Public health issues are closely related to the design and planning of the built environment. There have been several pandemics in the history of humankind. Three pandemics occurred in the last century, with the Spanish flu, Asian flu (1957) and Hong Kong flu (1968). The Spanish flu pandemic is thought to have been the single most devastating outbreak of disease in human history, causing some 50 million deaths worldwide. Pandemics can occur unpredictably and cause widespread diseases [1]. However, from the year 2019, the contagious disease COVID-19 quickly affected the entire world and challenged some established practices in architectural and urban planning and design. Altered circumstances not only affect people’s lives, habits, and environments but also require a reconsideration of various aspects, including the tools and intended outcomes of the processes of (re)forming these environments.

After a period of the extraordinary measures and restrictions imposed on most communities across the globe to protect public health during the COVID-19 pandemic, the world has seemingly returned to the normal mode of operating in many places. In their everyday routines, people can, again, practice in-person experiences, socialise, travel and perform other activities in the ways known prior to the pandemics. However, below the surface of apparent normality, the long-term consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are being recognised. There seems to be a broader understanding that a simple “back to normal” approach is no longer an option, and the lessons learnt during the pandemic must lead to more profound changes in how we live and organise our living environments. Much research has addressed the medium- and long-term consequences for various disciplines including urban planning and design. Dealing with the complex overlap of the spatial, social and economic aspects of the future of cities, research and practice are additionally challenged to find new solutions to other ongoing and emerging issues, such as environmental pollution, climate change, ecosystem disruptions, the mass extinction of living species, rising socio-spatial injustices, a decline in democratic practices, growing geopolitical instability, and increasing resource scarcity, to name a few [2]. A worldwide public health emergency once more reminded us of the need for a comprehensive approach to spatial planning in order to sustain the gains of civilisation while maintaining environmental balance in the longer term.

This Special Issue was initiated to present some relevant research questions and provide adequate responses to reveal the characteristics of the built environment in circumstances characterised by the presence of massively infectious human diseases in combination with other challenges for contemporary communities. It brings insights from the Central- and Southeast-European context, a region characterized by a variety of socioeconomic, cultural and political situations within the (post)pandemic context. The articles
cover concerns regarding heritage evaluation and cultural landscape analysis, shifts in housing concepts, in-depth understanding of working at home, the need for vertical greening, the importance of visual perceptions from apartment windows, and guidelines for urban environments proposed in light of COVID-19.

Krajnik et al. [3] illustrate a case study from a secluded remote settlement of Lubenice on the Adriatic island of Cres in Croatia. Even if the pandemics made many people exchange their urban places of residence for more remote places, their research illustrates the ongoing struggles to regenerate such remote places, which have, for decades, faced developmental stagnation, continuous demographic decline and the decay of building stock. They highlight the need for a methodological approach based on an understanding of the historical development and of the natural and humanmade features of the cultural landscape. Based on the comprehensive approach, different developmental scenarios can be proposed, but always within the basic framework of protecting the valuable natural and humanmade characteristics of the place.

The possible shifts in the current housing concepts are discussed by Bojović et al. [4] for the case of the Montenegran capital city of Podgorica. They developed a possible model of the resilient adaptation of residential buildings and neighbourhoods that is based on the flexibility of the apartment units, the existence of common areas in multi-unit buildings and direct contact with nature. In the comparative study of the present theory and practice of housing development with those deployed in the second half of the twentieth century in Montenegro and the region, they conclude that the past ones were more adequate in the context of resilience. They argue that improving the resilience of housing would consequently increase that of the communities and, thus, better prepare them for future challenges similar to COVID-19.

The article by Čok et al. [5] sheds light on the post-transitional context of Slovenia. The authors indicate that working from home is not a new concept, but what is new is the increased interest in the field. The normative provisions have only recently begun to address the spatial and programmatic scope of working from home. Through the application of GIS analytical techniques, the authors used morphology and building typology data to understand the extent of the phenomenon in Slovenia in the past decades. They conclude that the extent of business-related activities in residential areas is rather high, but it differs according to the distance from the functional centres. To further improve the conditions, there is a need for clearer program regulation and monitoring of the spatial situations to support the concept of working from home in the future.

The potential increase in working from home means that the daily routines of many people will be limited to certain parts of cities, and consequently, the spatiofunctional characteristics of such places will influence the quality of life and health of the users even more. This is addressed in the article by Gantar et al. [6], describing a study of the vertical greenery in urban areas. In the example of the Slovenian capital city Ljubljana, the authors examine the possibilities for the implementation of vertical greening. They observe that, even if the city follows the concept of sustainability-oriented urban development at the strategic level, there is a lack of support for vertical greening at the actual legislative and administrative levels. At the same time, their analysis of the physical and functional characteristics of the urban fabrics shows great potential for the implementation of vertical greening in the city once the ownership, management, and economic issues are resolved. To accelerate this process, the authors suggest looking at some other good practices in comparatively similar contexts that can be taken as examples.

The perceptual qualities of the built environments have gained much more attention during the pandemic. Being confined to the limited areas of their home territories during the most strict lockdowns, people have become aware of the qualities of the perceptual dimension of the built environment. Drobne et al. [7] address a sporadically discussed topic of visual planning and mark the view from the window as an important parameter of living comfort. They focus on dense urban environments and study the perceptual elements of window views. Based on the analysis of the design elements in window views
that can trigger negative reactions from viewers, they show that a negative response to a window view depends not only on a short distance between buildings, but also on the visual aesthetics—for example, the composition quality, the surface characteristics, the presence of greenery and the maintenance of the environment seen through the window.

The Special Issue is concluded by the contribution by Lekič Glavan et al. [8], which addresses the changes in human lifestyles and usage of urban living spaces. Among others, they observe that some activities have been moved from the inner to the outer spaces as a consequence of the pandemics, which demands that urban planners pay greater attention to outer spaces. Their research reveals that there is a consensus in terms of the new guidelines aiming at simultaneously increasing the resilience of urban environments to future pandemics and improving the overall quality of city life. They optimistically foresee the greater integration of nature-based solutions at various city scales, which will improve ventilation and the penetration of natural light, establish a greater variety of programs through mixed-use areas, and introduce flexible building typologies surrounded by enlarged, multiplied and multifunctional open spaces that will accommodate the ever-changing needs of the urban dwellers.

This Special Issue invites researchers in the disciplines of the built environment to undertake the challenging and much needed task of contributing to research on achieving just and healthy cities in line with the accumulating research on these aspects [9,10]. Operationalising a healthy built environment is a complex process underpinned by the need to master past lessons, critically consider responses to current crises, and envision upcoming trends and risks, all for the purpose of successfully coping with future uncertainties.

**Funding:** This research was funded by Slovenian Research Agency, by the Research Programme “Sustainable planning for the quality living space”, no. P5-0068.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**References**

5. Čok, G.; Mrak, G.; Breznički, J.; Foški, M.; Zavodnik Lamovšek, A. Spatial Regulation Instruments of Work at Home: The Case of Slovenia as a Post-Transition Country. *Sustainability* 2022, 14, 4254. [CrossRef]