

Planning Cities Commission held its Webinar: "**The impact of coronavirus on the city planning. Experiences of the Baltic Cities**" on 19 November 2020 using Zoom platform. 42 representatives of UBC cities and invited speakers took part.

The Covid pandemic has affected our lives and added a new unexpected layer of challenges for the cities around the Baltic Sea. The Commission that usually had been working very practically, had to now limit its work to the online discussion.

"Indeed, it is much poorer to meet online, but still it is better than nothing" – said **Katarzyna Gruszecka-Spychała**, Deputy Mayor of Gdynia, who welcomed the participants.

The main questions posed to the city planners included:

- Did the pandemic situation of coronavirus change the sense of place? Do we have to reimagine our cities? Can city planning enhance communities that are both healthy and connected?
- What has become more important in our planning considerations? Is there anything that has become less important?
- Do we have to re-evaluate the core principles of the city planning? Or, on the contrary, are we convinced that they are still actual?

Alessandra Galletti, Director of Design Practice at Project for Public Spaces, New York, shared her presentation on the importance of public spaces in the time of pandemic. In her opinion people realized how important public space is nowadays. The US examples of using the streets during pandemic prove that, though distancing is a need, still social interaction is important. "Public space is fundamental for democracy", Galletti concluded.

Participants paid attention on the question of integration of people from different backgrounds. How to make the public space inclusive and accessible for all?

Sebuliba Mercy Stephen, Regional Programmes Officer, LVRLAC, presented a different perspective of how pandemic influenced the municipalities in his region. Though negative consequences of isolation seemed obvious, a positive impact was noted, too. The pandemic mobilized local authorities to carry out activities that would have faced resentment if it was not due to the lockdown like redesigning and reconstructing some streets in Kampala into less car oriented.

In the second part of the meeting the cities planners presented their thoughts and reflections how COVID-19 pandemic has influenced urban planning and construction, and also how it changed the habits of citizens.

Sirpa Kalio, Helsinki, focused on how people's behaviours during pandemic influenced the city space, layout of the shops, and public transportation. Professional life moved online mostly, so demand for high-tech solutions is natural.

Representatives of Rostock, **Andreas Schubert and Dürten Schölens**, delivered a story about BUGA 2025, a re-development plan of the city area on the Warnow river that included e.g. new public spaces and green areas.

Experiences of the city of Umeå were shared by **Tomas Strömberg**. The cities should work on diversity of solutions to be resilient towards such challenges as pandemic. Digital strategies and fast Internet should also be prioritized. He underlined the biggest social problems now were loneliness, mental health and exclusion. The most obvious consequences of pandemic are: increase of e-commerce, remote working, moving out from the city.

Christian Hegardt, Region Gotland, focused on question how to keep city centre still attractive, resilient and sustainable. Gotland, being up to now a living area for commuter workers and a holiday destination, became a place where inhabitants of large metropolitan areas decided to move in.

Henrik Pedersen shared the experiences of the city of Aarhus. He told about daily work in the municipality in the situation that many colleagues work from home, hold on-line meetings and face gathering restrictions. He noted that the pandemic hadn't caused any physical changes in the space but influenced the structure of the retail and the situation on the real estate market causing that commercial spaces rental decreased and summer houses are bought very willingly.

Paulina Szewczyk, Chairwoman of PCC, presented the CLIMATic Gdynia City Centre project. It is aimed at reduction in the intensity of carbon dioxide emission and improvement of living environment by increasing the urban greenery, convincing inhabitants to change their transport habits and making mobility sustainable, accessible to more people and integrated for higher overall efficiency. Paulina Szewczyk pointed out that the pandemic, however, made many people work from home and use private cars instead of sustainable public transportation. It will be a challenge to reverse this trend in the future.

Most of the participants of the virtual meeting agreed that the Covid pandemic situation highlighted some problems that must be resolved but in general they were on the right track. Many of them also indicated the need of reviewing and proposing new strategies for city planning in their cities when the pandemic ended.