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▲ Interior courtyard of the revamped Minimes barracks. PHOTOGRAPHER: DMITRY KOSTYUKOV FOR BLOOMBERG BUSINESSWEEK

The 15-Minute City—No Cars Required—Is Urban Planning's New Utopia

From Paris to Portland, cities are attempting to give residents everything they need within a few minutes of their front doors. Can it work—without leaving anyone out?

By Feargus O'Sullivan and Laura Bliss
From **New Economy**

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The Minimes barracks in Paris don't look like the future of cities. A staid brick-and-limestone complex established in 1925 along a backstreet in the Marais district, it's the sort of structure you pass without a second glance in a place as photogenic as Paris.

A closer look at its courtyard, however, reveals a striking transformation. The barracks' former parking lot has become a public garden planted with saplings. The surrounding buildings have been converted to 70 unusually attractive public housing apartments, at a cost of €12.3 million ($14.5 million). Elsewhere in the revamped complex are offices, a day-care facility, artisan workshops, a clinic, and a cafe staffed by people with autism.

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The green, mixed-use, community-friendly approach extends to the streets beyond. Five minutes down the road, the vast Place de la Bastille has been renovated as part of a city-funded €30 million revamp of seven major squares. No longer a roaring island of traffic, it's now dedicated mainly to pedestrians, with rows of trees where asphalt once lay. A stream of bikes runs through the square along a freshly repaved, protected "*coronapiste*"—one of the bike freeways introduced to make cycling across Greater Paris easier during the coronavirus pandemic. City Hall has since announced that the lanes will be permanent, backed by €300 million in ongoing funding from the region and top-ups from municipalities and the French government.

▲ Place de la Nation, one of seven transformed squares. PHOTOGRAPHER: DMITRY KOSTYUKOV FOR BLOOMBERG BUSINESSWEEK

Taken together, the new trees and cycleways, community facilities and social housing, homes and workplaces all reflect a potentially transformative vision for urban planners: the 15-minute city. "The 15-minute city represents the possibility of a decentralized city," says Carlos Moreno, a scientific director and professor specializing in complex systems and innovation at University of Paris 1. "At its heart is the concept of mixing urban social functions to create a vibrant vicinity"—replicated, like fractals, across an entire urban expanse.

Named Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo's special envoy for smart cities, Moreno has become a kind of deputy philosopher at City Hall as it endeavors to turn the French capital into what he calls a "city of proximities." His 15-minute concept was developed primarily to reduce urban carbon emissions, reimagining our towns not as divided into discrete zones for living, working, and entertainment, but as mosaics of neighborhoods in which almost all residents' needs can be met within 15 minutes of their homes on foot, by bike, or on public transit. As workplaces, stores, and homes are brought into closer proximity, street space previously dedicated to cars is freed up, eliminating pollution and making way for gardens, bike lanes, and sports and leisure facilities. All of this allows residents to bring their daily activities out of their homes (which in Paris tend to be small) and into welcoming, safe streets and squares.

Similar ideas have been around for a long time, including in Paris itself. Walkable neighborhoods and villages were the norm long before automobiles and zoning codes spread out and divided up cities in the 20th century. Yet the 15-minute city represents a major departure from the recent past, and in a growing number of other cities it's become a powerful brand for planners and politicians desperate to sell residents on a carbon-lite existence. Leaders in Barcelona, Detroit, London, Melbourne, Milan, and Portland, Ore., are all working toward similar visions. They've been further emboldened by the pandemic, with global mayors touting the model in a July report from the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group as central to their recovery road maps.

With climate change, Covid-19, and political upheaval all challenging the ideals of globalism, the hope is to refashion cities as places primarily for people to walk, bike, and linger in, rather than commute to. The 15-minute city calls for a return to a more local and somewhat slower way of life, where commuting time is instead invested in richer relationships with what's nearby. "These crises show us the possibility for rediscovering proximity," Moreno says. "Because we now have the possibility to stay closer to home, people have rediscovered useful time—another pace for living."

It's a utopian vision in an era of deep social distress—but one that might, if carried out piecemeal, without an eye to equality, exacerbate existing inequities. Skeptics also wonder whether a city that's no longer organized around getting to work is really a city at all.

Dreams of breaking down the segmented urban planning that dominated the 20th century—with industry on the outskirts, residential areas ringing the city, commerce in the core, and auto networks connecting long distances—of course aren't new. Urban thinkers have been advocating for the preservation or return of walkable, socially mixed neighborhoods at least since the 1961 publication of Jane Jacobs's paean to Manhattan's Greenwich Village in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.

This advocacy has slowly filtered into mainstream planning orthodoxy. Copenhagen pedestrianized its main shopping street in 1962, the first of many densely built European cities to take this approach in their downtown cores. In the U.S., the so-called New Urbanism of the 1980s and '90s created a planning template (first fully realized in Seaside, Fla.) that saw a preference for row houses and apartments over detached houses, as well as for walkable, tree-lined streets and a careful dispersal of schools, stores, and parks to reduce the need to drive. Since the turn of the millennium, rising concerns over air pollution and climate change have led to further innovations, such as the congestion charge London introduced in 2003 for cars driving into the center and massive expansions of public transit networks in cities from Moscow to Medellín.

The 15-minute city concept draws all these trends into an intuitive rubric that ordinary residents can test against their own experiences. It's also served as a response to pressures wrought by property speculation and rising tourism, which have pushed up rents and driven residents and businesses out of some long-standing communities. The 15-minute city seeks to protect the vitality that made diverse, locally oriented neighborhoods attractive in the first place.

Paris has been moving in this direction for some time. Under the mayorship of the Socialist Party's Hidalgo, who was first elected in March 2014, the city introduced bans on the most polluting motor vehicles, transformed busy roads flanking the Seine into a linear park, and, in a bid to maintain socially mixed communities, expanded the city's network of public housing into wealthier areas. It wasn't until 2020, however, that Hidalgo grouped these efforts together under the umbrella of the 15-minute city, plucking the term from the academic realm and giving it new political urgency.

▲ Moreno PHOTOGRAPHER: CHAIRE ETI

During her reelection campaign, she teamed with the concept's originator, Moreno, a former robotics specialist who'd realized that his primary interest was the environment in which robots functioned. Hidalgo had already laid much of the political groundwork for Moreno's blueprint in her first term; now she could link all those bike paths and car lane closures with a vision that matched the vibrancy and convenience of a metropolis with the ease and greenery of a village.

Since winning reelection in June, she's doubled down, appointing a Commissioner for the 15-Minute City, Carine Rolland. A Socialist Party councillor who'd previously served in a culture-oriented role in the 18th arrondissement, Rolland also became Paris's culture commissioner. "It's true that Paris is already a 15-minute city to an extent," she says, "but not at the same level in all neighborhoods and not to all sections of the public." There's much to be done in the working-class districts on Paris's eastern edge and in many quarters close to the Boulevard Périphérique beltway, for example. In areas like these, social housing towers frequently predominate, and grocery stores and community facilities such as sports centers and clinics are sparse. This has particularly acute consequences for older people and those with limited mobility, Rolland points out.

Closer to Paris's heart, she says, are areas "characterized by what we call 'mono-activity'—a single commercial activity occupying a whole street." These are notably around the eastern section of the city's inner ring of boulevards, which are dominated by offices and small shops, leaving streets that are lively on workdays to become quiet and uninviting on evenings and weekends.

Rolland's job as 15-minute-city commissioner entails coordinating related efforts by different departments. In September, for example, 10 Parisian school grounds reopened as green "oasis yards," bringing the total to 41 since the initiative began in 2018. Each has been planted with trees and remodeled with soft, rain-absorbent surfaces that will help battle the summer heat. The yards are left available after school for use as public gardens or sports grounds, and they open onto revamped "school streets" where cars are banned or severely limited and where trees and benches have been added. Transformations like these, Rolland explains, involve bringing together departments responsible for education, sports, roads, and parks, as well as local business and community organizations.

Paris is far from alone in attempting this sort of transformation. London's new "Mini-Hollands" import Dutch planning ideas that seek to reduce or block car access to neighborhood shopping hubs. Barcelona has been turning 400-by-400-meter chunks of road in areas dominated by apartment towers into mostly car-free "superblocks." Madrid has declared plans to copy that approach, in keeping with its goal to be a "city of 15 minutes" as it recovers from the pandemic. Milan has said the same, with hopes to turn Covid-19 bike lanes and sidewalks permanent as its economy restabilizes. But turning the 15-minute city into a truly global movement will require a big battle over a core urban tension: the primacy of the car.

It's one thing to turn a Paris or a Barcelona—cities that were almost completely shaped before the automobile was invented—into a neighborhood-centric utopia. Transforming them is rather like giving a supermodel a makeover. The challenge is far greater in the kinds of younger, sprawling cities found in North America or Australia, where cars remain the dominant form of transit.

Some are trying. Since 2017, Melbourne has been working on a long-term planning blueprint centered on the "20-minute neighbourhood." But while the city's aspirations are similar to Paris's, the issues involved in implementing them could scarcely be more different, especially in areas beyond the already densifying core and inner suburbs. "Some middle suburbs are well-served by public transport and are starting to experience densification, but others aren't on the bandwagon," explains Roz Hansen, an urbanist who oversaw the preparation of Melbourne's blueprint. "Meanwhile, the outer suburbs are still at very low densities, partly because of poor public-transport connections."

The city has tried to improve transportation and job options in the outer suburbs, which are marked by single-family homes. Some of the middle suburbs have hosted pilot projects where new mixed commercial-residential developments are being encouraged and streets are being remodeled to increase cycling space and improve walkability. But to create and connect true 20-minute neighborhoods, investment in public transit will be key. "The bureaucrats kept thinking, 'Oh, this is also about getting in your car for a 20-minute trip,' but it's got nothing to do with the car," Hansen says. "The 20-minute neighborhood is about active modes of transport and increasing an area's catchment of accessibility. If you're walking, 1 to 2 kilometers [1.2 miles] is your catchment. If you're cycling, it could be up to 5 to 7 kilometers. With public transport, it can be 10 to 15 kilometers."

> "Of course we need to adapt this concept for different realities. Not all people have the possibility of having jobs within 15 minutes"

U.S. cities holding similarly optimistic blueprints are also struggling to strike a balance between vision and reality. In 2016, Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan laid out a plan to turn high-density corridors outside the central business district in his sprawling, 140-square-mile city into 20-minute neighborhoods. Its leading edge thus far is a $17 million pedestrian upgrade in the Livernois-McNichols area, 9 miles northeast of downtown. The project concluded in early 2020 with an emphasis on narrower streets, wider sidewalks for cafe seating, and new lighting. Residents and business owners have been largely pleased with the improvements; a walk to the supermarket is now a much more pleasant ambition.

But that basic urban function is out of reach for the vast majority of the city. An estimated 30,000 citizens lack access to a full-service grocery store, according to a 2017 report by the Detroit Food Policy Council. Katy Trudeau, the city's deputy director of planning and development, says it wasn't long ago that many people had to travel to the suburbs for shopping and other errands. That's improved overall, and nine other districts have been targeted for upgrades along the lines of the one in Livernois-McNichols. Yet chronic fiscal problems and large swaths of blighted structures left vacant as the city's population declined have made rapid transformation implausible.

So far, most of Detroit's achievements under the 20-minute rubric have been modest, including moves toward a comprehensive transportation plan and ongoing investments in lighting and resurfacing. Trudeau also points to a new $50 million public-private affordable housing fund, which seeks to help low-income residents stay in place as property values rise in redeveloping neighborhoods. "These things might seem really basic in Paris, but here we've suffered so much in the form of population loss and financial uncertainty in the form of bankruptcy," she says. "We have to balance these concentrated strategies with citywide strategies that help everyone with their quality of life." The 20-minute label has served mainly as useful shorthand to communicate the city's goals with residents and investors. Trudeau hopes initiatives such as the housing fund will ensure that it includes a diverse cross section of the population.

Fifteen Minutes in Three Cities
Within 15 minutes of the + symbol

Data: Remix, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability, OpenStreetMap, Google, U.S. Department of Agriculture

Detroit's plans were partly inspired by Portland, Ore., which is celebrated in urbanist circles as a model of U.S. city planning. Portland has the highest rate of bike commuting of any major American metro, a tight boundary that defines how much it can sprawl, and forward-thinking policies aimed at spurring dense, lower-cost housing production. "We're often mixed up with Paris," jokes Chris Warner, director of the Portland Bureau of Transportation (PBOT).

Yet even there, it will take years to achieve the level of compactness that makes for a "complete neighborhood," as the city's 2013 plan phrased its goal. About three-quarters of Portland's residential land is occupied primarily by single-family homes, and more than half of its population commutes by car. A recent Brookings Institution report that studied local travel behaviors found that among six U.S. metropolitan areas, Portland had the shortest average trip distance for people traveling to work, shopping, and errands. But that distance was still 6.2 miles, hardly a 15-minute walk or bike ride to the dentist or laundromat. To combat this, PBOT is spending most of its $150 million capital-improvement budget

on bike and walking infrastructure inside complete neighborhoods, and on transit to connect them.

Adie Tomer, a fellow at Brookings' Metropolitan Policy Program and co-author of the report, says the 15-minute concept falls flat in America because "people in the U.S. already live in a 15-minute city, it's just that they're covering vast distances in a car." Planners concerned with urban livability and rising carbon emissions might do well to focus on distance rather than time, he says. He suggests that the "3-mile city" might resonate better.

However the concept is cast, Art Pearce, PBOT's manager of policy planning and projects, sees signs that Portlanders are keeping their travel closer to home as the pandemic changes the way they relate to their surroundings. "We're seeing a lot of people adjusting their behaviors to focus more on their communities," he says. "That produces an opportunity to strengthen those ties as people return to a more normal life."

One thing would-be 15-minute cities everywhere will have to reckon with is social equity—and affordable housing in particular, as Detroit's Trudeau points out. Many neighborhood services rely on lower-income workers who often make long commutes, and a 15-minute city isn't really one if only the well-off can stay put. To that end, Paris aspires to have 30% of its housing stock in the public domain by 2030, and it's been increasing the share even in richer districts despite resistance from well-heeled neighbors. "It is completely part of Anne Hidalgo's program to resist real estate pressure, to maintain public housing, and to diversify the housing offer for the middle class," says Rolland, the 15-minute-city commissioner.

▲ Cyclists along Rue de Rivoli in Paris. PHOTOGRAPHER: DMITRY KOSTYUKOV FOR BLOOMBERG BUSINESSWEEK

Such measures can, to a degree, counterbalance Paris's trends toward high rents and social polarization. But in a city where property prices rose even during the pandemic, they're unlikely to prevail completely. And other goals of the 15-minute city, such as greening and pedestrianizing the heart of Paris, risk alienating lower-income suburban commuters. This accusation was leveled against Hidalgo's administration in 2016, after it introduced changes to the Seine's lower quayside that eliminated a key route for car commuters. Valérie Pécresse, president of the regional council for Île-de-France, which encompasses Paris's suburbs, accused Hidalgo of acting in an "egotistical manner" by pushing through road closures, noting that "some people don't have any solution other than driving into Paris for work, because they don't have the means to live there." Others have pointed out a related concern: that, by prioritizing local infrastructure, governments will overlook badly needed regional investments, such as in transit systems for more distant commuters.

Moreno recognizes that large segments of the population might never enjoy the slower-paced, localized life he envisions. "Of course we need to adapt this concept for different realities," he says. "Not all people have the possibility of having jobs within 15 minutes." But he emphasizes that many people's circumstances could be profoundly changed—something he believes we're already seeing because of the pandemic's canceled commutes. In his view, centralized corporate offices are a thing of the past; telework and constellations of coworking hubs are the future.

The 15-minute city could also be seen as what writer Dan Hill identified as a form of "post-traumatic urbanism"—a way to recover from the onslaughts of such things as property speculation, overtourism, and now the pandemic. Already it's become clear in Paris, Rolland says, that the city needs a more localized medical network, "so people don't feel they have to go straight to the emergency room."

Following the unending traumas of 2020, there's an appealing nostalgia to a renewed emphasis on neighborhoods, even if it addresses only some of the city's modern challenges. This, too, Moreno acknowledges, pointing yet again to his idea's recuperative possibilities above all. "The 15-minute city is a journey, a guideline, a possibility for transforming the paradigm for how we live over the next many decades," he says. "Before, people were losing useful time. With the 15-minute city, we want them to regain it."

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