

Preparing NYC for what comes next: How the five boroughs will and won't bounce back as the worst of the coronavirus pandemic ends

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A sign alerts customers that a business in Queens, which has one of the highest infection rates of coronavirus in the nation, is closed on April 3, in New York City.(Spencer Platt/Getty Images)

New York City has been dealt a body blow by the COVID-19 pandemic, with more than 10,000 deaths and counting in the first wave, and the possibility of a second wave coming. This 21st century has not been kind to New York: 9-11, the economic and financial crash of 2008, Superstorm Sandy and now the coronavirus, have all wreaked different kinds of havoc on the city. With each punch, cynics counted the city out. And each and every time, it roared back faster and stronger than ever.

This is not the first time the city has been hit hard by infectious disease. In 1702, Yellow Fever swept through the city, killing 10% of its residents in three months. The Cholera Epidemic of 1832 took the lives of 5,000 Manhattanites.

The 1918 Spanish Flu took the lives of 30,000 New Yorkers, many more than are projected to die from this first wave of COVID-19 — at a time when the city was home to considerably fewer people.

Members of my grandparents' generation, who migrated from Southern Italy through Ellis Island to Newark, lost numerous family members to it, including infants and young children. Despite that pandemic, New York solidified its position as America's largest city and eclipsed London as the world's leading economic and cultural center.

The same pundits who wrongly believed that terrorism, financial collapse and natural disasters could stop the city's growth now believe that the fear of the disease will empty out the city, driving huge numbers of people out to the suburbs and rural hinterlands.

There is no doubt that New Yorkers are afraid today and will continue to fear for the safety of their loved ones. Their justifiable fears of crowded places, and especially of public transit, are likely to linger for some time. Many who could work remotely left the city as the virus descended, heading to vacation homes or with friends and family in the suburbs, beach towns or rural retreats.

Depending on how long the threat of the virus is with us, some may indeed decide to relocate more permanently, a trend that will be reinforced by the increased capacity to do remote work. This is especially true of families with children, already chafing at the expense and unaffordability of the city, who may put an increased premium on a house with a lawn and backyard for their kids to play.

The silver lining in this is that the city may experience a short period in which housing becomes more affordable for middle- and working-class people. The over-built luxury segment of the housing market is already faltering, creating a possible supply of more affordable housing. With reduced demand for office and co-working space, some commercial real estate may be repurposed as residential, bringing prices down still further. Even as families depart, ambitious young people will continue to flock to the city to make their careers and realize their dreams.

Key industries like finance, entertainment, media, arts and culture and the high-tech sector are also likely to stay in the city. Because these industries turn on the clustering of talented people, proximity to customers, and close personal networks for deals and career advancement, they may even concentrate more in Manhattan's leading business districts. As a result, residential neighborhoods that are walkable and bikeable to Midtown and the financial district may become more highly desired than they are now.

The city's ultimate recovery will turn on how quickly and safely it can reopen. This won't happen all at once, like turning on a switch. Pandemics almost always occur in waves. This one will likely last anywhere from 12, 18 or even 24 months, depending on how soon effective anti-viral treatments and ultimately a vaccine is developed.

The city's future depends on how it can best mobilize and marshal its assets to get back-up-and-running safely during this period. Even as the state and city are all out to mobilize to combat the virus, preparation for reopening and recovery must start now.

As a large global city, airports, train and transit form the veritable backbone of the city's economy. Its nodes are also petri dishes for contagion. JFK, LaGuardia, and Newark airports, Penn Station, Grand Central Station, and PATH and subway stations must all be prepared to reopen safely and securely.

This will require a bigger retrofit than they received in the wake of 9/11. Crowded train platforms, security and customs lines, waiting and baggage claims areas will all have to be redesigned for social distancing. Some of this is as simple as painting lines or circles on the floor, DIY versions of which are already cropping up in grocery stores. Temperature checks and health screenings may also be needed in some places.

Similar kinds of retrofits will also be necessary in sports arenas and stadiums, convention centers, performing arts centers, Broadway theaters, museums, universities, large commercial buildings and shopping malls, which pack a lot of people into confined spaces.

Protective gear will be needed too, and it need not look like hazmat suits. The city's fashion design and clothing manufactures can be called upon to design protective gear that is visually unobtrusive — something the city's world-class fashion industry can help design.

So much of the city's character flows from its vibrant arts and culture scene and its countless mom-and-pop stores, bodegas, restaurants, cafes, bars, boutiques, barbershops, beauty salons, gyms, and small factories and makeries of every kind — the neighborhood-based enterprises that Jane Jacobs so vividly described.

Imagine block after once-vibrant block, in venerable neighborhoods like the Upper East Side to lively places like Brooklyn's Williamsburg, from melting pots like Flushing, Queens to food oases like Arthur Ave. in the Bronx, all of them lined with blank and shuttered storefronts.

And now try to imagine how those losses would reverberate throughout the city's economy, and how deeply the city's waiters, dishwashers, cooks, retail clerks, hair cutters, fitness coaches, manicurists, taxi drivers, delivery people and small-time entrepreneurs will suffer.

So many of these small businesses, which were already hard-pressed by the city's exorbitant rents, will not survive pandemic. In addition to grants, loans and other forms of immediate financial assistance, they will need technical assistance on how to reopen safely and securely as well as financial assistance to help them weather the storm.

In the long run, New York must face up to its deepening class divide as never before. The "tale of two cities" often discussed by Mayor de Blasio has taken on new meaning as the COVID-19 pandemic has killed black and brown New Yorkers at twice the rate of whites. This is apparently both a product of poverty and the jobs that minorities are more likely to do.

While so many of New York's professional class are able to work at home, a large share of the workforce do jobs that require very high levels of physical proximity to each other and the public — many of them, like nurses' aides, retail clerks, food handlers, delivery people and cleaners, on the front lines of the pandemic. New York also has the largest percentage of workers who rely on public transportation. Some of these front-line workers have been organizing and striking for better pay and greater protection in a way that is eerily reminiscent of the organizing efforts of the International Ladies Garment Workers union in the wake of the Triangle Shirt Waist Factory fire a century ago.

New York will revive and thrive, as it always has. But in the meantime, there is a lot that we can do to ensure that it does so in as safe, efficient a way as possible. Perhaps we can become a fairer, less exploitative and more equitable city as we do so.

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