

## 1. Projects



# How to develop territories to promote more localized lifestyles?

Finished research

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In a bid to address the climate crisis and the need to drastically reduce transport-related greenhouse gas emissions, as well as to take seriously the aspirations of the majority of French people for slower and more localised lives, the Mobile Lives Forum wanted to examine how to enable new lifestyles lived in greater spatial proximity. It therefore launched a workshop led by a group of students in the Land Planning and Urbanism master's program at the University of Paris 1.

Research participants

- Master 2 et Magistère d'Urbanisme et Aménagement Université Paris 1 (2021-2022)

## The research

The work is based on a literature review, more than a dozen interviews with researchers, experts, technicians from local authorities and elected officials, as well as observation work in the field. The students analysed how spatial proximity is considered by public land planning actors at the national level, then they focused on the urban area of Nantes. This territory, an archipelago of numerous separate localities, is highly car dependent, but also a pioneer in terms of sustainability policies. It eventually proposed measures that would favour local lifestyles by 2050 in five areas of the Nantes region.

## The results

### 1. Spatial proximity, a political blind spot

#### A polysemic concept

The students showed that spatial proximity has been overlooked in public policies, primarily due to the semantic vagueness of the concept. Indeed, while the term proximity increasingly appears in the grey and scientific literature and in public discourse, it remains a polysemic concept that refers to various realities: "social proximity" with the strengthening of social ties, "temporal proximity" through the speed of access to amenities, "spatial proximity" with the shortening of distances between housing and services, etc. Furthermore, proximity is defined differently depending on the scale in question (housing, neighbourhood, village, small town, city, etc.), the practices that are deployed, the mode of transport used (train, metro, bus, car, bike, walking, etc.), on individual subjectivity, etc.

#### A catch-all and ambiguous political slogan

This semantic confusion certainly helps to make it a "catch-all" political slogan, covering many policies that do not always involve the search for spatial proximity for all: for example, policies that encourage higher density and fight the loss of soil permeability but which neglect the provision of diverse services and urban amenities; policies encouraging the revitalization of centralities but neglect sparsely populated territories, enriching localised social life without providing local services and equipment, or coordinating urban planning & public transport with the aim of replacing individual cars in order to quickly access facilities. This last policy, overwhelmingly favoured by public actors, aims to combine stronger public transport with functional diversity around stations, which in turn leads to stronger centralities and a reliance on rapid mobility rather than on spatial proximity to access services. Since the concept of sustainable mobility arrived on the political agenda, in the wake of sustainable development goals in the 1990s, land planning levers have essentially aimed at greater density around public transport hubs and improving services to underserved areas. The term proximity then gradually appeared in legal texts around the 2010s, always linked to densification around transport hubs (ENE law of 2010 then ALUR law of 2014). This focus on the coordination of urban planning & transport is found in urban planning and urbanism documents such as specific coordination contracts (contras d'axe) and in the content of several Territorial Coherence Schemes (SCoT), such as in Toulouse that focuses on connecting the peripheries with the centre through transport.

Finally, the students found that political authorities appropriated the concept of the 15-minute city, implemented in Nantes, a place where three-quarters of the inhabitants already lived within 15 minutes walking-distance from most everyday services (grocery, bakery, newsagent, café/restaurant, bank, pharmacy, school, etc.). The students met an elected official who fully endorsed this political appropriation of the concept, claiming that "the 15-minute city is mainly a marketing thing." This further proves the popular and catch-all nature of the concept, that is sometimes used more as a marketing tool than a real policy. An intentional and explicit effort to reduce travel distances, that would occur by developing private and public local services, thus most often appears to be a blind spot in public policies.

The area of Nantes: spatial proximity is considered in the objectives, but obstacles remain in the implementation In the territory of Nantes, however, the goal of spatial proximity is present in some policies, such as the SCoT of Nantes Saint-Nazaire that aims to promote the proximity of daily services to within 10 minutes by foot and 5 minutes by bike in the centralities. The Planning and Sustainable Development Project (PADD, Projet d'Aménagement et de

Développement Durable), which includes the area's 24 towns as part of the Metropolitan Local Urbanism Plan (PLUm, Plan Local d'Urbanisme Métropolitain) aims to "design cities where inhabitants can live, work, access education and leisure, without having to travel too far or for too long." Furthermore, the Urban Travel Plan (PDU, Plan de Déplacements Urbains) of Nantes Métropole aims to reduce travel distances. However, the implementation of this goal of spatial proximity is hampered by several obstacles, chief among which is a lack of financial resources, which has been compounded by general underfunding for local authorities since the economic crisis of the late 2000s; between 2017 and 2020, towns with between 10,000 and 20,000 inhabitants saw their funding drop by over 4% on average. Secondly, policies are often limited in scope, with vague guidelines; for example, the target documents such as the PLU need only comply with the SCoT on issues of restricting urban sprawl or densification, but the document offers a certain freedom to intercommunalities. There are also a lack of policy evaluation procedures, particularly with regards to the effective reduction of travel distances for inhabitants to conduct their daily lives. The students also point to a lack of engineering (technicians trained in urban planning) and coordination between actors at different scales, with them operating independently and therefore preventing any common vision.

The divergent political interests of various actors constitute another obstacle to proximity. For example, in the city centre, the emphasis is on curbing urban sprawl, while in less dense areas, elected officials are reluctant to constrain their development. Another example is the tensions that can occur, in rural intercommunalities, between small towns and the central town, the former wanting a better distribution of public facilities and services throughout the different members of the intercommunality, and the latter favoring a greater centralisation of services and facilities.

### **Sparsely populated spaces: forgotten in local policies**

National and local policies that include proximity objectives focus mainly on cities and large or medium-sized centralities, to the detriment of sparsely populated areas. For instance, there are models that promote proximity, such as the "slippers city" (ville de la pantoufle), the 15-minute city or the cillaslow, but they are mainly urban, except for the 30-minute area, which is a version of Carlos Moreno's 15-minute city for sparsely populated territories.

Public actors try to address this shortcoming by pushing several policies such as the Small Towns of Tomorrow Plan (Plan Petits Villes de Demain), which is an extension of the Town Centre Action program (Action Cœur de Ville) for small towns and inter-communalities with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants. But these policies remain isolated: there is no large-scale systemic project, and they remain focused on city centres. Indeed, a woman working at the National Agency for Territorial Cohesion pointed out: "With these national policies, we are only focusing on city centres." Some actors even call for "questioning whether centrality is an end in itself or whether we shouldn't instead seek to establish several different centralities."

## **2. Which spatial proximity policy?**

A policy favouring spatial proximity must seek to reduce travel distances so that people can access their daily activities with active modes. However, the students' research requires us to adopt a broader vision that also includes an environmental dimension and how people can live together in these localised territories. Based on a list of 12 essential services and facilities identified by the Urban Planning Agency of the Nantes Region (grocery, bakery, newsagent, café/restaurant, bank, Maison France Service office, general practitioner, pharmacy, library, park and playground, nursery, preschool and primary school), the students formulated proposals to rethink our habits in terms of the place and time of work (reducing and fragmenting working hours, new temporalities, relocating activities through a tax, etc.), but also in terms of housing (energy use; housing projects financed collectively, housing in which dwellers finance and share spaces and appliances, or intergenerational housing; etc.), consumption (local distribution network, self-production, etc.), healthcare and learning (training in agriculture, for example), entertainment (access to culture, diffusion of artworks, etc.) - all this with climate change in mind, thereby also requiring us to consider green spaces in the midst of dense areas.

The students made many proposals, including:

- Making the establishment of companies conditional on their proximity to an urban centrality and/or to a public transport station and according to their accessibility by active modes;
- Adapting VAT taxation in order to promote short supply chains for food;
- Creating a rating system to assess the proximity of a dwelling to facilities and services, which would allow for a regulatory system of building permits based on a proximity index;
- Establishing a right to public services through a rural and peri-urban safeguard, enforceable in case of a public service shutdown;
- Setting up a regional fund for the development of shared houses with common or pooled services;
- Developing mobile health and commercial services as well as travelling museum collections;
- Enshrining in law a "right to green spaces" guaranteeing access to a space that could provide refreshing breaks from the urban environment;
- Rethinking the place and time of work (reducing and fragmenting working hours, new temporalities), ways of dwelling (energy use; housing projects financed collectively, housing in which dwellers finance and share spaces and appliances, or intergenerational housing, etc.) and learning (training in agriculture, for example).

The students also imagined how localised lifestyles might look in 2050. For this, they focused on five individual personas for whom they imagined a typical day, thus allowing them to discover proximity issues specific to different types of territories (dense urban space, rural space, peri-urban, small rural centralities,...) and to outline future lifestyles.

## **Profiles**

[Download the profile of Quentin \(in French\)](#)

[Download the profile of Lia \(in French\)](#)

## **Conclusion**

The students showed what more desirable and sustainable lifestyles could look like in 2050, outlining a calmer world, where ambitious measures for spatial proximity would bring about greater social proximity and slow our rhythms of life. More research would be required, especially to analyse the scales at which to implement the identified services in each of the territories (considering the socio-economic profile of their inhabitants), and to further examine the adequate levers of action, with regards in particular to reducing the distance between jobs and housing.

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### Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

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#### Associated Thematics :

##### Lifestyles

- Proximity

##### Policies

- Ecological transition
- Cities & Territories

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