

TWO-METRE ECONOMY

How '15-minute cities' will change the way we socialise



(Image credit: City of Paris)



By Peter Yeung 4th January 2021

A new urban planning model will change the French capital – and could provide a template for how to create stronger local communities and make residents happier.

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For a long time, Solène Fraioli says she “refused to admit” that Paris could be a stressful place. The 29-year-old waitress, who grew up on the city’s outskirts but now lives in a studio in a historic central district, was dazzled by its infinite opportunity – from Monday-night jazz concerts to West African cuisine and capoeira classes. But Fraioli began to recognise that living in the City of Light had certain disadvantages – particularly its frenetic, nonstop energy. “Paris is a city that is always on the move,” she says. “Everyone, all the time, everywhere.”

That conveyor belt of choice came crashing to a halt with the coronavirus pandemic. But for Fraioli, the two-month lockdown that began on 17 March – confining her to a 1km radius of her home – gave her a nuanced, enriching view of her neighbourhood. “I discovered it’s possible to feel like you’re in a small village in Paris,” she says. “To get to know your neighbours, to maintain good links with shopkeepers, to favour local craftsmen and shops over large supermarkets. I even joined a citizens’ movement where people prepare food baskets for homeless people. I thought I would have a hard time living the lockdown, but I was perfectly at home, in a quiet place.”

She’s not the only one who felt this way. “Unexpectedly, this experience strengthened the bonds I had with some people,” says Valentin Jedraszkyk, a 25-year-old civil servant living in the south of Paris. “It led me to criss-cross the small streets of my district more than usual and thus to discover magnificent places just a stone’s throw from my home.”



Parisian Solène Fraioli says lockdown gave her a nuanced, enriching view of her neighbourhood – and appreciation she didn't have before (Credit: Solène Fraioli)

The impact on how dense cities like Paris function, and how people that live in them interact, has been undeniable. The way we communicate, travel, consume and socialise had been moulded by the pandemic restrictions. Carlos Moreno, a scientific director and professor **specialising** in complex systems and innovation at University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, believes there “will never be” a return to city life as it was before the coronavirus struck.

When the pandemic shuttered city centres, he says, it showed how important social links are – but through a different prism. “Many people never visited shops close to their homes before because they were busy. They didn't know their neighbours or the parks nearby. The pandemic made us discover this. We have rediscovered locality, and this has improved quality of life.”

Moreno, who is also Paris City Hall's **special envoy for smart cities**, is regarded as the key theorist behind the recent resurgence in a new model for urban planning that seems almost custom built for this localised future: the '15-minute city'. The concept is to improve quality of life by creating cities where everything a resident needs can be reached within a quarter of an hour by foot or bike. The 15-minute city requires minimal travel among housing, offices, restaurants, parks, hospitals and cultural venues. Each neighbourhood should fulfil six social functions: living, working, supplying, caring, learning and enjoying.

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Moreno has been working on the concept – seen as a response to both the climate crisis, by bolstering green initiatives at neighbourhood level and reducing travel, and ever-growing urban sprawl that pushes those on the peripheries further out – since long before the pandemic arrived. But he says Covid-19 has rapidly kickstarted a trend toward localisation, putting the 15-minute city on the agenda of metropolitan areas around the world.

'City of proximities'

Many experts and planners have provided elements feeding into the 15-minute city concept over past decades. In the 1920s, American urban planner Clarence Perry **proposed** the idea of the liveable “neighbourhood unit” before the mass influx of private cars and city zoning arrived later in the 20th Century. Copenhagen **pedestrianised** its main shopping street in 1962, before other densely-built European cities took the same approach to their downtowns. Then **New Urbanism**, an urban design movement promoting walkable cities, swept across the US in the 1980s.

Yet the 15-minute city of today represents a major departure from the past, responding to climate change, Covid-19 and globalisation. While past initiatives focused on ease of travel, walkability and public services, Paris has taken an all-encompassing approach to bring a greener take on those aspects as well as including workplaces, cultural activities and the more ephemeral nature of social connections.

Anne Hidalgo, the mayor of Paris, made it the centrepiece of her **successful 2020 re-election campaign**, outlining four major principles – proximity, diversity, density and ubiquity – and has since appointed a commissioner for the 15-minute city, Carine Rolland. For the latter, above all the aim is to create what she calls “a city of proximities” – not only between structures but people.



In 15-minute cities, each neighbourhood should fulfil six social functions: living, working, supplying, caring, learning and enjoying (Credit: City of Paris)

“We know sometimes large cities can be tiring and can create a sense of anonymity,” says Rolland. “But proximity means that we will, through our social links, rediscover our way of living in cities. We want open spaces, but ones for doing nothing in particular, where people can meet each other or encounters can happen as much as possible. We live better when we live together, and this will rework our social fabric.”

The transformation of neighbourhoods has been well underway since Hidalgo took office in 2014, with the Paris mayor **banning** high-polluting vehicles, **restricting** the quays of the Seine to pedestrians and cyclists, and creating mini green spaces across the city – since 2018, more than 40 Parisian school grounds have been **transformed** into green “oasis yards”. More than 50km of bike routes known as “**coronapistes**” have also been added since the pandemic struck and last month renovation of the Place de la Bastille was **completed** as part of a €30m redesign of seven major squares. Hidalgo has **pledged** a further €1bn euros (\$1.2bn, £916m) per year for the maintenance and beautification of streets, squares and gardens.

With Paris leading the way, other cities around the world have been enticed by this model for resilient, vibrant communities. Madrid, Milan, Ottawa and Seattle are among those to have **declared** plans to copy its approach. **Melbourne** has adopted a long-term strategic plan for 20-minute neighbourhoods. **C40 Cities**, a city-led coalition focused on fighting climate change, has gone as far as promoting the 15-minute city idea as a blueprint for post-Covid-19 recovery.

“It’s tracing a path of community resilience,” says Flavio Coppola, C40 Cities’ programme manager for urban planning. “It reduces emissions through transportation, but also neighbourhoods are more resilient. It also means changing land use to allow offices but also ‘third spaces’ for people who are working remotely. So, at the neighbourhood-level, they will be more resistant to shocks.”

The shift in structure of cities will also mean that individuals themselves will be more resistant to shocks, according to Richard Bentall, a psychology professor at the University of Sheffield who **studied** the mental health and social impacts of Covid-19. The sense of belonging promoted by 15-minute cities, he says, could make us all happier.

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“We are increasingly becoming an urban species, but urban environments are linked to **worse mental health**,” he says. “With Covid, some people suffered but others benefited. But research shows the more you interact with your neighbours, the better. If you feel a sense of belonging to your neighbourhood, that’s a massive protector of your mental health. If 15-minute cities could strike this balance, then maybe a happy urban future for the human species is possible.”

‘More engaged inhabitants’

Finding that balance could be difficult, and sceptics are concerned the 15-minute city could worsen social divides, widening inequalities between poorer and richer districts – the latter benefiting from higher quality facilities and the former even less socially mobile than before.

“Making a space more liveable is something we can certainly achieve,” says Elisa Pieri, a lecturer in sociology at Manchester University. “But we need to make sure that the amenities are up to high standards. Marginalised neighbourhoods could be landed with terrible doctors and schools. It could bring about further discrimination and inequality and territorial stigmatisation.”



Valentin Jedraszyk says he discovered "magnificent places" in his home district during lockdown (Credit: Valentin Jedraszyk)

Few would dispute that residents of some disadvantaged Parisian suburbs have long faced economic and social blocks to their progress. But the way cities should guard against this danger is “by focusing first on the neighbourhoods that need the most”, says Coppola of C40 Cities. “I agree there is a risk,” he adds. “But our idea of 15-minute cities is about access and sustainability. It’s an opportunity to use a paradigm for change.”

Other concerns surround the impact of altering the very essence of what a modern city is. Elena Magrini, an analyst at the UK-based think tank **Centre for Cities**, warns this trend towards “the end of big cities” could also reduce creativity. “Cities allow people to mix, to be together and share ideas,” she says. “Often that happens in the city centre. Can we recreate the creation and innovation if they no longer exist?”

In a dense city like Paris, which thanks to its pre-industrial roots **has** more than 53,000 residents per square mile, the continued mixing of people in a 15-minute future is less likely to be an issue. In much more spread-out cities like London and New York City, however, that current lack of density could pose more significant issues.

But Carlos Moreno believes that by making the 15-minute city led by and above all for its inhabitants, creativity and wellbeing will flourish, pointing to the role of participatory budgeting, which since 2014 has **allowed** residents to vote on 5% of the municipal spending in Paris – totalling half a billion euros.

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“The pandemic has caused us to think about how to move differently, to consume differently, to live differently,” he says. “We are discovering that by working differently we have more spare time, to have more time to be with our families or friends. We are discovering and appreciating our neighbourhoods much more. This will make us all more engaged inhabitants.”

Moreno admits this transition will not be straightforward – but some key goals are already lined up such as making every street in Paris cycle-friendly by 2024.

“The 15-minute city is not a silver bullet,” he says. “Today our neighbourhoods are segregated by money – rich, poor, middle class, workers, bars, offices. There’s great segregation. But what we must do is use 15-minute cities to focus on the common good. With enough funding and support, deployed in the right way, we can guarantee they are for the people.”



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