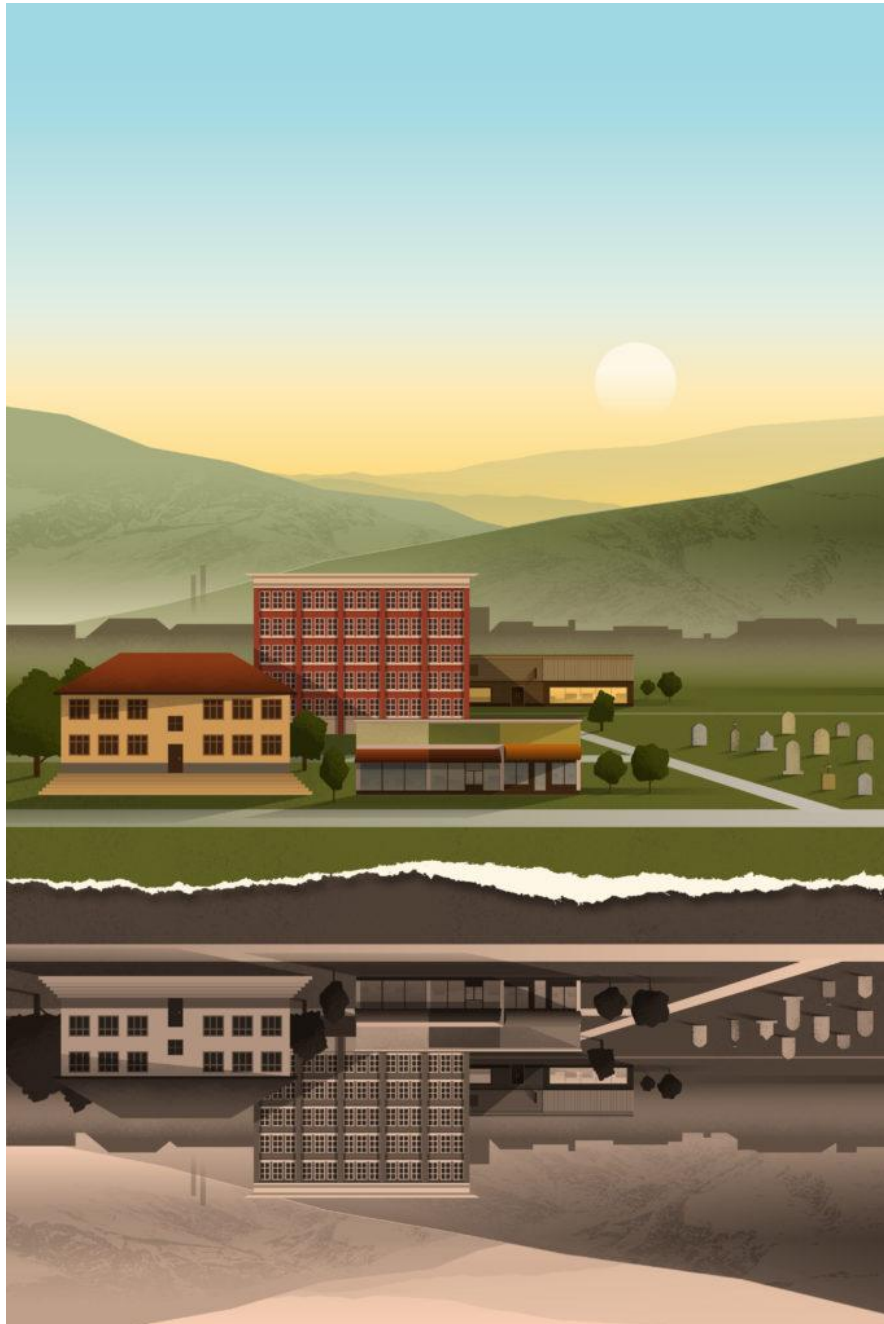


# THE PROMISE OF THE 15-MINUTE CITY

*Politicians and urban planners are betting on hyper-local living — a future ideal that borrows much from the past. But is it a path to urban utopia or just a fad?*

*Illustration by Simon Marchner for POLITICO*



BY AITOR HERNÁNDEZ-MORALES  
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THE CITY OF THE FUTURE might look a lot like the one your grandparents — or even your great-grandparents — lived in.

As policymakers grapple with how to adapt urban centers to the post-pandemic economy and reduce emissions in the face of climate change, one solution is catching people's imagination: the 15-minute city.

As a concept, it's both quaint and quietly revolutionary: redesign cities so that people live, work and have access to all the services they need — whether that's shops, schools, theaters or medical care — within a 15-minute walk or bike ride.

Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo was among the first to seize on the idea in 2020, putting it at the heart of a successful reelection campaign that also involved pushing cars out of the city in favor of green spaces and bike lanes.

Her pitch to turn the French capital into a “city of proximity” where children walk to school and residents know their local baker struck a chord at a time when COVID-19 lockdowns meant people were suddenly spending a lot more time in their own neighborhoods. Enthusiasm for the idea sparked similar campaigns in Dublin, Barcelona, Milan and Lisbon.

The aim is to “rebalance” cities that were originally designed to boost productivity rather than well-being, according to Carlos Moreno, the French-Colombian academic behind the 15-minute city concept.

Some 1.3 million Parisians commute across the city from East — where many working-class neighborhoods are located — to West and back again each day. Moreno brands this a “mad way of life” that means commuters hardly spend any time in the areas where they live. Many don't know their neighbors, visit their local shops or neighborhood parks.

The pandemic has been “an awakening” in that respect, said Moreno. “People have recovered a desire to live more calmly, more socially, and with greater control over their time.”

While many see in the 15-minute city a roadmap to a “new utopia,” others question its novelty — and its feasibility.

Moreno admits the idea involves reversing “70 years of urban planning,” a massive undertaking that throws up a host of new challenges, not least making sure cities don't become a collection of “island” neighborhoods isolated from one another.







Public housing on Via Marmorata in the 1920s and today | Gabinetto Fotografico Nazionale (archive) and Stephanie Gengotti for POLITICO

## An old ideal

The urban way of life Moreno wants cities to recover never died out in Testaccio, a district of Rome tucked between a bend in the Tiber River and a mountain of broken terracotta amphorae left over from a time when the area housed an ancient port.

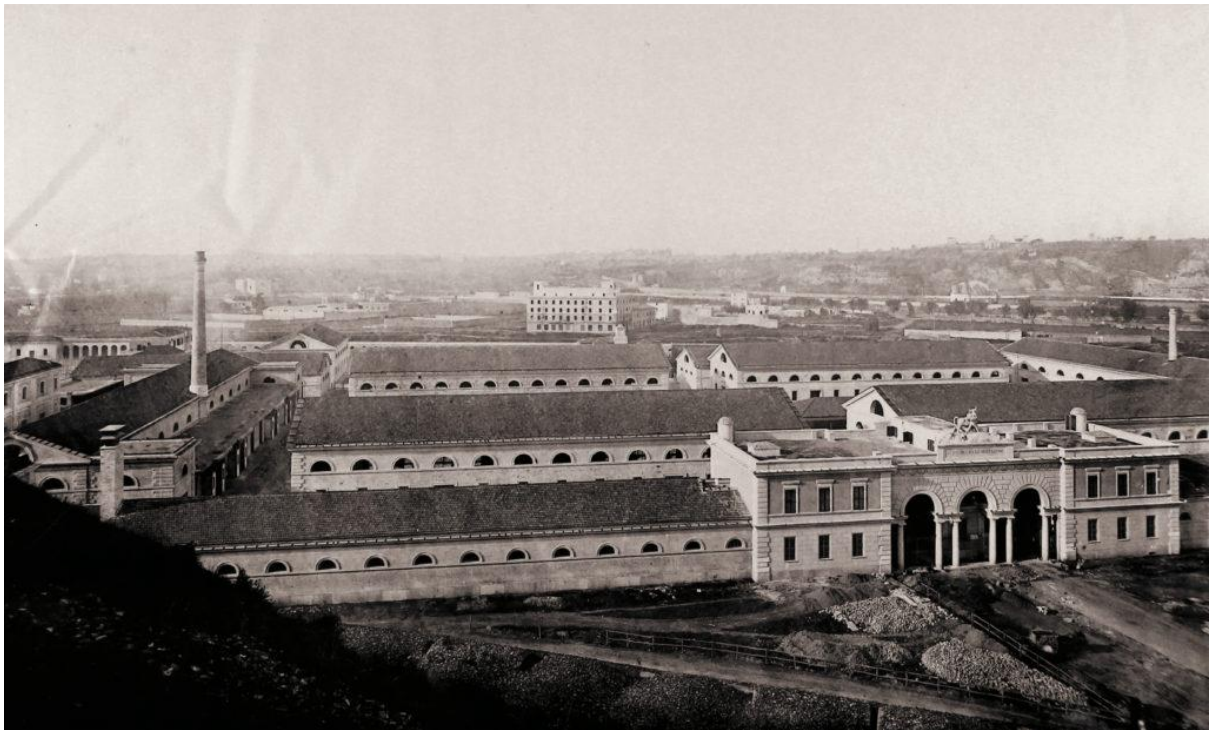
On a recent weekday in the district's main *piazza*, sociologist Irene Ranaldi pointed out that everything locals might need is within walking distance.

From the busy central square, dotted with butcher shops, bars and banks, it's just a short stroll to the local medical center, the primary and middle schools, a fresh food market and several local libraries.

"You don't need a car if you live here," said Ranaldi. "People walk and interact in places like this square, where all Testaccio's social classes mix over the course of the day, walking their dogs, watching their kids play, coming down for a chat with a neighbor."

If Testaccio seems to embody the ideals of the 15-minute city concept, it's also "a perfect example of a late 19th-century city," Francesca Romana Stabile, an urban historian at Roma Tre University, points out.





A public housing bloc — and entrance to the slaughterhouse — in Testaccio in the 1920s (top left) and a largely unchanged view today | Archivio Urbano Testaccio (archive) and Stephanie Gengotti for POLITICO

“Back then cities were planned with residential areas located as close as possible to workplaces and services concentrated throughout,” she said.

Quality of life in Testaccio, which was organized around the slaughterhouse complex built in 1888, wasn’t always worthy of emulation. The first *Testaccini* — as the locals are called — lived in squalid conditions, but public indignation soon forced local authorities to invest in developing the area, including by redirecting through-traffic along its perimeter and building public housing.

“It was all very progressive,” said Stabile, describing “grand” public housing blocs with leafy interior courtyards and plenty of light. The buildings also housed health care services and child care centers, and artists used nooks on the ground floor as studios.

For decades, Testaccio remained unchanged. Its robust housing and services, and its proximity to the slaughterhouse and other industrial sites meant locals — mainly tradesmen and blue-collar workers — continued to spend more time in their own neighborhood instead of stuck in commuter traffic in their Fiat *seicentos*.

## **The luxury of proximity**

More recently, Testaccio’s reputation for easy living has, paradoxically, forced out the true locals, who now find themselves priced out of the neighborhood by an influx of wealthier Romans.

Gentrification came for Testaccio in the early 2000s, when its public housing blocs were privatized and its prime location and general “charm” left it exposed to rampant speculation, said Danila Marcaccini, member of the local community group Comitato Testaccio.

“People who bought their 60-square-meter public housing flat from the city for €40,000 can now easily resell it for €400,000,” she said. “These are humble, working-class people so I don’t judge them for giving in and making some money, but it’s still sad to see the true *Testaccini* leaving.”

That shift embodies one of the main criticisms of the 15-minute city — that, today, it can only work for people who have the luxury of working from home.

“The flat under mine used to be owned by an elderly woman who worked at the market; when she passed away an architect moved in,” said Ranaldi, adding that a journalist had bought the flat next door. “People with these professions are the ones who aren’t under pressure to show up to workplaces and can take their time to go to the café, shop here, really *live* the neighborhood the way people used to.”

The distances most working-class people are required to travel for work pose a major challenge to the 15-minute city, Moreno conceded.

His vision of the ideal city involves enshrining the “right to work near home,” something he admitted can’t be done “by waving a magic wand.”

“There are aspects of this for which we do not have a solution because its a matter that’s up to private enterprise to change,” he said, adding that it wasn’t up to him to lead a social revolution or “hang the black — or red, or whatever colored — flag from the rooftop.”

But while people may still have to commute, city planners can still ensure workers “can go home to places where they can live locally and well,” he argued.





Pedestrians outside Piazza Santa Maria Liberatrice in Testaccio | Stephanie Gengotti for POLITICO

### **‘Simpler and closer’**

That’s something that’s very much on the mind of Andrea Catarci, the city councilor in charge of finding ways to implement the ideals of the 15-minute city across Rome.

His focus, he said, is on the Italian capital’s massive commuting class, rather than the lucky few who live in neighborhoods like Testaccio.

The push comes after Roberto Gualtieri took up the cause in his successful bid to be elected mayor of Rome last year, championing the concept as a way to make the notoriously chaotic capital “simpler and closer” for its 4.3 million residents.

Catarci cautioned that it would take time to figure out how to bring the best of hyper-local life to the sprawling city.

“I have no money — this portfolio doesn’t have any budget assigned,” said Catarci. “But I do have an enormous desire to come up with ways to reinterpret and reprogram the city, and to encourage the rest of the councilors to carry out specific actions in their areas.”

The solutions that have worked in Testaccio and other parts of Rome won’t necessarily work elsewhere, Catarci said. That’s particularly true in the areas he’s most interested in targeting — the poorer, haphazardly constructed neighborhoods that have sprung up near the 68-kilometer highway circling the city.

“These are places that were built for cars, where there are no basic services — sometimes there isn’t even a local bar or tobacco shop — and residents have no choice but to drive to the nearest shopping mall to pick up basic goods,” he said.

Making the 15-minute city real for those residents will mean investing in municipal services and attracting new businesses, according to Catarci, but it also has to involve building transit options that connect those areas to the rest of the city.

The idea, he said, is not to isolate residents in their own communities.

Moreno echoed the importance of keeping neighborhoods mobile — a key point that differentiates the modern 15-minute city from what existed a century ago.

“In the past people stuck to their neighborhood and saw the people living in the next one over as strangers, maybe even as threats,” he said. “We want to recover the good things from the past without going back to that. People come to cities for freedom and choice, not to end up locked in urban villages.”

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