MIT Portugal Partnership (MPP2030) Research Seed Fund Program
Title: A Cross-Cultural Exploration around the Future of the City and Urban Life in the Post-COVID Era
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Research objectives

The MIT AgeLab collaborated with the University of Coimbra and the University of Porto to explore in both the U.S. and in Portugal people's perspectives on residential density and desirability of urban areas in the post-COVID-19 era. The goals of this work were to understand better how the COVID-19 pandemic affected people's valuations of different aspects of residential density and urban life and their preferences for residential location, and how these perspectives and preferences might be shaped by individual factors including people's age/generation. The intent was to examine questions around the future of urban life – particularly as many people, especially in the U.S., seemed to be moving away from urban areas during the pandemic, and as people in both the U.S. and Portugal shifted to increased

working from home. The intent of the work is to contribute to MPP2030's goals of sustainable cities through understanding how the COVID-19 pandemic may have shifted people's preferences around residential density, if at all, and how related effects of the pandemic, including around employment and the use of technology increasingly to access goods and services, contribute to or pose challenges to the development of sustainable cities.

Two demographic trends converged in the twenty-first century: increasing global lifespans resulting in a rapidly growing older adult population; and the growth of urban centers and development of megacities. To support a high quality of life for older adults aging in cities, mobility is essential: allowing people not only to access basic necessities but also engage in meaningful activities and social encounters. Into this intersection of demographics, however, beginning in 2019 has the emergence and spread of the novel coronavirus which has led to the global COVID-19 pandemic. While COVID-19 has disrupted almost every aspect of life across the world, due to the nature of the virus's airborne transmission, dense residential locations – namely cities – have been particularly affected, resulting in significant changes in lifestyle and access to amenities for urban residents.

Prior to COVID-19, many cities continued to be attractive places for residents to live. The residential density of cities enabled them to offer their residents: more opportunities to access public good and services; more rich, stimulating and diverse environments; greater safety; better access to employers and to work; and more opportunities for innovation. Concerns around exposure to and contracting COVID-19 (combined in some markets the high costs of urban real estate), however, have led – at least anecdotally – a number of people to leave the cities to live in less dense areas – in suburbs, smaller cities, and rural areas. Further, many employers have shifted to employees working from home during the pandemic, and some employers – and employees – have signaled that their preferences are to continue remote or hybrid work schedules even in the wake of the pandemic. Finally, during the COVID-19 pandemic, in many cities the cultural and social amenities they offered were halted, and some content was delivered in alternative ways, such as via Zoom or other online platforms. As a result of these shifts, many people may no longer have or feel a need to live closer in to urban centers in order to create a manageable commute to work, and access to some of the cultural features that once made cities so uniquely attractive may now be broader.

Research plan

To explore the future of cities and urban life in the post-COVID-19 era, we undertook qualitative and quantitative research in two phases.

Phase 1 – Qualitative research: Semi-structured interviews

One focus of this work was to learn from people of different generations about their experiences living in urban areas during the pandemic and their resulting preferences around population density. Questions also included how – and if – people got around outside of their homes, and what their assessments were of their outdoor environments. To understand these experiences, a total of 16 qualitative interviews were conducted in spring and summer 2021 with people in the U.S. and in Portugal (eight in each country), stratified by gender and across four generations.

Results from the interviews suggested that:

- Participants in both Portugal and the U.S. valued living in urban areas for their centrality and the access they provided to different goods, services and amenities; features of the environments that participants identified as negative included traffic noise and spaces or buildings that were less well maintained or had been allowed to degrade.

- In both countries respondents described shifting away from more communal modes of transportation (if they used them at all) to ones that reduced people's exposure to others and to COVID-19. Months into the pandemic, however, a few people reported resuming using transit, but these were more likely to be in the U.S. than in Portugal. People in both countries reported using personal vehicles, if they had them, to accomplish work and shopping trips.
- Changes in walking behavior around the pandemic related to participants' perceptions of their neighborhoods. Respondents who felt their neighborhoods had a lack of usable green space were more likely to report spending less time walking in their neighborhoods.
- Some participants from both countries reported an increase in the use of online shopping during the pandemic, with fewer Silent generation members across both countries doing so. While respondents from both countries noted that the COVID-19 pandemic sparked an awareness of the need to support small local businesses and shops better, participants from Portugal were more likely to note this consistently and to report that they were more likely to plan to shop at local places in the future.

Phase II – Quantitative research: National surveys within each country

In the second phase of this research we drew on the results of interviews to create a questionnaire in order to conduct online surveys with participants in the U.S. and in Portugal. The goals of this phase of the work include exploring the following:

- Overall satisfaction with life, residential location and mobility;
- People's preferences for moving or staying in their current location and current home;
- The value people place on access to different community amenities and services;
- The impact of the pandemic on transportation use, modes, and preferences for accessing goods and services; and
- Willingness to share personal data with private companies versus governments.

At this time, the research team is pending language translation of the questionnaire from English to Portuguese, with the expectation of fielding the online surveys in the U.S. and in Portugal in March 2022. The vendor has already been contracted to complete the work.

Outputs from the research

In addition to a poster the team created for the MIT Portugal conference in fall 2021, the U.S. team has a draft report of the results from the U.S. interviews. The team expects that the results from the national surveys will be used to generate one or more publications.