

#1 - Social distancing and sociability needs: new urban social relations during lockdown... and for how long?

Julien Barbier (Institut pour la ville en mouvement-VEDECOM) - May 15, 2020

The coronavirus crisis and the population lockdowns that have spread across the planet in the space of a few weeks initially seemed to mark the end of cultural events and social gatherings. Considered “nonessential”, described as “biological bombs”, these rituals of day-to-day existence (church services, concerts, [weddings](#), sports events, [festivals](#), etc.), indispensable as they are to social life, were cancelled or postponed. In some cases, events could be held virtually, thereby maintaining a certain social proximity, despite physical separation.

This exceptional situation has nevertheless been an opportunity to contemplate how, all around the world, people have invented forms of communal ritual that obey the rules of physical distancing while aspiring to social togetherness. New forms of sociability have developed, with their codes of sharing and interaction. As the lockdown is relaxed, though restrictions remain in force, some initiatives will perhaps become a long-term feature of cities.

The street belongs to all of us, since it belongs to no one?

From the start of the crisis, street traffic (whether on foot, bicycle, scooter, car...) became an infringement of the “stay at home” rules.

Unable to venture into public space, urbanites turned to their immediate environment to share moments of togetherness and relaxation **from their windows and balconies**, between neighbours, where they [shouted out messages of support](#) in China, [improvised concerts](#) in Italy, [applauded health workers](#) in Spain, [organised games](#) in France...

The street – apparently – no longer belonged to anyone, except perhaps to the **police** charged with enforcing the hygiene rules, sometimes brutally, but also sometimes more playfully. In [France and in Belgium](#), in [Spain](#), in [Panama](#), in [Colombia](#), and also in [India](#), we saw police officers sing and dance to entertain the public, but also to communicate awareness-raising messages.



A twig's-length aperitif between neighbours in Bella in Italy.



Street performance by police, in Majorca in Spain.

In United States, the streets have been symbolically recaptured through “[Chalk your walk](#)”, a movement that has gone viral on social media, where residents and passers-by decorate the asphalt on sidewalks and roads with messages of comfort and words of support for frontline workers.

In France too, where every evening the inhabitants of a street in a suburb of Dunkerque [put on fancy-dress](#) to form a **drum band** with their wheelie bins.

And in [Lyon](#), in [Saint-Brieuc](#), or in [Bordeaux](#), **street criers** with special permits for work-related travel have been reciting poems and reading out small ads and messages to residents at their windows.



Two sisters draw in chalk on the road, in Mesa in Texas.



In Coudekerque-Branches in France, the inhabitants emerge into the street every evening at 8 pm to drum on their wheelie bins.

Together as an overriding motif

The health situation has challenged our capacity to change our behaviour in the interests of all. Citizens found themselves torn between the need to act and the need to limit the spread of the virus. As a result, new forms of cooperation and altruism developed across the world: support by citizens and organisations for care workers, the homeless, the elderly, to relieve them from fatigue, hunger, or isolation.

In Germany, the practice of “gabenzaun” (“gift fences”) took hold [across the whole country](#): on the railings around parks, at subway entrances and in public spaces, people would hang bags containing clothes, nonperishable food items, and other necessities **for the most deprived populations**. The phenomenon spread to neighbouring [Austria](#) and [Switzerland](#).

Similarly, in Italy’s big cities, the inhabitants left out “[hanging baskets](#)” with provisions for the homeless. A few towns [in France](#) followed suit.

In France too, the “[For Them](#)” initiative, widely publicised on social media, encourages individuals to prepare meals which are then directly delivered to the homeless by volunteer cycle couriers. In other words, a “Community Deliveroo” model, which took off in [several cities](#).



A Berlin organisation starts up a *gabenzaun* on the forecourt of a church.



Volunteer cyclists deliver meal baskets to the homeless in Toulouse.

Beyond the moments of togetherness applauding healthcare workers every evening from the windows, many initiatives in support of **health professionals** were launched early on in the crisis: [delivery of meals](#) prepared by locked down restaurants, loans of [vehicles](#) and [accommodation](#), [childcare](#) or pet care, [online yoga classes](#)... Initiatives that were sometimes extended to [other "second line" professionals](#) during the pandemic.



Vehicle loaned by an electric scooter design and rental firm to a night porter at Poissy Hospital.



A luxury hotel in Enghien-les-Bains gives free accommodation to a healthcare team from the south of France.

There were also support initiatives **for seniors** in retirement homes, particularly hard hit by the pandemic, where visitors were forbidden: [flower deliveries](#), [loans of tablets](#) for communicating with family and friends, [concerts](#) under the windows, [virtual gym classes](#). Sports men and women in all disciplines and of all levels also launched [challenges](#) to raise funds for their local hospitals and retirement homes.



Concert by a violinist for retirement home residents under lockdown in Chambon-sur-Voueize.



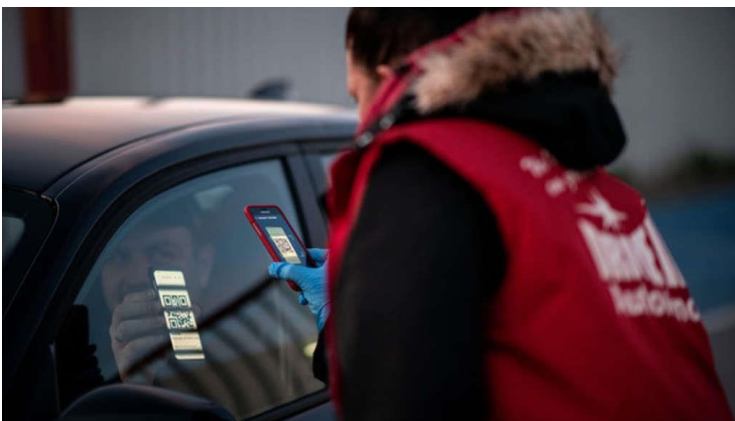
In Dordogne, a runner raises funds by completing a marathon in the retirement home where he works.

The car as a protective shell

Observing the interactions of pedestrians in public space, the sociologist Ervin Goffman described them as 'vehicular units': "The individual as a pedestrian can be likened to a pilot enclosed in a soft and poorly protective shell: clothes and skin".¹

During the pandemic, in order to a direct part in events, many people swapped this soft shell for the solid casing of the private car, thereby also swapping one kind of confinement for another.

Attendance at **drive-in cinemas**, in freefall for several decades, took off again [in the United States](#), [in Germany and in South Korea](#)... And it is beginning to emerge in other countries such as [Norway](#), [Lithuania](#) or [Iran](#). Some restaurant owners have even [converted their car parks into drive-in cinemas](#), while [Vilnius Airport](#) did the same with its runways.



Entry tickets to the Autokino cinema in Essen in Germany are scanned through the glass.



Opening of the world's first drive-in cinema on an airport runway in Vilnius in Lithuania.

While cinema is the most widespread form of drive-in, **other communal activities** were converted to the system during the pandemic: [theatres](#), [concerts](#), [opera](#), [football matches](#)... and even [strip-clubs](#)! In this way, **large car parks** took on a new function. In practice, a spectator in a car simply needs to be [close enough to the stage to see and hear](#) (by partially opening the car window). In some cases, for example at a

¹ Ervin Goffman, La mise en scène de la vie quotidienne tome 2, Les relations en public, Editions Minuit, 1973

concert or religious gathering, the audio is broadcast by a local radio station so that people can follow the event through their in-car sound systems. And sometimes too, especially for sports events, the spectators are forced to follow the event second-hand, on a giant screen located in the stadium car park.



Drive-in theatre in Prague in the Czech Republic.



Denmark is going to allow fans to follow football matches in their vehicles on screens erected in stadium car parks.

All these events could simply have been filmed and watched live or recorded, on TV or on the web, in the (relative) comfort and safety of people's homes. And that was already true before the pandemic. But it is clear how much these gatherings are essential to individual and social welfare and profoundly rooted in our lifestyles.

The most flagrant example of the **collective nature of these practices** can be observed in [drive-in religious services](#) in the US (which also exist [in Germany](#) or [in South Korea](#), and now [in France](#)), where congregations have invented a **[system of codes of interaction](#) with the priest and the other participants**, involving the use of the car horn, windscreen wipers, direction indicators... This “guide to drive-in prayer” is notably posted on **social media**.



The guide to Drive-in religious services in the US: honk once for an “amen”.



Drive-in church in Seoul, in South Korea.

Other initiatives have emerged that **transpose the key events of ordinary life to wheels**: [birthday parades](#), [weddings](#), [funerals](#), [demonstrations](#), [graduation ceremonies](#)... Once again, social media play a pre-eminent role in informing people where to go and what to do, and in sharing memories after the event.



Motorised demonstration on May 1 in Seattle in the USA, in front of Amazon's head office.



Drive-through wedding reception in Johor Bahru in Malaysia.

While enabling people to take part in events of different kinds in exceptional circumstances, the use of the private car as a social distancing tool raises **environmental issues** in a time of serious ecological transition. In addition, despite their ability to bring people together, these practices are necessarily restricted to car owners, and are therefore a **source of exclusion**. Finally, this “sociability of the car horn” falls far short of contributing to the well-being and serendipity that give cities their uniquely urban ambience.² It only very partially replaces the **need for non-verbal communication, the sensory nature and diversity of human interactions**.



In Louvière in Belgium, teenagers build a substitute vehicle to join the line in a drive-in McDonald's.



Drive-in rave-party in Schüttorf in Germany

And now?

Lockdown does not mark the end of **social rituals in public space**. These rituals are **adapted, reconfigured, recreated** differently, to meet the fundamental human need for togetherness, culture and proximity.

Epidemics of this kind seem likely to recur or even get worse. We therefore need to move quickly to pick out – from the creative profusion of the initiatives that have emerged – those that are healthy, frugal and

² François Ascher, L'âge des métapoles, Éditions de l'Aube, 2009

inclusive enough to fit into an ensemble of solutions for maintaining our social practices and the civility of our society. So that we can continue to greet each other, to come together, to surprise each other and to interact in public space and in our mobile practices.

Institut pour la ville en mouvement-VEDECOM (IVM – City on the Move) works on issues around the sharing of the street, and the emerging forms of urban civilities associated with current changes in mobility practices. At the start of the crisis, IVM also launched an international observation and discussion platform to spot, in the exceptional situation of a global pandemic, the emergence of practices and initiatives that could leave lasting traces – even in less dramatic times – and give impetus to transformations that are already in gestation.