

May 2, 2020

Thoughts on Urban Decentralization

Until a few months back, we, urban planners, were busy working to improve the conditions of the people living in the cities. We agreed that the economic opportunities offered by cities attracted the population regionally and globally.

The pandemic has thrust the new reality that is different from our experiences. Many, who had second homes or access to the countryside or the other areas outside New York, quickly left New York, pushing the virus far into the exurbs and countryside. Regular commuters, in 25-50 mile radius outside New York, spread the virus as they traveled back home after work every night. The mobility system in New York City has served the commuting population for many decades, managing the daily influx of over six hundred thousand to Manhattan has enormously strained the environment. The public transport, a boon in the normal times, is considered with much anxiety and trepidation following the scare from the pandemic.

Our team at ReThink NYC Studio has been studying decentralization even before the pandemic struck, using mobility tools, specifically rail transport, to propose new cores as alternate to the Manhattan-centric concentration. COVID 19 is challenging the existing high-density conditions in the city. Now we will be forced to think the alternates like decentralization to contain the long commutes in the region to the far away bedroom communities.

The global environmental awareness has New Yorkers hard at work, especially architects and the other building professionals, to reduce energy consumption in the buildings. It is time to seriously take stock of the size of New York City itself, for governance, institutions, social and economic equality/inequality, and the impact of all these on health and environment. We have all been seriously debating if life will be back to "normal," or will it be different. There will be many band-aid solutions, which are okay for the immediate response but will be wasteful if a long-term strategy for health and environment, and social and economic equality/inequality is not considered.

The developments in planning stages are focused on creating affordable new housing units and supporting institutions. The masterplans for Sunnyside rail yards and Willets Points, the two that I am familiar with, have only housing, limited retail, and schools to serve the population in the planned community with the projected new jobs in the retail and the schools. If Sunnyside rail yard included offices, the burden on mid-town Manhattan could be reduced. Many coming to work to New York will find employment in Queens. Similarly, there can be office jobs planned in Willets Points as well, containing some commute between Manhattan and Long Island.

*"if you look at the present in a **critical** way, you can also unleash the future".*

- Rem Koolhaas

I took liberty to replace **critical** in place of **creative** in the era of COVID 19.

Damu

Damyanti Radheshwar FIIA AIA LEED AP
D Radheshwar Architect + Urban Planner and Strategist
www.DRadheshwar.com