

# What Will Become of Cities?

Everyone was supposed to be back at the office by now. It's not really happening, however, and this has huge implications for the future of the American city.

Part of the reason is the cost, not only the finances of commuting but also the time. Another contributing factor is the crime and homeless population, which can be quite scary. Between inflation, rising poverty, substance abuse, and rampant post-lockdown incivility, the cities have become far less attractive. The impact on the commercial sector is becoming ever more clear.

Leases are coming up for large office spaces in major cities around the US. But there is a serious problem on the way. Occupancy of these offices is dramatically down in most places around the country. The decline is 30 percent on average and much more in San Francisco, Chicago, and New York City. That's for now but many tech companies and others have laid off workers, meaning that even the companies that renew will be looking to downsize dramatically and with shorter-term leases.

Dylan Burzinski of Green Street [writes](#) in the *Wall Street Journal*:

*“What began as a two-week work-from-home experiment in March 2020 evolved into an entrenched hybrid/remote work environment. Despite return-to-office mandates, office-utilization rates (how many people are physically in an office on any given day) have failed to pick up meaningfully this year and are still 30% to 40% below 2019 levels for most office markets across the country. Employers have shed office space as a result, helping send the amount of office space available for lease shooting up to historic highs across most major U.S. cities. The so-called availability rates are hovering at 25% on average compared with slightly above 15%*

*before Covid—and things could get worse before they get better.”*

You might say: there is nothing wrong with remote work. This would have happened regardless. Cities as we know them will pass into the night eventually as the whole world becomes digital.

That might be true in the long term, but it would have been far better to happen organically and not by force. That was the essence of what Burzinski calls the “pandemic” but of course it wasn’t a pathogen that sent millions out of the cities and leaving for the suburbs. It was the forced closures and then vaccine mandates and compulsory segregation by vaccine status.

For a time, cities like New York City, Boston, Chicago, and New Orleans were using state power to exclude shot refuseniks any normal public accommodations. The unvaccinated could not go to the library, the theater, restaurants and bars, and museums. It’s hard to believe that this actually happened in the land of the free but that is the real history of just two years ago.

Then once workers got a taste of remote work, and they fully realized just how ridiculously annoying the commute and office culture truly is, they would not and could not be pushed back into a full-time relationship with the office. That has left half and fully empty skyscrapers in multiple cities in the US.

The signs of doom are everywhere. A [poll](#) of New Yorkers has 60% saying that life quality is falling and this is in part due to far less quality foot traffic. San Francisco has [record](#) office vacancies. Even [large cities in Texas](#) have 25% vacancies. Population declines in many cities are [continuing](#) long after pandemic restrictions have been lifted.

And [here](#) is Boston.com:

*Absent flexibility from building owners, businesses worry that downtown will see even more vacancies and that tourists and office workers slowly returning to the neighborhood will have less reason to make the trip. Consider the worst-case scenario: Downtown falls further into post-pandemic disarray or a long-feared "doom loop."*

*Like many big-city downtowns, Boston is still in the midst of its recovery after COVID. Many offices and ground-floor spaces remain empty, and buildings lately have sold for sizable losses. Fears about what downtown will become were only exacerbated by the bankruptcy of the coworking giant WeWork, one of the largest office tenants in Boston.*

How far this will go and what the implications will be is anyone's guess. Will the skylines change? Are we looking at demolitions of some of the grandest structures in the coming years? It's not entirely out of the question. Economic reality can be like a brick wall: when the expense consistently outpaces the revenue, something has to change.

Why not convert office spaces to domestic apartments? It's not so easy. The buildings put up after the Second World War were made for air conditioning and had wide footprints without windows in a large swath of the space. That simply doesn't work for apartments. Cutting a giant hole down the middle is technically possible but economically expensive, requiring the rents in the resulting properties to be in the luxury range.

The next phase will be the fiscal crisis. Dying business districts, declining population, empty office buildings all mean falling tax revenue. The budgets won't be cut because of pension obligations and school funding. The next place to look is to the capital for bailouts and then of course the federal government. But those will only buy time and certainly won't address the underlying problem.

What bugs me most about this is just how much it fits with the dream of Anthony Fauci as he and his co-author [explained](#) back in August of 2020. Writing months after lockdowns, with American cities on fire with protests, he wrote that we need “radical changes that may take decades to achieve: rebuilding the infrastructures of human existence, from **cities** to homes to workplaces, to water and sewer systems, to recreational and gatherings venues.”

If your view is that the real problem with infectious disease traces to “the neolithic revolution, 12,000 years ago,” as they claim, you are going to have a serious problem with cities. Recall that this is the guy who said we need to stop shaking hands, forever. The notion of a million people working and socializing together in a few square miles of space is something that would run contrary to the entire vision.

Klaus Schwab of the WEF, too, has an issue with large cities, too, of course, with constant complaints about urbanization and the imagined world in which large swaths of our lives are spent online rather than with friends.

So a tremendous downscaling of cities might have been part of the plan all along. You will notice that none of the cities on the chopping block seem to be offering a viable plan for saving themselves. They could dramatically cut taxes, deregulate childcare, open up more schooling options, turn police attention to petty crime and carjacking instead of traffic fines, and open up zoning. That’s not happening.

New York is going the opposite direction, having effectively banned AirBnB in the city. Why did the city council do this? Because too many renters with space found it more lucrative to offer short-term rentals and overnight stays rather than make long-term contracts for residents. This is a sneaky way of pillaging property owners, not exactly a good plan for attracting real estate investment.

All of this speaks to a much bigger problem, which is that the whole political system seems to be engaged in an amazing game of “Let’s pretend” despite the overwhelming evidence of the disaster that has befallen us. No serious efforts are underway to reverse the damage of pandemic lockdowns and vaccine mandates and segregation. This is partly because there has been zero accountability or even honest public debate about what governments around the country did from 2020-2022. We live amidst the carnage but justice seems farther off than ever.

Yes, a complete reversal is possible but it seems ever less likely, especially with the continued efforts to purge from public life those who dissented during the crisis, as well as the intensifying censorship on all mainstream media platforms.

Once you step back from it, nothing really makes sense. One might suppose that when a whole society – and really globe – embarked on such a crazy experiment and utterly failed in every way, that there would be a major effort to come to terms with it.

The opposite is happening. Even with America’s treasured cities in such grave danger, so much of it provoked by terrible policies over four years, we are still supposed to either not notice or chalk it all up to some inexorable forces of history of which no one has any control.

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