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The cure for the social trauma left by COVID-19? Finally putting the needs of people first

By **Joseph Hall** Feature Writer

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Pain fades. But trauma stays.

It follows us down roadways and sidewalks, into our schools and neighbourhoods — it changes the very infrastructure of our lives.

The legacy of social trauma left by [COVID-19](#) will do this quite literally, experts say, shaping the way we plan and build Toronto and its surrounding regions over the coming decade.

“Overall what we have to do is get our minds around the fact that it’s not the ‘things’ that matter anymore, it’s the people,” says James McKellar, a real estate and infrastructure expert at York University’s Schulich School of Business.

“And we have to begin to understand that cities are for people and that we have done a terrible job in accommodating certain people,” McKellar says.

A more comforting, accommodating city, attuned to pedestrians and cyclists and less dependent on hurtling trains and beeping traffic, would be the best therapy for [COVID-19](#)’s trauma, McKellar and other city planning experts say.

It won’t be new-subway sexy.

Rather it means wider sidewalks, safer street signals and crossings, neighbourhoods filled in with “gentle development,” better parks and hundreds of additional kilometres of bike paths and lanes.

It will also mean the eradication or fundamental alteration of the shameful long-term-care facilities we offer our elderly — places whose human warehouse horrors and pitiful staffing strategies the virus so vividly exposed.

And all together — due to the need for closer, safer communities and the overcoming of crushing government debt that COVID-19 survival required — that means a scaling down of infrastructure projects and ideas as we move toward [Toronto 2030](#).

“I’m not saying don’t build the transit and so forth, but let’s not assume that the big problems are going to be solved by big infrastructure,” McKellar says.

“In many ways, the problems are going to be solved by a lot of small things that just make the city more livable.”

This might mean something as simple as building more playgrounds, McKellar says.

Or, says Ryerson University's Cherise Burda, it might mean something as radical as replacing a planned subway expansion with a far cheaper dedicated bus-route strategy; so-called bus rapid transit (BRT).

BRT provides buses with their own laneways, separate from those bearing automobile traffic.

"If we're looking at limited resources (because of COVID-19 expenditures), there's never been a better time to look at the business case for building transit infrastructure," says Burda, head of Ryerson's City Building Institute.

"And I think a really good example of that is the Scarborough subway. I know people don't want to talk about that again, but that's a \$5-billion project," she says.

Burda says that money would be better spent on building a vastly cheaper and longer bus rapid transit network — like the one that criss-crosses Ottawa — in Scarborough and other underserved areas of the city.

The three-stop Scarborough line could take 15 years to build; bus rapid transit routes could be moving before the decade is through, and provide faster transit along poorly served corridors like Jane St., Dufferin St., Steeles Ave. W. and Finch Ave E.

"And you could do all of that for less than the cost to build six kilometres of Scarborough subway," Burda says.

She also says the city should more seriously pursue its existing cycling plan, updated last year, which would place every Toronto resident within one kilometre of a designated cycling path.

The University of Toronto's Eric Miller, a planning and transportation expert, says many of the things on his list of infrastructure priorities would have been there pre-COVID-19, and that the virus has only highlighted their importance.

Like Burda, he would include far more buses, with underserved neighbourhoods in the city's outskirts at the top of the list.

"We've always been so fixated on, 'Let's build the big subway, let's talk about spending tens of billions of dollars,' " says Miller, director of U of T's Transportation Research Institute.

"But the really big impact we could have on improving travel in this region ... is much better surface transit," he says.

This would include in particular a far greater number of buses along existing roadways in the city's suburban regions, running with traffic-signal priority to make them move more quickly, Miller says.

For people living some distance from bus stops, which tend to be on arterial roads in the suburbs, scheduled ride-sharing programs could take passengers the "first and last mile" of their daily commute, he says.

"The importance of transit has been highlighted by COVID-19, and we have this huge question of, 'How do we move people if we can't crowd them onto buses?'" Miller says.

He says expanded and faster bus service would allow people to more easily physically distance on the vehicles, and bring more equitable transit to areas where many of the essential workers who are bringing us through the pandemic live.

"And surface transit is something you can do ... in very short times," Miller says.

"So over the next 10 years, we could dramatically improve how we deliver surface transit, particularly to places like Scarborough and Etobicoke, not to mention Mississauga and so forth."

Miller's infrastructure list for the next decade would also place decent, affordable housing near the top.

"We know we have a housing problem, certainly in the city of Toronto, more generally in the region," he says. "And we talk about it, but we don't do anything about it."

The virus has only highlighted the perils of this inaction.

"In these COVID-19 days, where is the disease spreading? The disease spreads first of all where too many people have to ride buses (together), but also where too many people are overcrowded," Miller says.

Packing large or multiple families into small apartments or houses is a key disease vector, Miller says.

And these tightly housed people are often among the essential workers who are lifting us through the current crisis.

"Hopefully we've come to appreciate how important, how essential these sorts of workers are — who we pay minimum wage and who we don't orient our policies toward, whether it's housing or transportation," Miller says.

"COVID-19 is highlighting how important these things are and how inequitable in particular these things are."

The inequities revealed by COVID-19 have been most stark and frightening in the region's long-term-care homes, several of which have been decimated by illness and understaffing.

"It's been a shambles clearly. The devastation that has occurred with COVID-19 in these homes is just heartbreaking, to say the least," Miller says.

"Clearly that system is completely broken and needs complete reinvention," he says.

The first order of business, Miller says, would be to shift the entire long-term-care system to the public sector, where much better oversight and wage and working conditions can be enforced.

On the infrastructure side, however, Burda says the homes must also shrink in size and be enfolded within local communities.

"Rather than warehousing seniors in big facilities in remote areas, we need to think about making them part of the neighbourhood," she says.

"More facilities, better rooted in the neighbourhood, rather than bigger facilities far away."

However it's done, Miller says, better long-term care is a moral imperative.

"If nothing else changes five years from now, if we don't have a vastly superior long-term-care system for the province, then shame on all of us, we have failed miserably," he says.

Among other infrastructure considerations, McKellar says COVID-19 trauma has almost certainly ensured people will be more comfortable gathering outside rather than indoors for the foreseeable future.

And that means Toronto should launch European-style projects to reclaim roadways from cars — either permanently or periodically — in many parts of the city.

"What you find in Europe is that on a nice day a whole area of the road gets taken over by seating," he says.

"We've already said the car gets about 50 per cent of the city and we get the rest. Well, we might not be able to give the car 50 per cent any more."

A fluid transition from cars to patio seats on the roadways might also require getting rid of sidewalk curbs, as some European cities have done, McKellar says.

"We've chopped the city up and said, 'Well, even if there are no cars on the road you can't go on the road, it's called jaywalking,'" he says.

"So we're going to have to change our attitude toward the public environment and small things. Like, on every street, do we really want those big curbs is something we'll have to decide."

McKellar also sees the potential to bring amenities closer to the mental comfort of our homes through a better, more intense use of the city's school sites.

"Another example I would use is the stupidity of school sites ... we have huge assets in the school systems," he says, noting that many of these sites could accommodate far more city services.

"We're still in silos, where we build a library, we build a school, we build a health centre. Why can't we start to put those things together and make it convenient for people?"

Indeed, McKellar sees such integration as a partial solution to the long-term-care crisis — especially for facilities that offer retirement-home levels of care.

"Right now, the models that we use is old people go to old folks homes, children go to daycare centres," he says.

"Well, my mother was at a home in Calgary where the daycare centre was in the seniors home, and it brought such life and joy to those seniors."

Burda says neighbourhoods could also become more self-sufficient and livable by supporting locally focused infrastructure like cycling lanes and "gentle" low-rise development to fill in the city's existing residential neighbourhoods.

She says Toronto should pursue sidewalk, bike route and development projects that would place everyday needs like groceries, medical care and schools within 15 minutes of every resident.

Small-bore infrastructure projects such as intersection and crosswalk improvements that make it easier and safer to travel on foot — as laid out in the city's Vision Zero plan — would help in this quarter-hour goal, Burda says.

McKellar says a reluctance to build things like integrated school and library nodes or smaller-scale infrastructure was often based on a desire to maximize the economic stimulus that public works could provide.

"But let's not use (that) excuse, let's go back and use the infrastructure we have and make it more people friendly," he says.

“And all the new infrastructure should exemplify new ways of thinking that put people back in the equation.”

Such smaller-scale infrastructure building would also be easier on a hugely depleted public purse, as governments climb out of the fiscal canyon that COVID-19 continues to dredge.

There is a huge reserve of private capital, especially within big pension funds and the like, that is eager to fund new for-profit infrastructure, McKellar says.

“For example, the Canada Pension Plan Investment Board is heavily investing in charging stations for electric vehicles,” he says.

“There is something that is going to have a huge environmental benefit if we can entice more and more people into it. Electric buses would be another one.”

Miller says the promotion of electric vehicles and the infrastructure needed to support them across the city and beyond would be a major step in the fight against climate change — an even more existential threat than COVID-19.

“We have to keep our eyes on what’s coming down the pike, and what’s coming down the pike is climate change,” he says of our infrastructure planning.

“We’ll be able to get our buses, but the buses may be underwater because the roads keep flooding.”

Private institutional capital could also flow into new and better data delivery if — as some expect — governments choose to regulate such systems, McKellar says.

“I think we’re coming to the point where we’re saying, ‘Shouldn’t this be a regulated utility?’ ” he says.

“And if it is a regulated utility, a pension fund would say, ‘That’s perfect for us, we’ll build a system and the government will set the rate.’ ”

Of course any infrastructure planning for the city and beyond depends on getting the virus under control.

And though people are optimistic that a vaccine or effective therapy will be found in the near future, COVID-19 could linger for years.

“Right now, we just don’t know,” McKellar says.



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