focus narrowly on individual cities. In Indonesia, for example, we may see policies that simultaneously seek to regenerate Jakarta, create a new capital in East Kalimantan, increase the role and size of Bandung and Surabaya, and support the growth of another 6 to 10 cities. This approach will be essential to embrace sustainability and manage population movements.

One permanent challenge, which the pandemic has starkly revealed, is weak urban governance. COVID-19 has highlighted the need for well-run cities that are able to manage extreme situations effectively.

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**In light of COVID-19, how can Singapore further its role as a successful world city?**

Singapore occupies a unique and important role in the global network of cities. It is not just a successful city-state; it is a global laboratory on how 21st century urbanism can work.

Singapore has established a reputation for innovation in water, education, housing, transport, and city planning, and for world-class standards in business policies, urban governance, and R&D investment. Like other leading cities, Singapore will now need to make a further shift towards innovation, habitat, and experience, underpinned by a rapid net zero carbon transition. Singapore is already on that path and can teach the world what it has learned.

What I hope to see is that Singapore uses its acquired advantages to demonstrate a “fast track” towards circularity, as it has done with water, and towards innovation districts such as in Jurong and Punggol.

**Finally, in this time of crisis where global travel and the international conference sector remain severely curtailed, while some nations have turned inward-looking, a word please on the prospects for continued global collaboration.**

At no time in the past 50 years has it been more important to share innovation and drive solutions that work across borders. The pandemic itself, the subsequent global public health and bio-security efforts, and the vaccine discoveries and rollouts, have proven that. Without global collaboration the pandemic would be very much worse.



Brazil's cities have been hit hard by COVID-19, especially residents living in poorer quality housing.  
Image: Fernando Bizerra / EPA-EFE



Artist's impression of the future Jurong Innovation District in Singapore.  
Image: JTC Corporation

I do not believe in the idea of de-globalisation. Globalisation does need to be better managed to be more socially and environmentally responsible but working across borders is essential to address the planet's imperatives. The individual countries that lead efforts to put their national interests first are often the ones that have no intention to address the major issues of our time such as climate change and global inequality. They seek to leave multilateral agreements and platforms in order to pursue regressive policies.

Despite severe constraints on reaching multilateral agreements on climate protection, inter-continental inequality, fair taxation, and technology dependency, it is essential to seek such global agreements. To abandon these efforts would be to abandon hope.

For cities, the appeal of international cooperation remains compelling. Every city is its own laboratory of urban life, creating fresh experiments that use different environments, methods, catalysts, and interventions to find solutions that work. Learning together by sharing knowledge and insights will enrich all cities' efforts to become better places to live. Because successful cities are fundamental to creating a better planet, there is no real competition. We need all cities to succeed. 🌐