

NINETEEN

**Mercurial Images of the
COVID-19 City**

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Introduction

Sick city. Quarantine city. Hostile city. Anxious city. Fearful city. Unsafe city. Restrictive city. Dystopian city. Lockdown city. Timeless city. Closed city. Empty city. Isolated city. Distanced city. Divorced city. Pod city. Lonely city. Homeless city. Unequal city. Divided city. Sourdough city. No toilet paper city. Quiet city. Birds are back city. Nature takes over city. Opera on the balcony city. Clapping in the streets city. Work from home city. Zoom city. Frontline city. Essential workers city. Home-schooled city. Unemployed city. Business as usual city. Masked city. Gloved city. Disinfectant city. Plexiglas and tape city. Bored city. Impatient city. Crowded city. Protest city. Compliant city. Defiant city. Selfish city. Selfless city. New normal city.

Multiple and mutable images of the city have emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. There is the *conceptual image of the city* formed in our imaginations: a newly hostile and restrictive space that influences our affective experiences, emotions, mental health, and behavior. There is the *perceptual image of the*

1 *city* that has aesthetically and materially changed: redesigned
2 and reconfigured, marked with new materials and by novel
3 forms of litter. These conceptual and perceptual images are
4 in turn forged through the new images *in* and *of* the city that
5 we encounter and create. There are the *images in the city*: signs
6 that instruct us how to act, messages hung in windows, and
7 diverse forms of graffiti and street art. There are the *images of*
8 *the city*: photographs that document these changing forms,
9 atmospheres, and aesthetics of space. This chapter examines
10 the relationship between image and city during the COVID-
11 19 pandemic and reflects on these mercurial images: images
12 in flux that reflect and communicate different aspects and
13 stages of the pandemic. Referring to photographs taken in
14 Oslo, Norway between March and October 2020, this chapter
15 asks: How does the COVID-19 city look? What is the image
16 of the COVID-19 city? How do these images and pandemic
17 aesthetics impact our urban imaginations?

19 20 **Image and city**

21 The image of the city can be understood in different ways.
22 Image may refer to the visual matter that makes up the city,
23 from symbols and signs to structures and design. Images can also
24 refer to an impression that one has of place: abstract, imagined,
25 affective, aesthetic, intuited. When considering the relation-
26 ship between image and city, Kevin Lynch's pivotal book *The*
27 *Image of the City* is a logical point of departure. Lynch's influ-
28 ential book written in 1960 is largely concerned with visual
29 form, focusing on patterns inherent to the city. It is at once
30 a typology and mediation on the city as an object made up
31 of components and is concerned with how architecture and
32 urban planning influences our image of the city. Though the
33 book is more a practical and technical exploration of what
34 comprises the image of the city – one that is ever-changing
35 and perhaps never fully realized – Lynch acknowledges that
36 'nothing is experienced by itself, but always in relation to its

1 surroundings, the sequences of events leading up to it, the
2 memory of past experiences' (Lynch, 1960: 1).

3 Mona Domosh investigates different understandings of
4 'urban imagery' and offers a more cultural and humanistic
5 interpretation: 'the city, like a painting, is a representation, an
6 image formed out of the hopes and ideas of the cultural worlds
7 in which we live' (Domosh, 1992: 475). Domosh, referring
8 to Lowenthal, argues that the image of the city is more than
9 perceptions and 'reflections of reality' but also 'the result of an
10 active imagination' (Domosh, 1992: 476). Urban photography
11 is another way through which we create and understand the
12 image of the city. Jane Tormey writes that photographs 'say as
13 much about what we imagine cities to be or what we consider
14 to be important about cities, as literature or theory do' (Tormey,
15 2012: 244). There is no one direct route then to explore the
16 image of the COVID-19 city. What follows is an exploration
17 of some ways to think about the connections, moving from
18 the more abstract conceptual city of our imaginations to the
19 more literal images of the city.
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21 **Conceptual and perceptual images of the city**

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23 In his book *Landscapes of Fear*, human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan
24 (1979: 102) asks: 'How did a city devastated by pestilence look?'
25 Tuan offers some indications of the image of a city marked by
26 infectious disease, describing scenes from various outbreaks
27 throughout human history. From the typhus epidemic in
28 Athens in 430 BC to the plague in 17th-century London,
29 these descriptions are gruesome and harrowing. Describing the
30 London epidemic of 1665, Tuan writes: 'None could go into
31 the streets without encountering people carrying coffins. There
32 were few passers-by, but of those that one could see, many had
33 sores on them. Others limped painfully from the effects of sores
34 not wholly healed. In silent streets, the red cross flamed upon
35 doors, the few dwellings not so marked being left tenantless and
36 open to the winds' (Tuan, 1979: 103). This stark imagery of past

1 epidemics is visceral and unnerving: sick and dead bodies in the
2 streets, coffins being moved through the city, residences in quar-
3 antine marked visibly, and church bells ringing for the deceased.

4 The scenes of the COVID-19 city are generally more orderly
5 and less severe and graphic than Tuan's descriptions of past
6 epidemics. Yet the conceptual and perceptual images of the
7 city have changed dramatically, simultaneously, and similarly
8 in cities worldwide. The conceptual image is linked with our
9 imaginations and is both individual and collective. It is built
10 upon many other images, impressions, and information that
11 we receive on how to stay safe and comport ourselves in public
12 space. Our conceptions of the city shift as the city alternates
13 between an antagonistic and safe space depending on local
14 rates of infection and political measures like lockdown and
15 curfews. Writing about Melbourne, Alison Young describes
16 the locked-down city as 'dramatically altered' with little traffic,
17 few people, and discarded face masks as the 'now-archetypal
18 detritus of the pandemic' (Young, 2020: 1).

19 Spaces newly emptied recall dystopian images from apoca-
20 lyptic films and literature. At the beginning of lockdown
21 in Oslo in March and April 2020, empty streets and buses
22 contributed to an eerie urban atmosphere (Figure 19.1).
23 Even unoccupied football fields seemed disquieting, devoid
24 of people, and with infrastructure re-arranged to discourage
25 recreational use (Figure 19.2). The atmosphere of public space
26 is changed by the absence of people but also by the presence of
27 new materials and infrastructures. At the University of Oslo's
28 Blindern campus, a mobile COVID-19 test station set up in
29 the central square is a jarring addition at the start of the autumn
30 semester while crowds of students are notably absent from the
31 space. A view into one of the university cafeterias after hours
32 is also stirring as large crosses made in tape serve to enforce
33 socially distanced seating (Figure 19.3).

34 Uninhabited and still spaces usually filled with people and
35 movement are unsettling. Yet so too are spaces where we
36 inevitably encounter people as our perceptions of others and

1 **Figure 19.1:** Empty bus and emptied fields in Ekeberg in the early stages
2 of lockdown, April 2020



19 Source: Emma Arnold

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22 their behaviors have been radically transformed during the
23 pandemic. Tuan describes how outbreaks of disease contribute
24 to feelings of fear, how we become attuned to the threat of
25 other people. Though we may not encounter the grisly scenes
26 of past epidemics that ravaged cities and populations, there are
27 scenes in the COVID-19 city that harken to past outbreaks.
28 Tuan writes of the plague in 17th-century London: 'The plague
29 made everyone both suspicious and suspect. Strangers, intimate
30 neighbours, and close kin could all be carriers of death. Fear
31 of infection was such that those who had to pass through the
32 streets moved in a corkscrew fashion, crossing from side to side
33 to avoid contact with other pedestrians' (Tuan, 1979: 98–9).
34 This corkscrew movement of people is also observable in the
35 COVID-19 city and is reinforced by public health authorities
36 through dictates on social distancing.

1 **Figure 19.2:** Nets arranged to discourage use at Ekebergsletta football
2 fields in Oslo, March 2020



19 Source: Emma Arnold

21 **Figure 19.3:** A view into the Faculty of Social Sciences cafeteria at the
22 University of Oslo where crosses made with masking tape on tables
23 encourage social distancing, September 2020



34 Source: Emma Arnold

1 **Figure 19.4:** A disposable mask discarded among leaf litter, October 2020



12 Source: Emma Arnold

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15 The newly masked and socially distanced stranger or the con-
16 spicuously unmasked stranger who does not respect social dis-
17 tancing have both become part of the changed urban landscape,
18 giving rise to different affective experiences. Mask-wearing is
19 about public health and slowing rates of transmission but also
20 about optics. Wearing a mask signals that one cares for one's
21 own health as well as the health of others and that one trusts
22 government and science. Masks and gloves have become cus-
23 tomary sartorial additions during our daily navigations, and in
24 many places have been made mandatory by authorities. They
25 are also an ubiquitous new form of litter (Figure 19.4). The
26 optics of mask-wearing has become part of policing and protest
27 in public space. In Oslo, the Black Lives Matter demonstra-
28 tion in June and the Extinction Rebellion Oslo Uprising in
29 September are two examples where many activists volunteered
30 to wear masks and other protective gear. While the use of masks
31 is also a matter of protection, it is also to signal responsibility
32 and to ensure that political messages are not undermined by
33 the optics of not wearing masks or worse, a subsequent spike
34 in infection rates.

1 Images in and of the city

2 Images inserted into the city and images taken of the city
3 are part of our shifting conceptions and perceptions of urban
4 space. In the newly empty spaces of the city, Young (2020: 1)
5 writes that ‘the material infrastructures of lockdown became
6 highly visible’. These material infrastructures include new signs
7 advising not to push buttons at pedestrian crossings and outdoor
8 advertising displays replaced with advice from public health
9 authorities. Official infographic signs from the Norwegian
10 Institute of Public Health, The Norwegian Directorate of
11 Health, the Municipality of Oslo, and other unaffiliated
12 signage appear throughout the city in different formats and
13 spaces (Figures 19.5 and 19.6). The messages are most often
14 reminders on social distancing, hand sanitizing, orders to
15 stay home if ill, and more recently requirements for masks
16 on public transportation. The fear of other people that Tuan
17 (1979) describes during epidemics may be reinforced by these
18 new images in the city. Whether we perceive a given space as
19 safe or not may rely on these changing images. An absence of
20 these images may subsequently lead one to feel unsafe or may
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23 **Figure 19.5:** Multiple signs on social distancing and hygiene from The
24 Norwegian Directorate of Health and the Norwegian Institute of Public
25 Health hang inside and outside of a small shop, October 2020



36 Source: Emma Arnold

1 **Figure 19.6:** Municipality of Oslo sign advocating social distancing
 2 in queues with small text 'Do it for Oslo' in the lower right corner,
 3 September 2020



14 Source: Emma Arnold

17 serve as an indicator that some kind of 'normal' has returned.
 18 Ebbs and flows in these images have been particularly visible
 19 on public transportation whose operators have experimented
 20 with various ways of minimizing transmission during different
 21 stages of the pandemic. While most of these official signs are
 22 temporary, others appear more permanent such as the metal
 23 traffic sign on one of Oslo's ring roads pointing drivers toward
 24 the nearest COVID-19 test center (Figure 19.7).

25 In contrast to the official signs being inserted into the city,
 26 the cultural responses of graffiti and street reflect the pecu-
 27 liarities of the pandemic experience. Stefano Bloch reminds
 28 us that graffiti is not 'monolithic' and that graffiti concerning
 29 COVID-19 'can best be described as diverse in terms of its
 30 members' sentiments, with heavy leanings toward conspiratorial
 31 perspectives as well as public health preoccupations' (Bloch,
 32 2020: 1). Julia Tulke describes how graffiti and street artists are
 33 playing with predominant visual narratives of the pandemic like
 34 the hoarding of toilet paper and the ever-present face mask.
 35 Other interventions border on public service announcements
 36 and remind the viewer to stay at home or to wash their hands

1 **Figure 19.7:** Traffic sign points to the nearest COVID-19 test center,
2 October 2020



13 Source: Emma Arnold

16 **Figure 19.8:** Text written in marker on a painted wall says: 'Take care of
17 one another', April 2020



34 Source: Emma Arnold

1 **Figure 19.9:** A handwritten sign on paper on the inside of a shop
 2 reads: 'We are closed because of the Coronavirus! Stay healthy'. The
 3 window reflects the photographer who is wearing a surgical mask,
 4 September 2020



15 Source: Emma Arnold

17 (Tulke, 2020). Such images have not been a dominant part of
 18 the pandemic aesthetic in Oslo though some small messages
 19 appear here and there on walls and windows showing support
 20 for essential workers, reassuring young children, or conveying
 21 hope to the public (Figure 19.8).

22 We experience these new images in the city through our
 23 navigations of space. We also encounter them through pho-
 24 tography in academic sources, popular and social media, and
 25 through our private correspondences. The exchange of such
 26 photography is also part of the construction of the image of
 27 the COVID-19 city and a reflection of our hyper-connectivity
 28 at this moment. As we confront new images in the city,
 29 our own experiences are reflected back, sometimes literally
 30 (Figure 19.9). Photography has been important in how we
 31 understand the changing image and experience of our own
 32 cities and cities elsewhere. Photographs are documents and
 33 a way to record and process the significance of this moment
 34 and allow us to connect across distances and cultures, ultim-
 35 ately reinforcing our understandings of the COVID-19 crisis
 36 as a global, collective, and shared experience. As much as we

1 passively consume these images, we also actively create them
2 as individuals and as a collective. Photographs such as those
3 presented in this chapter are part of a global visual narrative that
4 reveal how cities are changed and how we too are changed by
5 these images. They are informative, communicative, evocative,
6 powerful, and they may also be part of how we are building
7 new imaginings of the future.
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10 **From new images to new imaginings**

11 Through the multiple, mutable, and mercurial images of the
12 COVID-19 city, new urban imaginings are being formed: both
13 dystopian and utopian. Through the dystopian image, we may
14 conceive of how other global crises may similarly alter urban
15 landscapes and experience. The climate crisis presents many
16 challenges to cities, writes Paul Dobraszczyk (2017), including
17 how we imagine adapting to a city transformed. He explores
18 the connections between imagination, climate change, and
19 future cities and suggests that representations of the future city
20 transformed by climate change play a part in our adaptability
21 and resilience. The image of the COVID-19 city is of a city
22 transformed that also hints at the utopian and the potential for
23 change. The rapid urban transformation spurred by COVID-
24 19 has been realized through policy, individual and collective
25 action, and the introduction of new materials into the city.
26 Tape, paint, and other materials have become important, ver-
27 satile, and effective means of reconfiguring urban space and
28 influencing behavior. Justin Davidson writes that tape is ‘a
29 liberating force, breathing new flexibility into urban infra-
30 structure that is built to resist change’ (Davidson, 2020). This
31 reconfiguration of space is an important part of how the image
32 of cities are changing, whether it is to exclude cars and pri-
33 oritize space for pedestrians and cyclists or to encourage new
34 behaviors like social distancing and community care. If bits of
35 paper and rolls of tape and concern for the public can radic-
36 ally change the image of the city, what more can we change?

1 Instead of asking only what the image of the COVID-19 city
2 is, we might also ask: what does the city we want to live in
3 look like? What future city do we imagine? How might we
4 achieve these new urban imaginings?
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