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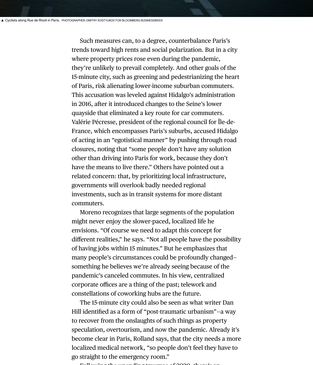
Adie Tomer, a fellow at Brookings' Metropolitan Policy Program and co-author of the report, says the 15-minute concept falls flat in America because "people in the U.S. already live in a 15-minute city, it's just that they're covering vast distances in a car." Planners concerned with urban livability 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 he relates 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.



A Cyclists along Rue de Rivoli in Paris. PHOTOGRAPHER: DIMITRI 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 will 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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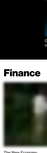

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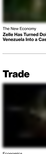

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