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The Death and Life of the Central Business District.

Offices are not going back to the way they were pre-pandemic, and neither are the downtown neighborhoods that house them.

Just last spring, a chorus of pundits loudly proclaimed a sweeping urban exodus and the impending death of cities. Now, just slightly more than a year later, our cities are springing back to life. Sidewalks are starting to bustle; restaurants, which have spilled onto the streets, are teeming with patrons; museums and galleries are reopening; and fans are heading back to baseball parks, basketball arenas and even outdoor concert venues.

But one area of urban life where the pandemic is poised to leave a far bigger mark is on the places where we do business. The ongoing shift to remote work challenges the historic role of the Central Business Districts — neighborhoods like New York’s Midtown and Wall Street, Chicago’s Loop, or San Francisco’s Financial District — as the dominant centers for urban work.

These signature skyscraper and corporate tower districts that define the skylines of great cities, and are often synonymous with downtowns, will have to adapt. But far from killing them off, the shift to remote work will ultimately change their form and function in more subtle ways. Given their strategic locations at the very center of major metro areas, Central Business Districts are perfectly positioned to be remade as more vibrant neighborhoods where people can live and play as well as work — a leading-edge example of what many urbanists are now calling 15-minute neighborhoods. And with conscious and intentional action on the part of urban leaders and assistance from the federal government, these CBDs can be rebuilt in ways that are more inclusive and affordable.

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