

The Museum of Care

Imagining the world after the pandemic

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Or more precisely, we are imagining a sane world after the virus, one where, instead of just trying to put things back the way they were, we act on what we've learned. For instance, a huge proportion of office work, especially administrative, managerial, marketing, legal, finance, consultancy and the like have shown themselves to be pure bullshit. If they disappeared, it would either make no difference or the world might even be a slightly better place. The proof is that during the crisis, most of them did disappear and the world kept spinning. So imagine for a moment we are sane and don't just go back to pretending there's some reason to have all these people bluffing to make us think they work all day but instead got rid of the bullshit jobs. Well, one question would be: what would we do with all the buildings where they used to work? Obviously, those actually useful workers who kept us alive and cared for during the epidemic – doctors, nurses, cleaners, couriers, electricians, farmers – don't need giant glass buildings to make them feel important. Some can be blown up. This will be good because it means there will be less energy use to keep them heated, cooled and so forth, which will reduce carbon emissions. But surely we wouldn't want to blow up all of them.

After the French and Russian revolutions, the royal palaces were turned into state museums. That might point to one sane way to use them. But there's also a crazy way: a return to "normalcy". The model for this might be what happened after the large-scale deindustrialization of western metropolises, when former factories and warehouses were turned into private art centers, offices and condominiums for the kind of people who worked in them. Many find it hard to imagine this won't happen again, if there is rapid de-bullshitization of work, but no real change to the financial system, or structures of wealth and power more generally. Empty offices would be bought up by investors, who would turn them into expensive condominiums or private art spaces whose presence will give the real estate additional market value. The only alternative usually put on the table is if the state takes over everything, either in the form of state socialism (which is basically just state-monopoly capitalism) or its right-wing "national-socialist" variant (in whatever updated 21st century form).

In that future, those empty offices not used to house bureaucrats or secret police will be turned into state museums: conservative, elitist institutions whose general ambiance balances somewhere between that of a cemetery and that of a bank. We would like to insist on the possibility – perhaps not the likelihood, but at least the possibility – of sanity. Imagine that the

experience of lockdown and economic collapse actually allows us to see the world as it really is and we acknowledge that what's referred to as "an economy" is simply the way we collectively keep each other alive, provision each other with the things we need and generally take care of one another. Say we also reject the notion of social control.

Prisons, after all, provide food, shelter and even basic medical care. Still, they are not "caring" institutions. What they provide is not care because real care is directed not just at supplying material needs, not even just to allow others to grow and thrive, but also, to maintain or enhance their freedom. Imagine we jettison the idea of production and consumption being the sole purpose of economic life and substitute care and freedom. What would we do with the buildings then?

In a world built around care and solidarity, much of this vast and absurd office space would indeed be blown up, but others could be turned into free city universities, social centers and hotels for those in need of shelter. We could call them 'Museums of Care' — precisely because they are spaces that do not celebrate production of any sort but rather provide the space and means for the creation of social relationships and the imagining of entirely new forms of social relations.

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