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Covid-Stroll #4: CITY AGAIN

Walking around the downtown Urbana-Champaign, IL, with an idea of documenting the covid-19 pandemic impact on the city, its people, and businesses made me a ‘para-reporter’ exposed to [Stan Ruecker and Jennifer Roberts-Smith’s](https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled-aa1769f2-6c55-485a-81af-ea82cce86966/section/fc008ab5-502a-4073-8624-fb24ba243dbc) ways of experiencing.

This time, I had a sharpened vision to look for negative and positive cues of the pandemic. The former is definitely in abundance with people distancing themselves, businesses struggling to operate in a new reality of empty seats and tables. The downtown here is famous for its variety of restaurants that each foodie would enjoy. Yet, during the pandemic, most of the restaurants are empty inside; some even have chairs stacked together, making sitting on them impossible—most of them offering food for pick up. The emptiness is also visible outside of the restaurants. In fact, the ‘positive’ also connects to ‘emptiness’ as there are fewer lines to wait for favorite pick-up food and more open parking spots.

Nevertheless, the first picture above, provides some hope for the future as we see the construction crane in the back, pointing out to development projects taking their place despite the pandemic.

Covid-Stroll #3: TWIN-CITIES — A DOUBLE DOSE OF COPING WITH Covid-19

In this report, I will assess the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Urbana-Champaign, UC, (Illinois) downtown, and connect my observations to a previous stroll through the University of Illinois.

UC is of this perfect size—you can walk around and easily find parks, shops, restaurants, things to do and at the same time not get overwhelmed by the volume of all of that as in the big metropolitan area. According to Wikipedia, the twin-cities of Illinois heartland are not relatively big in terms of the population—having 122,305 people. Therefore, everything in the downtown is more or less an extension of the campus. Nomen omen, this district is called “Campustown.”

Since campus and downtown are almost one organism, the streets are filled with students and university staff, most of them following the Covid-19 safety protocol. **Walking around makes us sometimes forget about the pandemic, yet be quickly reminded by people wearing masks and hanging posters on every entrance to store and restaurant requiring people to have face-covering.**Observable are sporadic ‘hordes’ with masks — an interesting showcase of a mélange between old and new normal. And ‘trios’ of mostly overconfident males who, for some reason, assume herd-immunity before the vaccine invention. The heart of UC, Green Street, is a place filled with restaurants (mostly Asian) and these days they all operate in a ‘for pick-up mode’ (with some generous covid-promotions available). Due to the pandemic, there are more parking spaces open and more empty spaces around restaurants and less occupied bus stops and buses per se.

All of that well speaks to [Stan Ruecker and Jennifer Roberts-Smith’s piece,](https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled-aa1769f2-6c55-485a-81af-ea82cce86966/section/fc008ab5-502a-4073-8624-fb24ba243dbc) especially to its “impact assessment list.” There are “in/voluntary physiological” reactions when you ‘automatically’ fix your mask while entering the crowd, or avoid it altogether by switching the side of the path walk and “directing perception” to potential dangers. Of course, these aspects apply only to some while the Murphy’s Bar is still carefree well populated, though with all windows open. Nevertheless, our perception of downtown has been shifting. Too many of us, including myself, downtown became an arena of ‘essential duty’—while walking to/from work, picking food, buying groceries, or medication. **The entire aspect of ‘fun’ or ‘stroll for a stroll’ has been diminished. But, we all know it that it will not last forever**, at least we hope.

This time, being reminded about the nature of this assignment, I walked with a ‘radar’ on. Perhaps this is the default for journalists…? To some extent, it is not the most desirable mode of experiencing the city as ‘if you a hammer, everything looks like a nail’. If we look for the impact of covid, everything is perceived in binary ‘zero-one’ terms. Yet, it also gives some sense of purpose and meaning to the entire experience of being a chronicler. To conclude, UC is quite bright despite the pandemic; new places are rising, and almost all businesses survived. **Unfortunately, 20 people lost their lives due to covid, and this makes UC emptier.**

**Sources:**

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Covid-Stroll #2: STILL ON THE CAMPUS

Every time I go to the campus to take photos, the weather is very gloomy. Everything is in somber hues. If almost coronavirus-reality does not want to be portrayed in bright shades. Yet, I still do hope that behind most masks hides a smile. In fact, Covid-19 also mobilizes us to act, as we are the hoping ‘machines’ for betterment. My most significant discovery of this outing relates to this notion: 1667 little markers stuck into the quad lawn. Each was symbolizing one student infected recently with covid. Each being a reminder that learning or socializing can result in disease. Each being a reproach to the university’s administration for despite doing everything, still not doing enough. This outing also reminded me of my last time at my own campus in March. That day a group of students performed a bizarre dance on the roof-top of one of the academic buildings. They were not only bizarre but also naked. Since then, surreal pictures stopped to surprise us; some places we go could stage for the Chernobyl tv-series, and yet in that dance and the dissent on a quad is also something very bright, the bright side of our humanity.

Covid-Stroll #1: CAMPUS

Last week, I read in one out of million emails concerning covid and campus life the word — “unprecedented.” I also some time ago watched a YouTube film of someone trying to explain to herself from January 2020 how 2020 unveiled. All of that what happened is, in fact, unprecedented to all of us.

I was privileged to spend the considerate time of my life on campuses, and now walking around the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, I do feel the ‘unprecedentedness’. 18 testing tents all over the campus, countless number of posters, stickers, signs — “wash your hands”; “wear your mask”; “get tested”; “stay six feet apart.” I walk among the people with half-covered faces. No more smiles in return for a ‘*hello*’. No more ‘*high-fives*’. And even, no more preachers on the quad (at least during the first week of school). To be frank, I am quite thrifty, so I always loved free stuff — all the gadgets from campus organizations given at the beginning of the semester. Today, I got only a brochure on how to self-monitor my health. Seeing and writing all of that made me a bit nostalgic… because, I love academia; especially now, when I am getting a bit older and engaging with the spirit of an energized community of students and faculty, I always consider so rejuvenating.

Yet, there is also hope. And, the biggest hope in all of that gives the quad. What the quad looks like today? There are people from all over the United States and the world coming to one place to study and grow (despite limited flights and all migration hassle). It exemplifies the strive to become a maker/creator of your own future. Of course, this comes with a price tag as US education is not free, but to some, various scholarships made it possible to pursue their dreams. They come to the quad with friends, partners, or alone to create the community and fulfill the need for a social ‘animal’ to be social. But someone else is missing in addition to the preachers. I used to also meet here people of socio-economic disadvantage, some of them homeless, some looking for a safe place to rest. Now, the campus is closed to all of them, for you cannot enter any building if you are not tested and have it indicated on your cellphone’s app. But, the strive for social justice continues some people still put with chalk political messages on campus pathwalks, or engrave them inside the restrooms. The maker inside us is what “keep[s] hoping machine running,” as Woody Guthrie said. After this walk, my machine runs faster.