

POST COVID-19

The role of urban environments in adapting to the new normal

August 2020

ARUP



‘First life, then spaces, then buildings - the other way around never works’

Jan Gehl

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has altered every aspect of our lives, including the way we work, learn, shop, and relax.

The UAE government was proactive in its response to the unfolding crisis, and took bold, decisive measures to reduce the transmission of the virus in the country, quickly closing schools and nurseries, then later offices and commercial establishments. Almost overnight, and on an unprecedented scale, our homes took on additional roles, also becoming our workplaces, study environments, and our play areas.

An office in one area, and a classroom in another soon became the new normal. We all adapted because we all had to.

Of course, COVID-19’s full legacy has yet to be written but, in the

planning sphere, these changes have already given rise to a new debate: how will the pandemic affect our cities and what impacts will it have on our urban environments? Will we see drastic interventions or simply minor adaptations? Naturally, no one can say for certain, but, as ever, we certainly have the power and the opportunity to influence the outcomes.

This document examines the many ways that the pandemic and responses to it have already impacted our everyday lives. It looks at the personal experiences of five members of Arup’s Middle East planning team, using their accounts to highlight some of the new challenges we’ve faced. By doing so it seeks to throw a new light on our urban environments, and ask the simplest of questions: how can we make our present better?

TAKING AN EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH

One of the greatest tools for city shaping available to urban design and planning professionals is observation. As human beings, we are all keen observers and our daily observations with regards to our environment shape our routines both consciously and unconsciously. Avoiding a certain street at night or taking the longer route to the supermarket sometimes becomes a given or second nature to us. However, we seldom take a pause and reflect why we make these decisions. Why we avoid a certain street or why we choose to walk longer to get to the supermarket are important questions to ask if we are keen to understand how our urban environments affect us. Observing our patterns along with our spaces helps us connect the dots between spatial design and its impact on our lives.

COVID-19 has thrown our personal and public spaces under minute scrutiny. Formerly mundane actions, such as a trip to the local park, now require much more conscious thought and planning to ensure our and the safety of our loved ones.

Five Arupians decided to reflect upon how their lives have changed in the past few months due to the pandemic and how their urban environment has helped or challenged them to adapt to current conditions.

We hope that the stories shared here will resonate with others. The reflections and recommendations that we have identified collate some lessons to support urban environment practitioners, developers, planning authorities, and policy makers make informed decisions in shaping our cities, and perhaps in increasing their resilience to future challenges.



Pandemic Living

The various viewpoints presented in this document are assimilated by the members of Arup's Middle East team. Each person has had a unique experience depending on their living situation as well as their living environment. Despite the diverse situations, a number of common reflections have come out of

these stories highlighting that while each of us has our own lifestyles the basic expectations from our living environments are largely the same, and they can be identified and addressed.



Akshay Deshpande

Akshay is a Senior Urban Designer. A UAE resident for five years, Akshay lives in The Greens with his wife and pre-school son.



Azza Abdallah

Azza is a Transport Planner and aspiring data scientist. She grew up in the UAE and now lives in Jumeriah Village Circle with her cat.



Nermin Hegazy

Nermin is a Planner who moved to the UAE seven years ago to pursue her studies and start her career. She currently resides with her sister and flatmate in Business Bay.



Dua Abdelqader

Dua is a Senior Transport Planner. She moved to the UAE in 2015 and lives with her husband and toddler daughter in Sports City where they have been residents for almost five years.



Maram Balash

Maram is an Urban Designer and Planner. Although she is a long-term Sharjah resident Maram was on assignment in London when the lockdown started.





The Greens, Dubai

Working from home

Working from home brought a unique set of challenges as well as opportunities. In a matter of a week, our one-bedroom apartment transformed from a place of relaxation and play to a full-blown office for my wife and I as well as a nursery for our son. Our dining table was immediately appropriated into a work desk for my wife who needs to work from her office PC. I was left with a makeshift arrangement using a combination of an armchair and our bed to create a work area. **Our son struggled considerably due to the sudden change from his nursery routine and the fact that despite both of his parents being at home they couldn't play with him all day.**

Over time we made some adjustments to our apartment set-up providing ourselves with work and play bubbles. **The large sliding glass doors looking into the balcony and subsequently onto a green open space brought in much needed natural light and a dash of nature.**

In addition, a steady and reliable high speed internet connection has been the most important asset in facilitating efficient remote working.

Though we are now looking for a larger apartment in the same neighbourhood to provide us some space to spread out, our current apartment certainly helped immensely in dealing with this unforeseen situation.

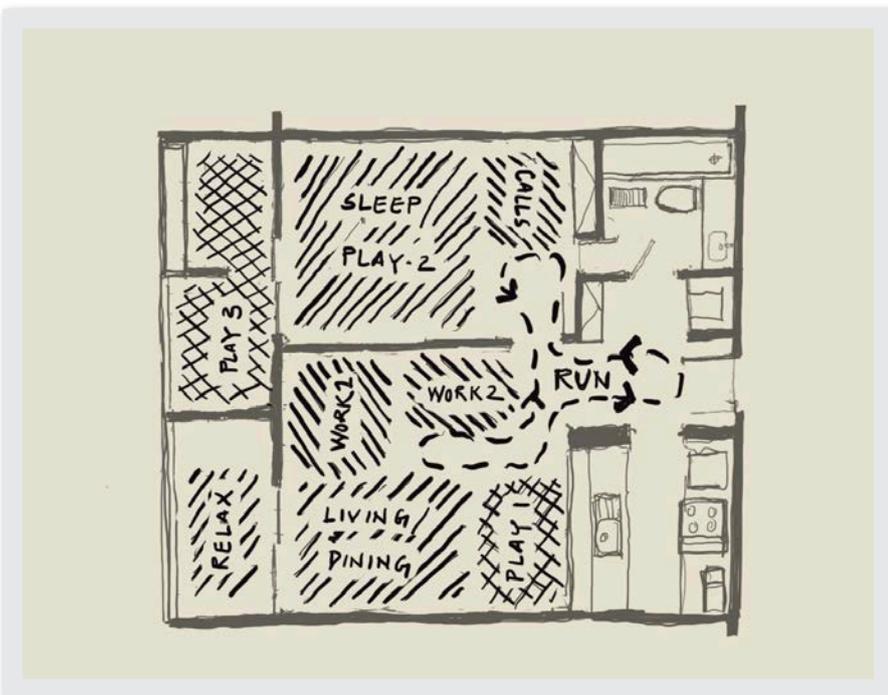
The lockdown

Towards the beginning of April 2020, a 24/7 lockdown was imposed in Dubai as a precautionary measure to curb the spread of infection. All movement outside of peoples' homes were restricted to only essential trips to groceries, pharmacies and clinics. The lockdown enforced for three weeks also curtailed all outdoor activities including exercise and play. **The humble balcony transformed from a nice to have space to an essential space for relaxation and recreation as well as our sole physical connection to the outer world.** Watching the police patrols

enforcing lockdown was my son's daily source of entertainment.

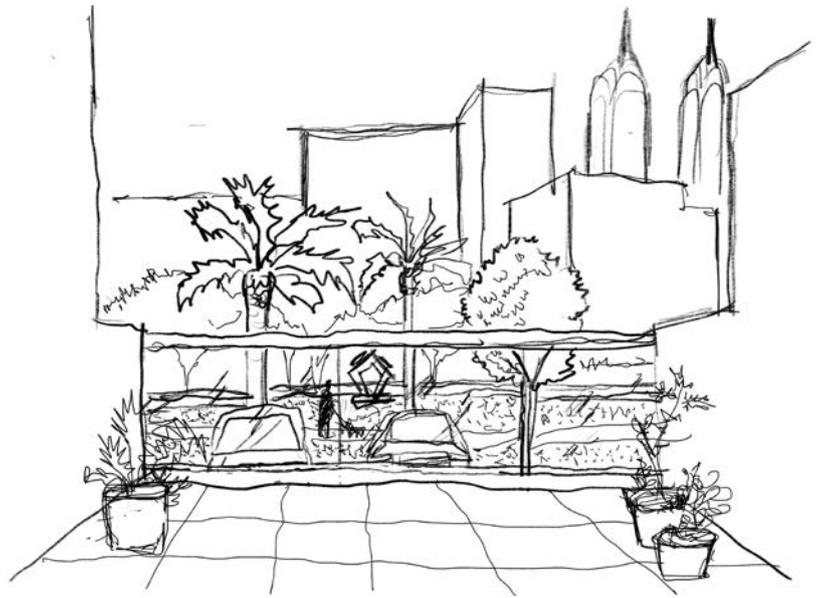
Home deliveries were literal life savers. The possibility of getting everything from groceries to medicines delivered at the doorstep avoided a number of risky trips to the supermarket. However, I do believe that the **sheer number of options that we could choose from for home delivery was because we live in a relatively dense neighbourhood** which has local shops as well as good connections to the rest of the city and thus benefits from a high serviceability.

Another key factor that played a crucial role was the **virtual community groups, both within building clusters as well as on a neighbourhood level** that helped residents whenever they needed crucial information such as updates on movement restrictions, shops to buy gloves masks (many residents offered masks and gloves for free if they had surplus ones). It also helped us feel a part of a larger group and appreciate that all of us were in this together.



THE APARTMENT TRANSFORMED INTO A PATCHWORK OF PLAY AND WORK AREAS INCLUDING AN INDOOR RUNNING TRACK WHEN OUTDOOR EXERCISE WAS NOT AN OPTION.

THE HUMBLE BALCONY TRANSFORMED FROM A NICE TO HAVE SPACE TO AN ESSENTIAL SPACE FOR RELAXATION AND RECREATION.



THE SHADED LAWNS IN OUR NEIGHBOURHOOD HIGHLIGHT THE IMPORTANCE OF INFORMAL FLEXIBLE SPACES.

The new normal

Post lockdown as things were eased, we moved into a new ‘physically distanced’ normal. The movement restrictions were eased, however, a number of public spaces including parks and beaches still remained closed. Our apartment that was our microcosm for three weeks was now expanded to our neighbourhood.

Despite the closure of parks, we found several outdoor spaces such as the podium of our building cluster, but **the greatest asset was the informal open spaces that included a shaded lawn in front of our house as**

well as the central lake area and numerous sikkak that run through the neighbourhood. Due to these spaces we never felt a lack of places to exercise, play or relax. Wide sidewalks made it possible to walk and cycle to the supermarket while maintaining physical distancing.

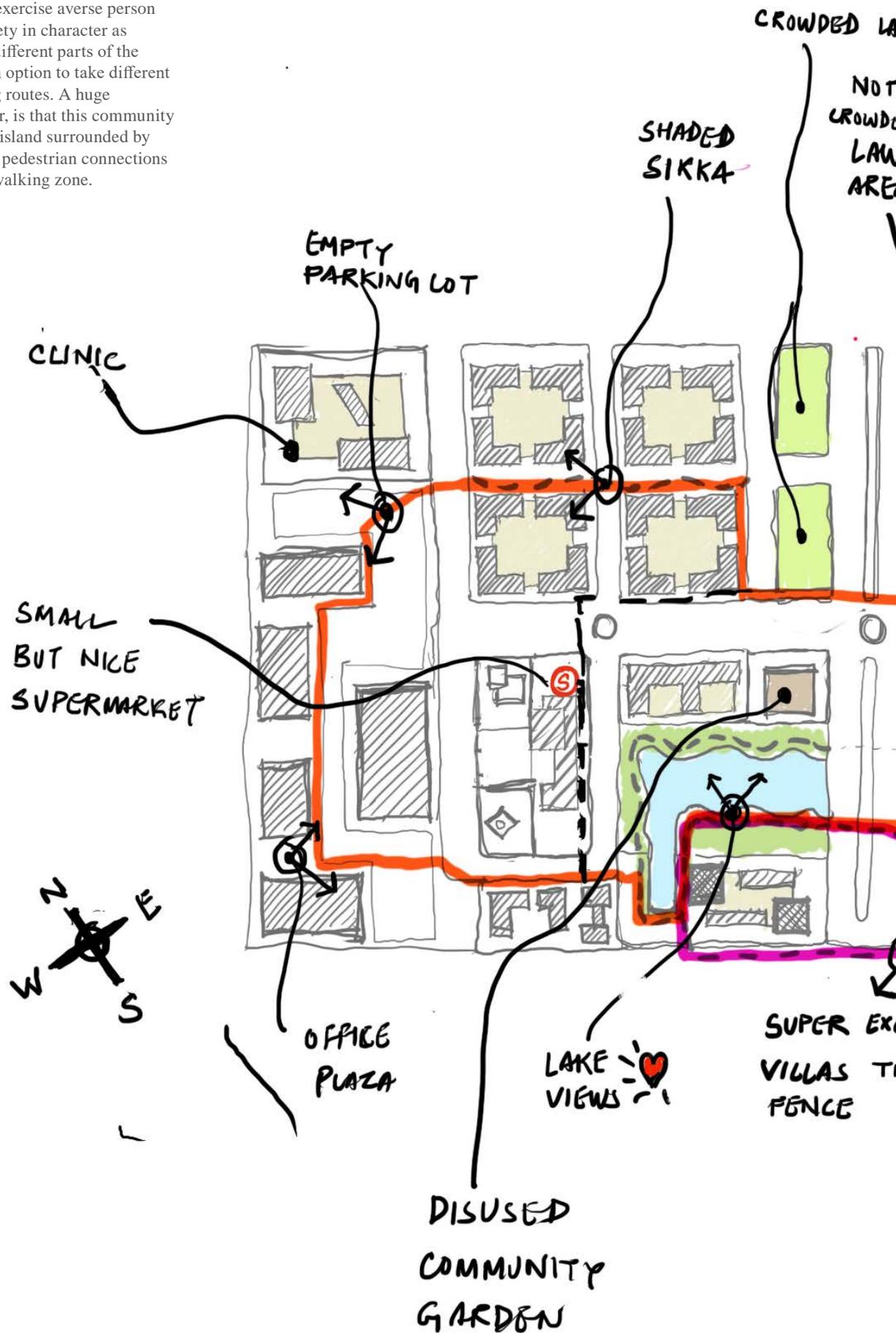
It wasn’t just the quantum of open space available but also the quality of it that made all the difference. **All open spaces are well shaded and well landscaped which has been a blessing in enduring UAE’s harsh summer weather. Trees planted over 15 years ago have matured**

into fully grown specimens, you are never far away from a shaded area.

We always had a great attachment to our neighbourhood but after living in it through these unforeseen circumstances has made us even more appreciative of it. Dubai is well known for its imposing skyline and flashy malls but this understated community is what matters the most for us.

EXPERIENTIAL MAP OF OUR '15 MINUTE' NEIGHBOURHOOD

Our daily bit of exercise often includes 30-40-minute walks. What keeps it interesting for an exercise averse person like me is the variety in character as we walk through different parts of the community and an option to take different equally interesting routes. A huge challenge, however, is that this community often feels like an island surrounded by highways limiting pedestrian connections to our 15-minute walking zone.



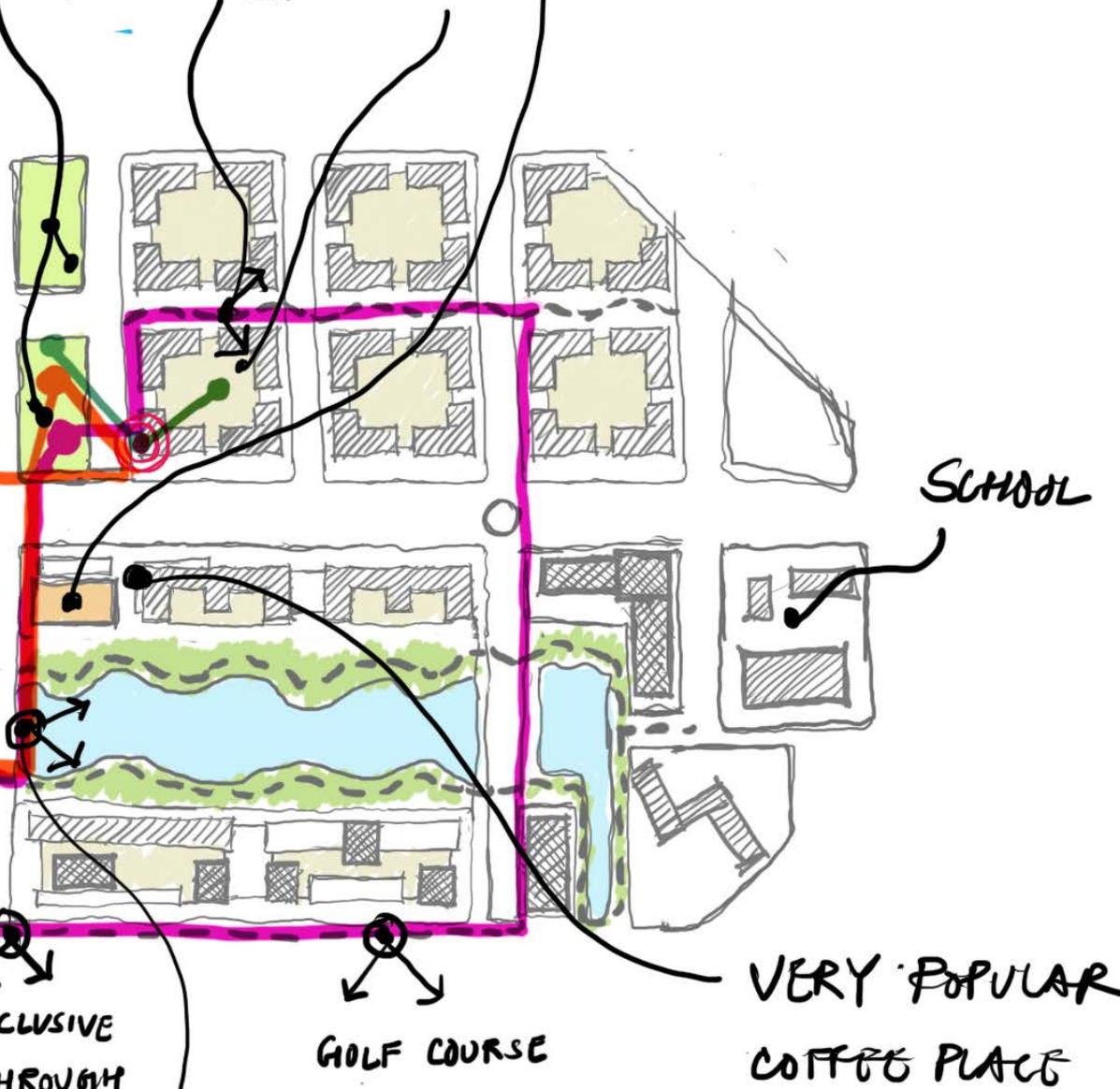
TOWN AREA

SO
ED
IN
A

PLAY AREA
(CLOSED)

SHADED
SIKKA

PODIUM



SCHOOL

VERY POPULAR
COFFEE PLACE

GOLF COURSE
THROUGH FENCE

LAKE
VIEWS

EXCLUSIVE
THROUGH



Jumeirah Village Circle, Dubai

Working from home

It had been less than a month since I moved into my new apartment when the COVID-19 lockdown started. I had unpacked all of the boxes in the bedroom, living room, and kitchen; only the small storage room remained. When the lockdown was announced I realised I couldn't procrastinate any longer. That room would become my new office. I cobbled together an old computer desk and my coffee table, and, with the support of a few stacks of books, soon had a makeshift standing desk. No one knew how long the lockdown would last, so **my workspace had to be as comfortable as possible – and completely separate from the rest of my home. At the end of the day I could close the door to the office and physically clock out for the day.**

In a corner of the living room that I designated as my new gym, I installed my bicycle and indoor trainer. Having them in plain sight

served as a reminder to stay active during these sedentary few months.

Living alone meant that not much else changed for me at home. My only house mate was my cat, Moomin, who found my new routine much more to his liking.

The lockdown

Jumeirah Village Circle (JVC) is a low-density neighbourhood, with lots of town houses and low-rise apartment buildings. **The large window in my office, which overlooks a row of town houses, became my gateway to the community. I grew to look forward to my neighbours' morning rituals, watching them hang their laundry or have their coffee on the balcony.** I'd never met them in person but seeing them every day helped me feel that I wasn't alone in my anxiety. Moomin also enjoyed the view, but his interest was purely pigeon related.

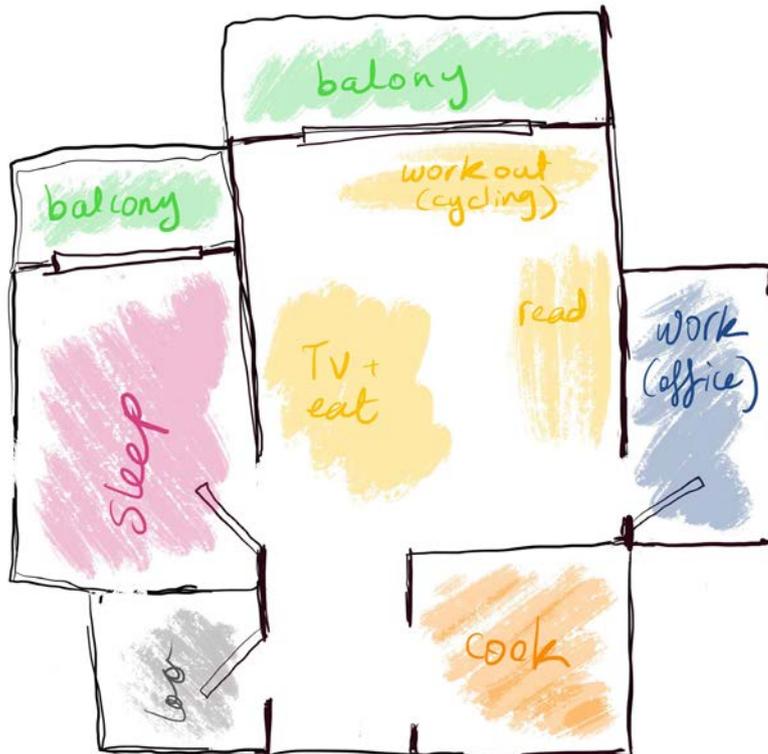
JVC is in a somewhat remote part of the city, and under normal

circumstance isn't considered a very convenient place to live. However, its remoteness and sparseness gave me a sense of security during the pandemic.

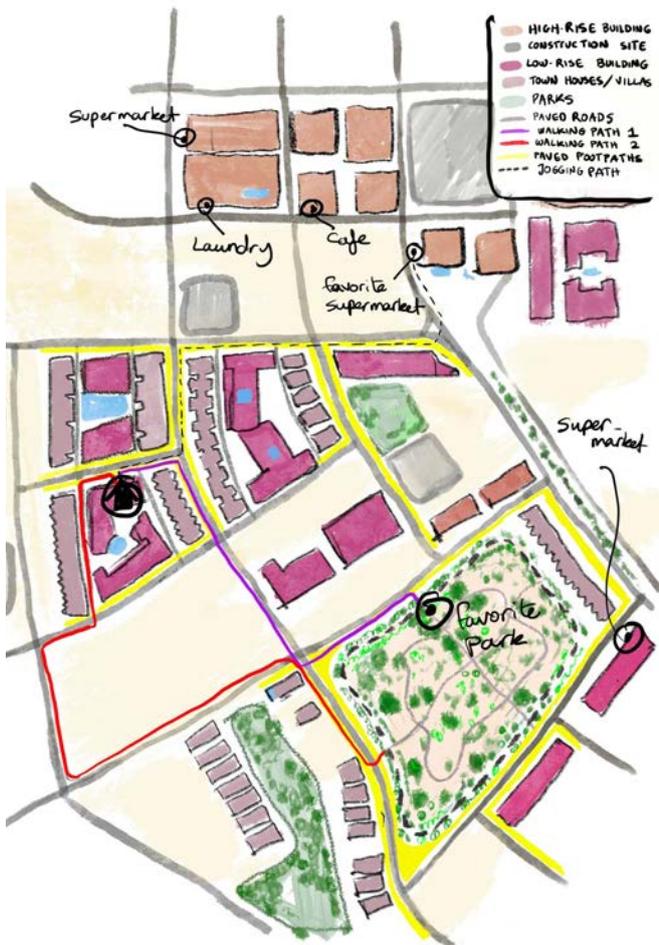
Before the lockdown, I had done my grocery shopping in person at one of the large supermarket chains. When movement restrictions were enforced, everyone turned to online shopping, and supermarket chains struggled to meet their delivery dates and keep their shelves fully stocked. **The smaller grocer's shops that dotted JVC proved to be more reliable, and I discovered a host of specialty food shops in my neighbourhood that I'd previously been unaware of.**

The new normal

With the lockdown lifted, life in JVC is slowly returning to normal. **Despite the hot weather, I've noticed an abnormally large number of joggers on the street, as if they're making up for lost time. Wide footpaths along the circular inner roads have**



THE APARTMENT



WALKABLE
PART OF MY
NEIGHBOURHOOD



PEOPLE WATCHING

encouraged all types of pedestrians, e.g. families with children, mothers with prams, and casual strollers.

The grid-like street network in JVC offers many route options, making it easier to avoid a crowded path. There are three parks within a ten-minute radius of my building, my favourite of which has a jogging track that I'm now taking advantage of. **I try to take a new route to the park every time to**

see more of my neighbourhood, and I've since discovered which streets have trees, which have the most continuous footpaths, and which have the least number of unbuilt plots. When I grow bored of the jogging track, depending on the time of day, the empty sand lots can be a great obstacle course to run through.

These moments of discovery change the way you feel about

your neighbourhood – you somehow feel a greater sense of ownership of the place you live.



Business Bay, Dubai

Working from home

Living in an apartment with every member working, we were not used to spending much time at home together. Our time was normally split between the office and going out with friends. So suddenly faced with the fact that our home would serve as our offices and recreation space as well, we prepared a few arrangements to accommodate. Luckily having a desk in the living room gave us an option for the first desk, and the dining table turned into the second desk in our living room. Sharing the same space for our work, we needed a more private space to take our calls, hence the bedroom was our call/meeting and our focus room, since the living room was the liveliest area. **Our balcony served as our daily dose of vitamin D and our outdoor lunch spot while the good weather lasted.**

Living in close proximity to the canal walkway was our breathing space and our post work change of scenery. As we spent more time near home, we noticed the planning of

the pedestrian paths was given little attention the masterplan of Business Bay. Yes there were bicycle lanes, but from the point we leave the house to reach the other side of the canal, we had to walk on the main street for lack of pavement space, and most of the time we were prompted to cross the street in an informal way, as the crossings were far apart and sometimes not linked to pavements.

The lockdown

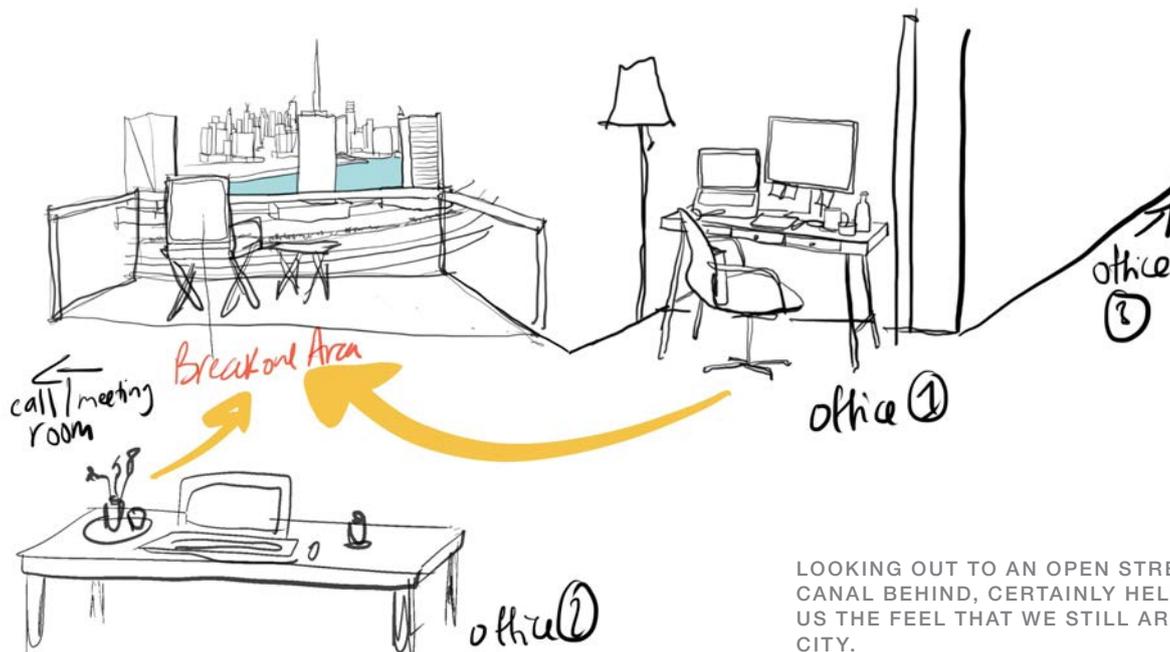
When we first heard the 24/7 lockdown restrictions were going to be implemented, we thought it would be too hard to do in our small apartment, **especially as we found pleasure in doing the small grocery and essential trips.**

However, it turned out to be the opposite, **we managed to get more comfortable in our small space. Having a somewhat spacious balcony gave us a breathing space and a link to the outside world, and we enjoyed the occasional clapping on each balcony every other night**

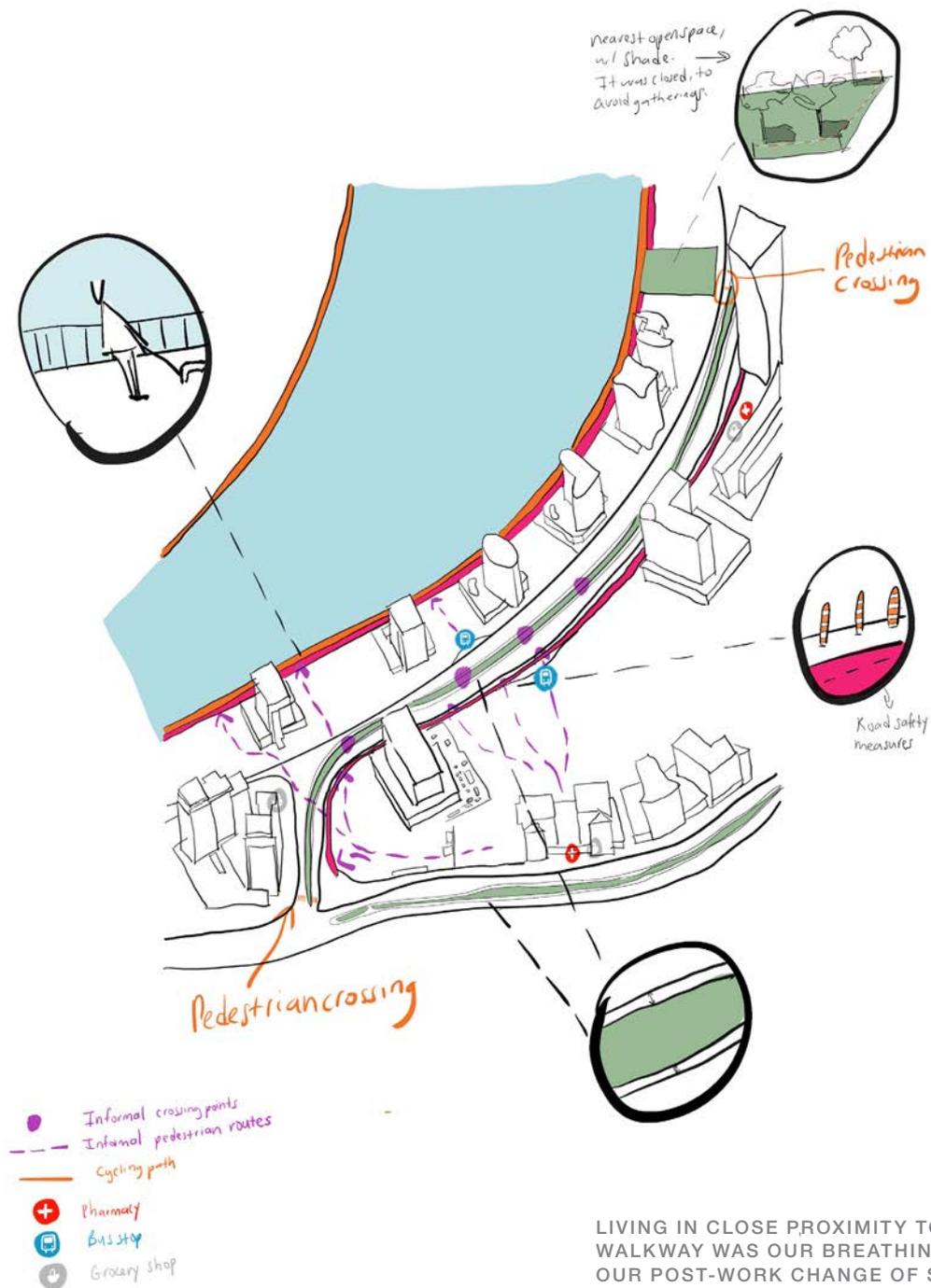
as a sign of gratitude to the health workers risking their lives.

Living in a high-rise tower, we did not have any relation to our neighbours and it did not evolve from that level during the lockdown. The building got a lot quieter and the few neighbours we had previously met in the common area were nowhere to be seen. The small grocery store in our building's ground floor became our new hypermarket, as it had the essentials and did not require any waiting for delivery. We also had two nearby mini supermarkets, that we could access (with a walking permit). **These small grocery shops were our saviour as any delivery at that time required at least a week to arrive.**

Even though we could not use the canal walkway next to us, we did enjoy overlooking it from our balcony and watching the occasional security patrols to ensure everyone is abiding by the rules.



LOOKING OUT TO AN OPEN STREET AND THE CANAL BEHIND, CERTAINLY HELPED GIVING US THE FEEL THAT WE STILL ARE LIVING IN A CITY.



LIVING IN CLOSE PROXIMITY TO THE CANAL WALKWAY WAS OUR BREATHING SPACE AND OUR POST-WORK CHANGE OF SCENERY.

The new normal

With the new normal coming upon us, we were a bit reluctant for a change of scenery and started heading to the closest public beach for a walk or even just to enjoy the view.

Our activities around the neighbourhood pretty much stayed the same. The busyness of the canal walkways in the final hour of curfew almost remained the same, but with more activities like cycling as the Careem hire bike amenities re-opened in our area.

Before the pandemic, I had never seen the cycle lanes in our area as busy as they are now, I think people have found greater joy in activities like this, as opposed to sitting in cafes at night or going to the mall.



Sports City, Dubai

Working from home

Working from home wasn't new to our small family. Kids at my daughter's age tend to get many sick days throughout the year. So, I had to practice some working from home before the pandemic. However, we were definitely not prepared for such a drastic "full-time, everyday over three-months and counting" working from home situation. **Coupled with a child who needs space (all the space!) and a small apartment, it was not an easy transition.**

Working in a vital sector, my husband continued to work from his office. I had to take care of my child and work at the same time. **This restricted the option of having a dedicated workspace and forced me to share any space with my child at all times. Every inch of our home became a 'live, play, work' space.**

In some instances, I had to use the kitchen or the balcony to make some calls and still keep an eye on my daughter while she played in the other room.

With time, **I realized the importance of having a dedicated space even if I only have the willpower to use it for a tenth of my overall working time.**

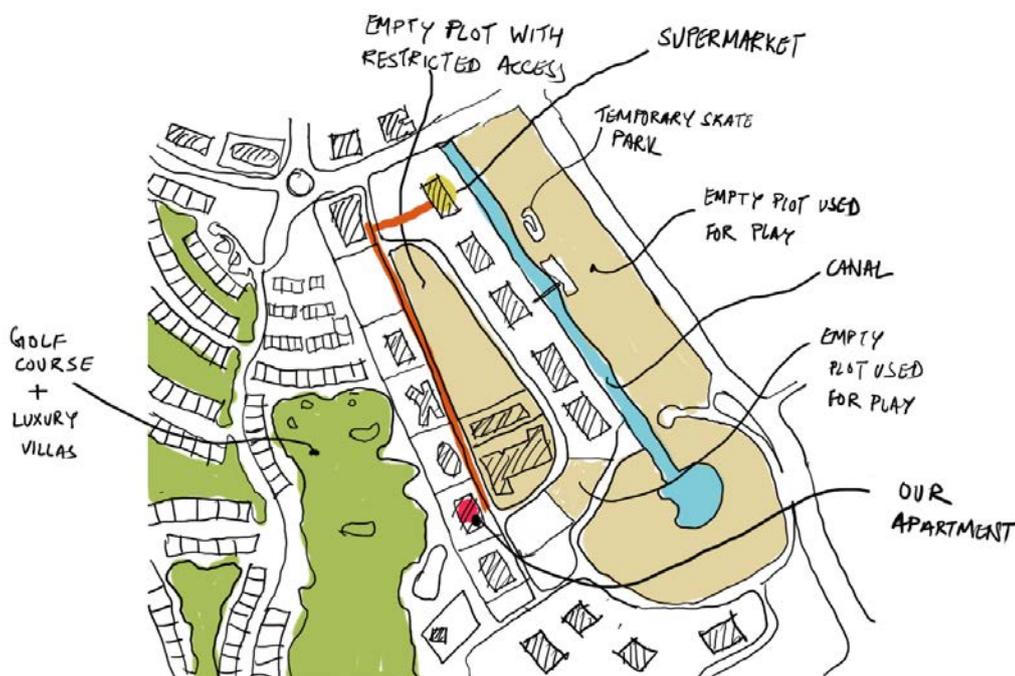
I needed a space that is comfortable, that was able to put me in a working state and help me be more productive despite all the distractions. So, I assembled my humble workspace comprising of two small, different size and height 'Hallway' desks and a stack of books. Simple but very effective.

The lockdown

While our working from home experience has remained the same for the most part, when the full lockdown in April started, all other aspects of our life started to drastically change. **We became more and more appreciative of our home space and even more of the extension of that: the balcony and views beyond. Sitting on the balcony or on the windowsill was the favourite part of my daughter's day.** It was evident that our neighbours felt the same way as people on their balconies was pretty much the only thing you could see

during lockdown. **This, in addition to the festive lights that ornamented these balconies, maintained the sense of community unity.**

We tried to limit our trips by ordering online but the options were limited in our neighbourhood and deliveries took very long and a few never arrived. So, we chose to walk to the nearest supermarket which is a 10-minute "rough and unsafe" walk from our home. As we didn't have any other outlet, we (me or my husband) tried to make the most of our few essential trips' experiences. This didn't last long. **As this supermarket started to become too crowded and difficult for shoppers to maintain a safe physical distance, we started driving to a larger and less crowded store that is located beyond a safe walkable distance given the limited, disconnected and narrow sidewalks.**



OUR NEIGHBOURHOOD:
ALL THE OPEN SPACE BUT
NOWHERE TO GO



RESIDENTS
APPROPRIATING EMPTY
LOT FOR PLAY



PAVED PARKING AND
UNPAVED SIDEWALKS



DRIVING TO A DIFFERENT PLACE SO
THAT WE CAN WALK

The new normal

When the lockdown was recently eased and life started to slowly go back to normal, our neighbourhood started to gain momentum again. However, this momentum and vibrancy was not the norm in our area. Before the pandemic, few people (mostly single or with dogs) would walk the streets of our neighbourhood. **Families with small children like ours would find it unsafe to walk on the pavement with the lack of safe and connected sidewalks.**

Over five years living in this neighbourhood, **I've witnessed countless times when a contractor**

unloaded those interlock tiles and it ended up being another on-street parking area.

With the continued closure of parks and other recreational areas, **we and other families in the neighbourhood were forced to utilise the available spaces to us to walk, cycle and play even if it was not designed for that purpose.**

We discovered a big unpaved lot near our home which people have started using regularly for so many different activities. We are unsure of the future plans for this space but the whole community is rooting for a much-needed park.

This experience was eye-opening and encouraged us to explore other nearby communities that we could potentially call our new home in the near future. **We looked for communities that are accessible, safe and comfortable for us as a family. We also looked for well landscaped areas providing good shade in the summer with playgrounds for our little girl to play but also bond with other kids in the community.**

Internal space is as essential. I would like to be able to see from the window while sitting on my desk working from home and have enough space for an actual "not wobbly" corner desk.



Marylebone, London

Working from home

I was in London for a few months when working from home started. My little flat had one couch in the living room that I would adjust for office use during the day. I placed both back pillows on one side and added smaller pillows on the couch base to compensate for the difference in height and depth between my couch (now a desk chair) and my dining table/desk. **After work the couch went back to its original condition. This helped me create a shift between work and non-work hours. Sometimes I placed a coffee table on top of my dining table to create a standing desk.** A shoe box and few books helped adjust the desk to my height and elevate the mouse pad.

I felt slightly disconnected from outside since none of my windows had a view of streets or parks. I could not see anyone outside and was living alone. The weather slowly turned from chilly to a nice breeze, so I kept my windows open most of the time. The fresh air and wind eased the feeling of being boxed in.

During Ramadan and Eid I decorated the wall behind me and discovered it added something to my backdrop for video calls so I kept them up. I also decorated the wall in front of me to lighten up my workstation and my visual field.

Over time I grew tired of my one sofa, if my time in London was not temporary I would have purchased more office furniture.

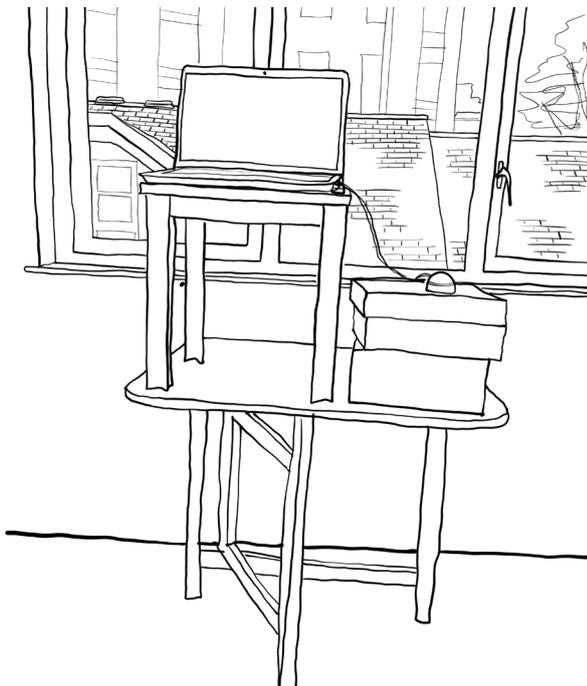
The lockdown

Living in central London proved very advantageous during the lockdown. There were a few supermarkets and pharmacies within a 15-30-minute walk in each direction of my flat. The network of streets and sidewalks was comprehensive and very pedestrian oriented. **Like pre-lockdown, walking around the city was easy and convenient. All the more since I was avoiding public transport and didn't own a car. The streets were dominated by pedestrians and cyclists since traffic was low. I had to remind myself to keep checking for cars before I cross the streets as**



I found myself casually crossing the streets on more than one occasion.

While I began purchasing most items online (an activity I was new to), grocery slots were very rare and difficult to acquire. They required a minimum cost per delivery which I -living alone- could not meet most of the time. There was also a significant number of people who are more vulnerable and needed these slots more, so I continued to purchase my groceries physically from nearby shops. I combined my one-hour a-day workout allowance with my grocery trips. **Walking around the neighbourhood with my backpack**



MAKESHIFT HOME WORK STATIONS, SITTING AND STANDING DESKS SOLUTIONS



PEDESTRIAN PRIORITISED
STREETS AND PUBLIC REALM
WITH FOCUS ON SOCIAL
DISTANCING



VISUALLY RICH PEDESTRIAN
STREET WITH NO ACTIVITIES,
RELIABLE FOR CONSTANT FLOW
OF PEDESTRIANS WITHOUT
POOLS OF PEOPLE

once or twice a week became my fun outside activity. I took different routes and went to different shops to change the scenery.

The new normal

As the lockdown measures started to ease and more restaurants and bars opened, and people met with some friends outdoor, the streets started to fill up. **Physical distancing became more difficult and I began avoiding the main roads and took secondary and tertiary roads around the neighbourhood and completely avoided Oxford street.** My walks increased to 5-7 days a week. The street became richer as

people watching was enabled again.

Pedestrianised streets and sidewalks were split for movement in one direction. For example, **the sidewalk on one side of the street was designated for people to walk east-to-west while the sidewalk on the other side of the street was designated for people to walk west-to-east.** This was assigned through stickers with arrows or footprints on the ground. Similarly, one direction movement around supermarkets was encouraged through floor stickers with arrows. Coloured lines were added in front of shops and restaurants to help people maintain physical distancing while standing in line. **Temporary**

fences were placed in the streets to decrease road width and increase sidewalks. Restaurants and coffee shops removed their outdoor tables and gave the area back to the sidewalks. Several public plazas installed hand sanitizer stations.

I adjusted my walks to go through all the pocket parks within my proximity. If one was too crowded there was always a next one. When streets became more crowded, I would go to the Regents Park which was large enough to be full and still allow for physical distancing.

Reflections & Recommendations

Despite our individual living situations and urban environments, there are a number of common themes that have come out of these stories. While the profiles of the contributors are by no means comprehensive or exhaustive in representing all parts of the UAE society, the common threads do point to certain qualities of personal and public spaces that are not only desirable but also to some extent necessary to prepare our cities in enduring the challenges surrounding the current pandemic as well as similar challenges in the future.

Here we describe common reflections as well as three recommendations to create stronger communities post COVID-19.

Reflections

Appropriation of left-over spaces

The challenges of physical distancing have brought in focus the need of greater amount of space for pedestrians, not only to move around but also for social interaction, exercise and play while maintaining the safety norms. This has highlighted the importance of left-over open spaces between and around buildings. Many people are already informally utilising these spaces as ad-hoc play and exercise spaces.

With the real estate demand changing in the UAE, there might be also be a strong case to turn some of the undeveloped plots spread across the city into parks especially in areas which have very limited open spaces. This would not only benefit the residents but also developers by making their communities more liveable and thus more attractive for owners and tenants.

Need for private and semi-private outdoor spaces

A large proportion of people in the UAE live in apartments. However, there are mid/high rise buildings that do not have balconies or even windows that open further than a crack. Private and semi-private outdoor spaces such as balconies, courtyards, and podiums not only provide a breather from the confines of our internal spaces but also provide options for people to socialise with their neighbours and encourage passive surveillance; thus, reinforcing a sense of community.

Recommendation 1: Create a robust Open Space Strategy

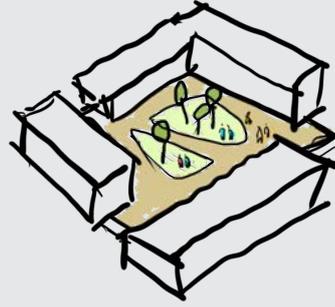
Open spaces play a significant role in our physical and mental wellbeing. In addition to formally assigned open spaces such as parks and playgrounds, planning for informal open spaces such as spaces between buildings, sikkak, podiums and terraces can be extremely important in providing places for outdoor activity and relaxation close to homes.

Private and semi-private spaces such as balconies, podiums and courtyards can provide options for outdoor activity in a relatively controlled environment. This hierarchy both, in terms of scale as well as public access is crucial to create a robust framework for wellbeing, especially, in situations such as the current COVID-19 pandemic where the formal open spaces may have restricted access or might pose a greater health risk to certain groups.

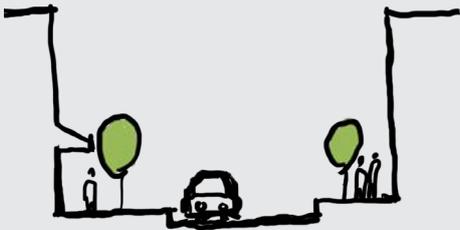
A well thought-through Open Space Strategy at a city or master plan level can be an important tool in identifying and providing an appropriate mix of open spaces to meet a community's needs, catering for a variety in size, public access, and function.



Balcony / Terrace / Garden



Courtyards / Podiums



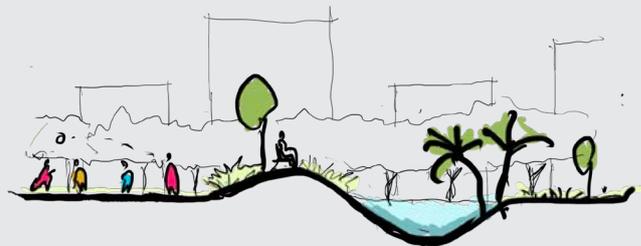
Street



Between buildings



Local Park



City Park / Nature Reserve

OPEN SPACE HIERARCHY

Reflections

Need for connected and comfortable outdoor spaces

Comfort, safety and a pleasing experience play a huge role for people in using the open spaces. Often many parts of the city or developments may have a high percentage of open spaces. However, poor design choices leading to a lack of safety, comfort and engagement for users, can render these spaces unusable.

The harsh summer weather in the Gulf requires greater thought and consideration of climate when designing open spaces, including streets. Street are not just movement and transition spaces but also places for social interaction and play and their design should reflect this multidimensional nature.

Need for safe and accessible spaces for children

Children need spaces to play and run around. Unlike adults, they cannot run on a tread mill or use cars to get around. They need open spaces and safe streets to be active and exert their independence even when they are as young as toddlers. The ability to use streets and open spaces with freedom also provides great opportunities for children via informal learning by observing their environments. The challenges posed by the current pandemic have highlighted how important the public realm around our homes is in facilitating play, exercise and informal learning.

Need for ‘weak-ties’

‘Weak ties’ refers to general acquaintances or even people with whom we just exchange smiles or a casual “hi” without any meaningful conversation. The current pandemic has yet again highlighted the challenge of isolation experienced by hundreds of thousands in our cities. For most people in the stories mentioned above, those informal connections they made even at a distance created a sense of belonging to a larger community.

Recommendation 2: Design places for human experience

Comfort and safety might be the most important factors with regards to the design of indoor and outdoor spaces. Providing diversity, both visual as well as in terms of density, uses and character, creates an environment that encourages continuous passive engagement with the built environment. Architectural and landscape design plays a significant role in making outdoor places pleasing to people and thus encouraging more interaction and physical activity leading to healthier lifestyles.

Creating a rich and engaging experience for pedestrians at street level requires designing at a human scale and responding to human senses. In addition to design articulation, bringing nature into our spaces is instrumental, especially in large arid cities where access to nature may be viewed as a distant dream for some people. This can be done both at a building scale via planted balconies, green facades, gardens; community scale, via tree-lined streets and parks; as well as city scale through access to nature reserves and the coastline.

Reflections

Need for local stores

The strict movement restrictions during the lockdown phase and logistic challenges posed by the pandemic highlighted the risks of reliance on large scale supermarkets and shopping malls for meeting convenience needs. The smaller supermarkets, corner stores, pharmacies and clinics became instrumental in providing people much needed services without having to travel long distances. Additionally, they also reduce reliance on personal vehicles by making it possible and convenient for people to access facilities on foot or bikes.

Need for active transport spaces

A connected and safe pedestrian and bicycle network is instrumental in giving people the option for active mobility. Poor pedestrian environments can often force people to use cars, thus creating a self-fulfilling perception of high car dependence that is often blamed on the weather. Pedestrian and cycle networks are most effective when they are not merely leisure routes but are planned to be safe and convenient routes connecting to key destinations and public transport nodes.

Recommendation 3: Provide choice through a mix of uses and mobility modes

Mixed use development is a key consideration in creating complete communities. However, the right composition of uses as well as typologies is instrumental. Provision of a shopping mall within a community which only requires a small supermarket and convenience retail may tick all the boxes but can immensely change the character of the development. Well-distributed smaller corner shops, small supermarkets, pharmacies, clinics and restaurants can provide much better service and easy access to pedestrians without attracting a large vehicular traffic. Additionally, such uses also help activating the public realm thus making it vibrant as well as safe.

A substantial proportion of urban areas within the Gulf region have been designed for cars, leading to poorly designed and disconnected pedestrian spaces and to limited public transport options. This often means that people are forced to use personal cars even when trips could have been made comfortably by foot, bike or bus had the required infrastructure been present. Furthermore, due to the physical distancing challenges posed by COVID-19 with regards to public transit, the choice of movement for most people has almost become binary: either they can move around in the perceived safety of their personal vehicles exacerbating street congestion and pollution or they can use active modes of mobility which are healthier for both individuals and the environment.

In context of the current pandemic the concept of a '15 minute city' has gained a lot of traction. Legislators and policy makers in prominent cities such as Paris and Milan are already looking at ways incorporating this concept where daily urban necessities are within a 15-minute reach on foot or by bike. There is a real opportunity for UAE to lead the way in this region for providing 'complete communities' through planning for the right mix of uses and a choice of mobility modes, in both new and existing neighbourhoods.

Start now

COVID-19 has slowed down our cities. While this has posed many challenges, it has also created an opportunity to use this down time to implement strategic interventions that will allow cities to recover better and bounce-forward into the direction of wellbeing and liveability.

For example, a number of car parks remain under-utilised as people continue working from home. Programming temporary uses for underused car parks as well as leftover open spaces to create pop-up parklets and exercise pods for the local community can create much needed amenities in areas lacking open space. Such temporary measures can then be evaluated and refined over time to create longer-term interventions that nudge people towards healthier lifestyles and make cities more attractive and competitive.



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