

1. Controversies



The “15-minute city”: the way forward or an ideological mirage?

11 April 2022

Everyone having everything within fifteen minutes of their home: this is the promise of the fifteen-minute city. The idea of a city that is peaceful because of the proximity it allows and ecological because of the reduction in travel that it entails has gained ground, and it is now part of media debates and political programmes. But are its promises really feasible? Is it fair? Is it even desirable? Carlos Moreno, the father of the fifteen-minute city, and Pierre Veltz, who questions its virtues, respond to these questions.

Introduction by Vincent Kaufmann

With the Paris agreements, signed by almost all nations, the development principles of cities, metropolises and, more generally, territories must be reviewed. If we look at mobility alone, which for several decades has been a poor performer in the fight against global warming, the switch to all-electric motorized transport by 2050 will only cover 45% of the journey to carbon neutrality ¹. The remaining 55% must be ensured by a modal shift, i.e., the use of means of transport other than cars, but also by a commitment to local life so as to drastically reduce private car travel. Beyond the environmental necessity, we know that half of the population would like to both live and work in their neighborhood, and 100% of Westerners want to work within 30 minutes of their home ².

To meet environmental challenges and fulfill aspirations, it is therefore necessary to rethink the way cities and territories are planned in order to allow for life to be conducted close to home and to establish this concept : daily life that takes place within a 15-minute radius on foot, by bicycle or by transport. In such a vision, the development of telecommuting would make it possible to avoid a large part of the daily commute; the development of shops, services (coworking, car-sharing, childcare facilities, etc.) and facilities (green spaces, urban gardens, neighborhood centers, etc.) in residential communities would make it possible to perform a good number of daily activities in proximity; and reduced automobile accessibility accompanied by pedestrian and bicycle facilities would encourage active mobility.

This set of measures is intended to put an end to the car as a benchmark for mobility. It would send a strong message: access to daily activities should be first on foot, by bicycle (electric or not) or by public transport. Putting this into practice would imply a large-scale reduction in car speeds. Such changes would transform the territorial location strategies of commercial stakeholders, such as large retailers, and would challenge the principles of office planning based on geographic areas that can be reached by car from a specific point in a given time (elliptical road isochrones).

While this concept does sound attractive, it raises a number of fundamental issues. The first concerns social inequalities: does the fifteen-minute city concern only a fringe of the affluent population in urban centers, while the workers who ensure its very existence would remain in far-flung outskirts? On the other hand, could it actually solve a number of access inequalities, for example by enhancing the mobility potential of people with reduced mobility? The question also arises for mobile workers: would the fifteen-minute city, one of whose cornerstones is telecommuting, be able to adapt to the constraints of professions whose travel needs are seemingly incompressible? The last question is a territorial one: is the fifteen-minute city likely to be applied in suburban and rural areas? If so, how?

Notes

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2 [Survey « Aspirations for mobility and lifestyles »](#), Mobile Lives Forum, 2016

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.

[En savoir plus x](#)

Active Mobility

Active mobility refers to all forms of travel that require human energy (i.e. non-motor) and the physical effort of the person moving. Active mobility occurs via modes themselves referred to as "active," namely walking and cycling.

[En savoir plus](#) x

Proximate living in a lively city

- Carlos Moreno

The "15-minute city"¹² has become a global concept, now present around the world³. Why is this approach so popular?

At a time when climate change is increasingly evident and the global COVID-19 pandemic is raging, this proposal, originally made in 2016⁴, has been in the international spotlight since the beginning of 2020⁵.

Since then, around the world, it has opened up a debate on the essential need for a paradigm shift on how we live in cities and within territories. Originally, I was surprised to see how this idea spontaneously took shape on all continents. I was also amazed at the number of conversations it sparked, and the concrete commitments and practices that were generated. Like any researcher whose idea gains traction, I was happy to see how this polycentric, multi-service, multi-use city that offers a carbon-free blueprint was becoming a new approach to proximity, changing how we conceive of the city.

1 What does the 15-minute city mean?

It is not an "organized countryside," nor is it a "miracle solution" or "magical copy/paste." The "15-minute city" for dense areas - along with its twin concept "the half-hour territory"⁶ for medium and sparsely populated areas - have offered, in the right place and at the right time⁷, a conceptual framework, a methodological approach and analytical tools to encourage a new urban and territorial practice, based on a different way of thinking and acting centered around the use of the city. We wanted to ask one simple, core question: "What kind of city do we want to live in?" We provided a comprehensive, in-depth, systemic, broad and open framework, with proposals to achieve our goals for a better life in our cities and territories. More than simply planning the city, we are interested in planning life in the city⁸.

Bruno Latour rightly evokes the structural contradiction between "the world we live in" (le monde où l'on vit) and "the world we live from"⁹ (le monde dont on vit). In an urban and territorial world where our quality of life should be of main concern, I wanted to add the following dimension to the conversation: "the world we think we live in." With the "15-minute city," we are introducing, at the heart of the issue, a new way of living, producing, consuming, travelling, but also of experiencing the city.

Our approach is inspired by the matrix established by our colleague, Professor M. Yunus, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2006¹⁰, and the SDGs¹¹, goals No. 13 and No. 11¹². We argue in favor of the "three zeros: zero carbon, zero poverty, zero exclusion." The "15-minute city" calls for convergence in the creation of ecological, economic and social values, to make our cities economically viable, ecologically livable and socially equitable.

2 How to overcome urban dead ends?

Faced with the segmentation of cities, which is a major factor in the deteriorating quality of life, we propose three levers of action:

Chrono-urbanism

- Will we continue to accept social and territorial fractures that only get bigger, making us go faster and further with a "sacrosanct mono-use" that takes up so many precious resources? Like the Saclay Campus in the south of Paris - disconnected from any urban reality - or the La Défense area in the west with its almost 4 million m² of offices and 180,000 employees¹³ - a model now under question with the COVID-19 crisis?
- Will we keep accepting that we do not have any useful time available because it is sacrificed every day through commuting, in difficult travel conditions, when in 2016 (before the Covid crisis), France was the European country with the largest share of employees who traveled to their workplace every day (77%)¹⁴?
- Does it make sense to have 70% of workers in urban environments commuting at the same time of day and converging on less than 10% of the territory? Are we doomed to keep on commuting like this?

Yes, we want a new chrono-urbanism to get out of obligatory mobility and move towards chosen mobility. The keywords here are: taking care of reclaimed time; changing rhythms; desaturating public transport, roads, workplaces, and destinations where everyone arrives and leaves at the same time; decentralizing work.

Chronotopia

- Is it still acceptable that buildings are used for a single function, and closed 60-70% of the time?
- Is it sustainable for so many square meters to be so underused?
- How can we better use existing resources to save personal time? To have more social time? How can we reorganize our presence in the urban space?

Yes, we should use places more and for a wider range of uses, and we should change the purposes buildings have to make them more versatile. This is the second element, chronotopia.

Topophilia

- Can we keep accepting the disembodiment of our living places and neighborhoods, which often lack the necessary services to cover our essential needs? Let's take the case of priority neighborhoods (QPV, for Quartiers Prioritaires de la Politique de la Ville). The French Court of Audit was very clear in its February 2020¹⁵ report: "The State spends about €10 billion each year [...]. Despite the

financial and human resources deployed, the attractiveness of priority neighborhoods around three dimensions of daily life - housing, education and economic activity - has made little progress in ten years.” The goal is to “better coordinate urban renewal with social, educational and economic support for residents within the framework of neighborhood projects.”

Yes, we must recreate a functional, social, and emotional connection between inhabitants and their living environments. This third element is toponophilia.

This allows for mutually supportive relationships to be built, as we have seen throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. These relationships need to live and breathe within their neighborhoods. Using public spaces for activities creates social bonds. Just like reinstalling local businesses, cultural and economic activities, and local health centers.

How should this be set up?

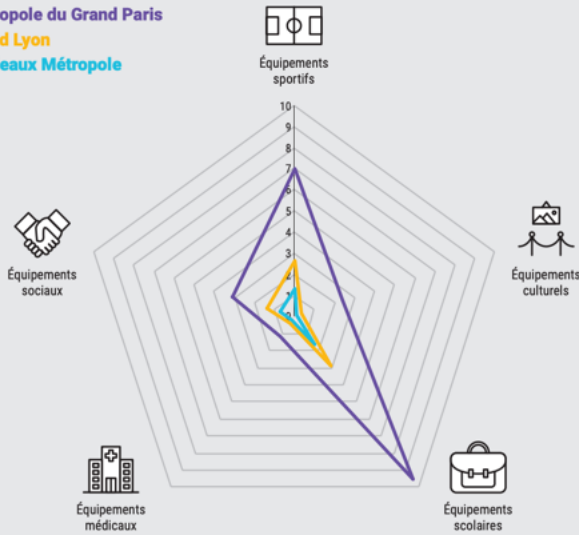
3 Thinking and living the city and territory differently

Our work is rooted in the need to rethink the spatial distribution of urban amenities and their use in urban areas, cities and territories. In a recent book, the Paris Urbanism Agency (APUR) presents our core approach at the scale of Greater Paris¹⁶ (Métropole du Grand Paris), from the standpoint of facilities and services, making these a resource to strengthen the service to users: "Densifying and bringing closer the supply of facilities and services opens up prospects for urban spaces that promote soft mobilities and collaborative and shared models. This model will be promoted by transport projects that reduce distances. In a context of land and financial scarcity, and of environmental and social crises, the supply of public facilities and services can be conceived of through the lens of the 15-minute city." Throughout France, with its great territorial diversity (which is also the case in many places around the world), we find very strong spatial inequalities in terms of equipment and facilities, that reinforce already existing social divides. In this regard, the comparison between Paris, Bordeaux and Lyon is telling, clearly showing the existence of significant differences in the spatial concentration of urban facilities:

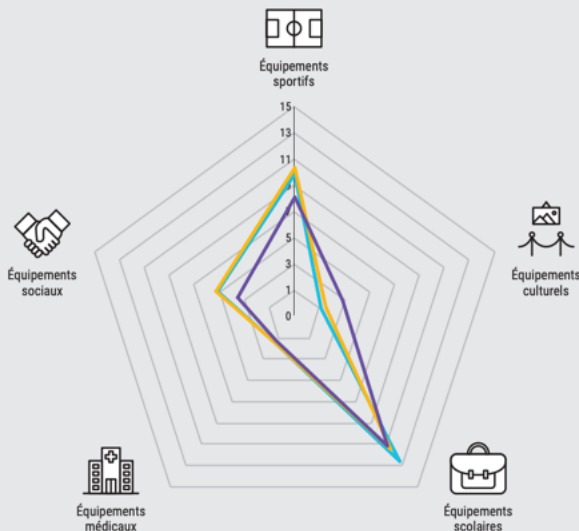
COMPARAISON DE L'OFFRE EN ÉQUIPEMENTS ENTRE LES MÉTROPOLIS DE PARIS, BORDEAUX ET LYON

→ par km²

— Métropole du Grand Paris
— Grand Lyon
— Bordeaux Métropole



→ pour 10 000 habitants



Sources : Base permanente des équipements (BPE), Insee 2018

This approach around a polycentric and multi-use proximity, offers an increase that is not just quantitative, with access to more equipment, but that is also qualitative, based on the idea of pooling infrastructures in order to improve and amplify the services provided by putting resources in common and changing the scales of operation. With the Paris Urbanism Agency (APUR), we discuss the need to optimize what already exists by increasing its temporal modularity, by increasing the availability of services outside of their usual opening hours. Optimizing existing resources also means using spaces that are vacant, unoccupied, or in development, temporarily or permanently. The vacancy of some spaces - such as industrial wastelands, unoccupied offices, or available square meters in the public space (squares, gardens, streets closed to traffic) - offers an opportunity to develop more inventive uses and meet new expectations.

3.1 Decentralization and life in proximity

With the "15-minute city and the half hour territory,"¹⁷ we have proposed another way of thinking about how we use the city and the territory, about its decentralization, its network, the hybridization between compact and less dense areas, in a continuum of polycentricities, by optimizing its resources but also rediscovering its humanity. Faced with decades of "productivist" urbanism that has generated large areas of inequality, fragility, poverty and social exclusion, our concern is centered around the idea of social rebalancing. Resulting from the Great National Debate (Grand Débat National), that ended the period of unrest throughout the country driven by the "Yellow Vests" movement, the recent vote in France of the 3DS¹⁸ Law falls in line with our proposals and shows the importance of rethinking life in urban areas, cities and territories with a new perspective: that of greater decentralization, proximity and diversity within society and its uses. The point is to highlight local action and proximity in the implementation of these essential social readjustments.

Take, for example, the "social housing" component throughout the "social diversity contract," which encourages municipalities to build social housing in affluent neighborhoods. Rent control is one lever to fight gentrification, especially in the central areas of metropolitan zones, where for instance it limits the seizing of housing by seasonal rentals. With the "15-minute city" and the "half-hour territory," we call for creating a backbone based on a policy of local facilities and services that would allow the desaturation of constrained and

obligatory mobilities, and the deconcentration of shopping centers, again becoming “places of life” with a mix of housing, health centers, cultural venues and strolling areas. The 3DS law also allows local elected officials to get involved in the management of health policies, which is a central element where proximity has a key role to play, as we have seen during the pandemic. Inspired by our concepts, we see regions such as Occitanie now offering local health services¹⁹, with the following objectives: “Address and avoid ‘medical deserts’, restore and maintain access to a general practitioner close to home, ideally within 15 minutes.”

Major players in housing, such as “Action Logement,” are launching programs to rethink how we access work in terms of proximity, thus reducing tiring and constrained trips with alternative, decentralized locations: “The corpworking project is based on cooperation between the different actors in the territory, in the service of employees and companies. Our desire is to create sustainable working and development conditions for employees (reducing trips, stress and fatigue, preventing isolation, increasing purchasing power), for companies (optimizing real estate management, agility, facilitated recruitment, CSR) and for territories (easing metropolitan concentration, energizing new territories, reducing the carbon footprint...).”²⁰

In Mexico, inspired by our work, the Institute of the National Fund for Workers' Housing (INFONAVIT) voted in August 2021 for a disruptive measure, developed jointly with the business sector, trade unions and the government, establishing that housing must have primary and secondary schools, health centers, and access to different mobility options within a 2.5 km radius.²¹

We thereby express the need to radically change the temporalities of life and how we use existing resources, to change the rhythms of life, to be able to work differently, to make essential social functions more accessible - for a greater quality of life - to rediscover the intensity of social bonds and the affects lost by the weight of anonymity and loneliness, to reclaim a love for places, to favor otherness in our lives, to recreate and relocate jobs and activities, to reclaim public space for citizens, and to encourage citizens to take part in local life.²²

3.2 The common good, ensuring an urban policy in the service of all

With the “15-minute city” and the “half-hour territory,” we must contend with the deep inequalities in cities that generate very localized wealth, but also poverty, attractiveness and exclusion. Cities where prestigious architectural achievements coexist with fragmented, segmented and fractured urban places²³. To fight against “gentrification,” the key concept is that of the “common good,” which contributes to the general interest, and is reflected in regulatory tools in urban policy: social diversity, urban and commercial land and real estate companies, participatory budgets, local public services. Transitioning towards the common good is the challenge of the next decade, with living spaces everywhere for the commons, all taking up this mutualist motto.

Fighting inequalities through the common good and proximity means giving ourselves the means to provide all territories with public or private services that aim to improve accessibility to goods and services outside any speculative economy. Like the real estate company Foncière Paris Commerce et Proximité, created under the “15-minute city” plan implemented by Anne Hidalgo after her re-election as mayor of Paris, the government is now supporting this approach with the creation of 100 land and real estate companies within the next five years, to revitalize local businesses through the Territories Bank (Banque des Territoires) – and with rent control as a core priority²⁴. “We are thus working in support of the need for proximity - which is a real service to the population - and giving communities the means to take care of themselves,” says Valérie Lasek, Deputy Director for operational and strategic support at the National Agency for Territorial Cohesion. In the field of housing, combining proximity and housing is a powerful approach, thanks to the “15-minute city” and the “half hour territory,” allowing lower income households to access a high quality of life. Urban real estate agencies for housing offer new tools to ease the financial burden on residents²⁵. With polycentric, multi-purpose proximity, we propose new approaches to integrate accessibility to local services, through a tight network of supply, and even through new ways of subscribing to services.²⁶ The “Living Villages” program (Villages vivants) by the MACIF Foundation is a concrete example of how residents can also be involved in this “happy proximity,” thanks to the creation of citizen real estate companies to buy and renovate shops, and providing support for innovative projects that are useful to the territory²⁷.

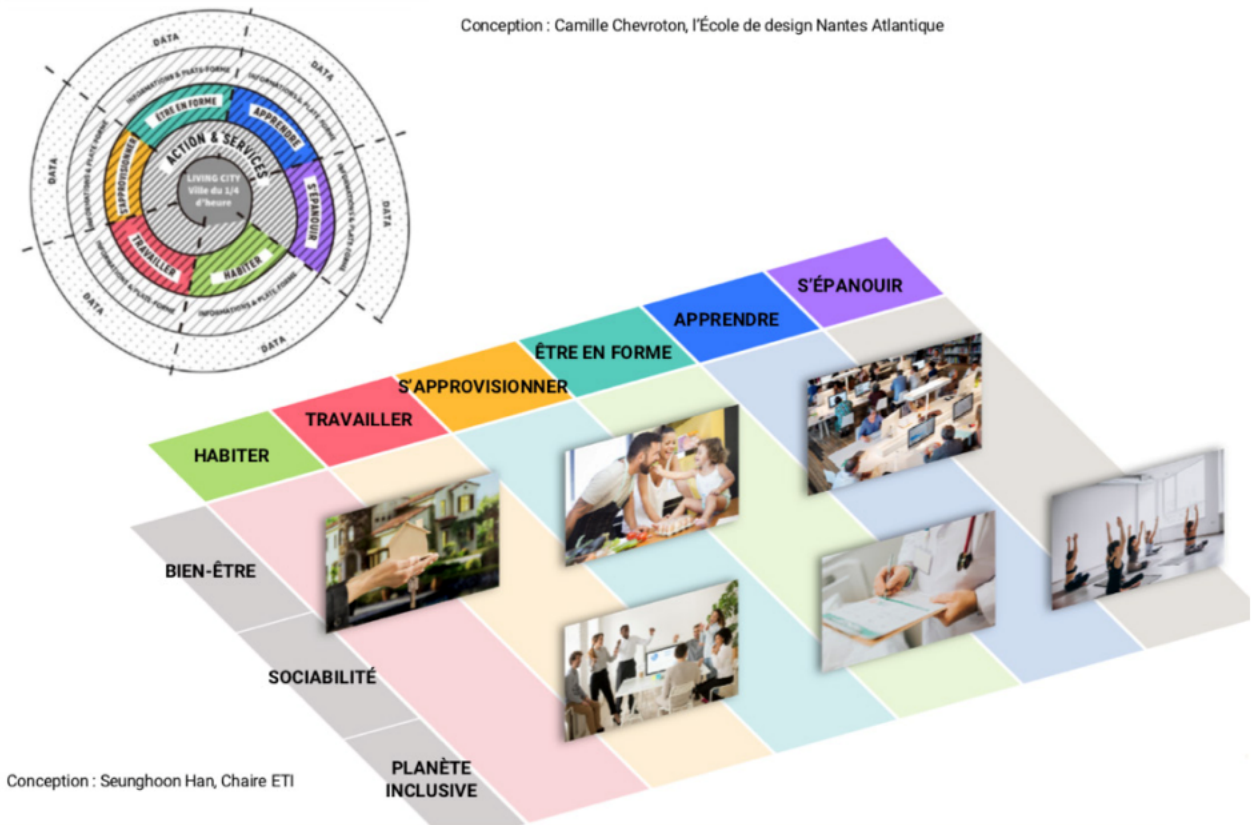
3.3 A new urban ontology for proximity with a high quality of life

We have proposed a new urban ontology²⁸, by modeling six essential urban social functions that are accessible through low-carbon proximity.

This ontology is structured around six social functions, detailed through subcategories: living with dignity, working with fewer commutes, sourcing through local supply channels, taking care of one's physical and mental health locally, accessing education and culture, flourishing in conditions of harmony and resilience with nature. The detailed development of this ontology provides a roadmap in terms of uses and services, irrigating the whole city in a polycentric way.

This ontology is generic, it implies that the 15-minute city, as a model, supports a hierarchical network of amenities mapped onto a system of temporal ranges. However, each territory's specificities (geographical, urban, political, social, etc.) mean it must be adapted from this common root.

The practical goal of this ontology is to build a Traceability Matrix of the High Quality of Societal Life using real data from accessible sets (Permanent database of facilities, open-data, etc.). This Traceability Matrix is structured around six social functions, cross-referenced with three states of the “happy” city: well-being (mine and that of my loved ones), sociability (interactions with neighbors, colleagues...) and the relationship to the planet.



The operational pillars of this model are:

- ecology, to have a low-carbon city with virtuous behavior on a daily basis;
- proximity, to develop new urban economic models that create value, with local trade and corpoworking or decentralized work, for example;
- solidarity, to develop social ties;
- citizen participation to embody this new urban culture.

These elements embody the “15-minute city” with a new matrix for the High Quality of Societal Life and its indicators for social functions that are cross-referenced with those of Well-being, Sociability, and Ecology.²⁹

4 A global movement

Six years ago, it was just a concept. Today, it is a reality in motion and this concept is becoming a global movement.

In March 2020, during the first wave of the pandemic, the C40 (the global network of cities for climate) set up a “COVID-19 Recovery Task Force.” The C40 is a global network of the world's major cities committed to fighting climate change. With a global reach and playing a major role in mobilizing the world's major cities against climate change, in May 2020 the C40 adopted the 15-minute city as an approach for post-Covid urban development.³⁰

Chairing this Task Force is Giuseppe Sala, mayor of Milan - the capital of Lombardy, 6th European city that suffered greatly from Covid, and the European epicenter of this virus that brought all other cities to a standstill. With its share of unprecedented measures, the Covid crisis forced us to question our future. Common efforts and discussions with the C40 on the scope of this crisis led us to champion the “15-minute city” as an urban and territorial solution to bounce back³¹.

This new development is a welcome change. Indeed, five years ago, just after COP21 in Paris, we had already called for a necessary paradigm shift regarding our cities (given that they are the main contributors to CO2 emissions), to fight climate change by calling into question our lifestyles and modes of production, consumption and travel³². We invited people to contemplate another way of life, to break with decades of a functional urbanism that accommodated and encouraged urban specialization and fragmentation, sacrificing quality of life for long travel distances – creating a world where, in the words of Richard Sennett,³³ “distance becomes a vice.” Our proposal was already based on a new model, an urban ontology, which, by confronting theory and practice, proposed a vision of polycentric urbanism, by uses, in circularity, with diversity and high levels of social mixing.

The latest international survey by the “International Workgroup Place”³⁴ and the survey by MOVIN'ON KANTAR³⁵ show that the working population between 18 and 40 years old supports this new urban approach.³⁶ Decentralized places of “corporate working” are appearing³⁷. The C40 has launched a global initiative which has led to concrete projects in 18 cities around the world³⁸. There is now a long list of cities committed to this process.³⁹⁴⁰ Zurich has just held a referendum on this model of the decentralized city⁴¹. China has just announced its “15-Minute Circles of Life” project, while the new master plan for the city of Chengdu has served as the framework for projecting it on a large scale, followed by another 52 cities⁴². In France, several cities have taken steps in this direction, including Paris,

Nantes, Aix-en-Provence, Mulhouse, and the Béthune – Bruay urban community, to name just five cities and territories of different sizes and densities. Many actors in the private sector have also joined this paradigm. The French postal service, La Poste, has just launched its new “Business Unit” based on proximity.⁴³⁴⁴ Other projects that champion the “15-minute city” are now under way. For instance, Altarea has signed an agreement with Carrefour to transform the property footprint of its hypermarket in Nantes by using the concept of the “15-minute city.” In a more structural way and on an international level, in January 2021, the Mulliez family launched Nhood in the 18 countries in which it is established, a new urban services operator whose goal is to regenerate urban real estate and transform an initial portfolio of 82 commercial sites managed in France. Around the world, many real estate developers and private sector actors are transforming places that were until now entirely devoted to offices - or to built real-estate with a different use - into spaces that accommodate a real mix of uses and services.

In the wake of this global movement, we are pleased to announce the upcoming launch, at the World Urban Forum in Katowice, Poland in June, of the International Proximity Observatory, in association with UN – HABITAT, the C40 and Smart City Expo World Congress and with the support of the Obel Foundation. This action highlights the continued importance of proximity in the coming years for regenerating and revitalizing our cities and territories in a time of climate crisis and in post-Covid-19 life.

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The 15-minute city: a project accessible to all,... is it?

- Pierre Veltz

Industrial relocation, local circuits of all kinds and promoting the modest, the small in the face of the big: proximity is the focal point of current and developing values. How else would we account for the huge success of the “15-minute city” concept? I believe that it sums up the aspiration to proximity that has become a key feature of our society, gaining media coverage thanks to its simplicity. The platforms in the latest municipal elections, with their general endorsement of the “village” model, are a striking illustration of this¹. It is as if this vision of a new residential Arcadia, green, peaceful and gentle, has become the main feature of urban policies.²

The return of proximity as a value: why?

What are the roots of this glorification of proximity? They are undoubtedly many, but I see three in particular.

Ecological awareness (which is stronger in France than is often portrayed) plays a part, because of the almost unanimous belief in “the closer, the more better”. The case of food highlights this. Marketing surveys show that consumers value local products more than organic products, for example. Transport is the villain, even though its carbon impact must be compared to the footprints of production and consumption.

The second driving force is undoubtedly the most powerful: it is the fatigue resulting from the evolution of lifestyles and the growth of mobility, due to “the shift from living 5 km away to living 30 km away”, as Jean Viard put it so well. Only the generations that grew up in the 1950s and 1960s have really experienced a world where everything was just a few kilometers away, completely accessible on foot and by bicycle, including in large urban areas. Now, people seem to be nostalgic for what they have never really experienced. Mobile Lives Forum readers are undoubtedly familiar with the basic data: the distance between home and work has multiplied by almost 2 in 30 years, and 2 out of 3 wage-earners work outside their home town, all of course with considerable variations around these averages. In France, local mobility accounts for 60% of the distances traveled and 70% of transport-related GHG emissions³. The spread of daily mobility, which is increasingly diversified in terms of reasons but still mainly structured by the home-work relationship, has enabled many households to avoid medium – or long – distance residential migration. But this comes at very high costs, both for individuals and communities, not to mention the GHG emissions resulting from a growing structural dependence on the automobile.

In addition, this negative spiral has been particularly strong in France because of the specific pattern of residential sprawl on our cities’ outskirts⁴: that is, a very fragmented sprawl, without sufficient critical mass to afford everyone close access to everyday services and to mass, low-carbon public transportation. It is this fragmentation that is the problem, not the much-criticized “sprawl”. In fact, it has been

encouraged by decentralization, which has granted almost total control to municipalities, however small, over urban planning, including housing policy and lax commercial planning. Significant investments in public transport have been made in the heart of urban areas, but they contribute only marginally to the reduction of GHG emissions, and have not reduced the overall use of cars in the country. A very large part of the population therefore remains “trapped” in a lifestyle that depends on the car and long travel times, with no alternative solution likely to change the situation in the short term⁵.

A profound cultural change

Beyond these functional aspects, I suggest that the growing value attached to proximity expresses, in the third place, a diffuse and profound cultural dimension: people’s aspiration to regain control over their own existence, the growing reluctance to being mere pawns in large organizations with no territorial ties; the urge to decide for themselves how to combine work and family life. Rüdiger Safranski rightly speaks of the need for “clearing” that we feel in our globalized world’s jungle of flows and interdependencies⁶. One can also speak of a “revolt against the abstraction” of contemporary life⁷. In this respect, we are living in a pivotal period. Indeed, the pandemic has not only made us aware of the technical potentials of telework – marking a “technical” break in our temporal and spatial organizations – it has also led many people to take a step back from the “lock-in” logic they were subjected to in terms of work and lifestyle; to voice previously latent or self-censored dissatisfactions; to re-examine not only working conditions, but the very quality of their jobs. Their reluctant return to company premises, the increase in resignations and changes in activities are all symptoms of this. The advocacy of proximity is then a way to take back the reins of their lives, even if this means collective and societal perspectives taking a back seat.

Is the “15-minute” city an adequate response?

The usefulness and relevance of an idea cannot be evaluated in abstracto. That is why I considered it necessary to recap the context, as I have done above. Even a utopia is only worthwhile if it offers even the narrowest path to changing reality. My doubts about the “15-minute” city, therefore, first and foremost concern its realism, with regard to concrete situations. I also question the underlying normative dimension.

Of course, everyone will subscribe to a theoretical vision in which all the benefits of urban life would be accessible in no time, within walking or cycling distance, including in rural areas. But is that possible? The answer will look very different depending on whether or not employment is included in the perimeter of the 15-minute city.

Leaving aside the work issue, it is worth revisiting urban organization through a better-structured principle of proximity, in terms of accessibility of services, improving their provision, and social links. This is true, for example, of the most emblematic application of Carlos Moreno’s ideas: the city of Paris, which has adopted the “15-minute city” as a guiding principle for the revision of its PLU (local urban plan), and which has also created a deputy mayor’s delegation specifically responsible for implementing this principle. When applied, it is largely concerned with strengthening the neighborhood as a unit of life, with interesting avenues⁸ such as the neighborhood capital school, the adaptation of shops and neighborhood cultural platforms, etc. More generally, a new vision of proximity can lead to innovative ways of thinking about urban spaces, with the multiplication of what Isabelle Barraud-Serfaty calls “proximity operators”, both public and private⁹, or of seeing residential buildings as resources, not only for their inhabitants but also for neighborhoods; by welcoming new services¹⁰, or by opening up schools to neighborhood life.

The problem is that these approaches are still tied to the sole domain of the residential city, and to a vision centered only on the interests of neighborhoods’ inhabitants. The “15-minute city” already exists in Paris, as well as in the heart of large cities and medium-sized ones. The difficult question – the real question, as I see it – begins when the discussion includes the separation between places of residence and work, and when we take into account the (majority) part of the population that lives in suburban areas, as well as in the sparsely populated areas on the outskirts and away from city centres. Is it reasonable to think that in a fairly large urban area, most jobs could be found in local spaces such as neighborhoods? Could a metropolis, in particular, be made up of a series of 15-minute villages, all more or less balanced in terms of housing/services/employment? In the current context, I daresay the answer is no. We are faced with powerful logics over which policies actually have little control. Employment tends to be concentrated in the areas that are considered most suitable, and remains thin elsewhere (think of logistics centers in particular). Meanwhile, the dynamics of land prices tend inexorably to drive the less wealthy inhabitants to ever more distant outskirts¹¹. In this respect, the “15-minute city” discourse remains at best a hollow shell.

Moreover, what is the main driving force behind large cities’ development? It is to offer more diversity and provide opportunities by expanding the labor market and the space of accessible jobs. However, in the same household, the probability that both spouses will find a job within the same limited area is very low. When both parents are wage-earners, the constraints of blended families and the consequences of the expansion of higher education are processes which help to explain the growth of metropolises, which in reality affect where people choose to live as well as companies’ preferences for premises, both with similar objectives of reducing uncertainty and opening up possibilities.

Telework: New opportunities and new inequalities

It is argued that telework, and mixed solutions such as community offices in low-density areas like the Dutch “smart work centers”, which predate the recent explosion of home-based work, can provide an answer to the problem. Undoubtedly, these are very profound changes. They will definitely lead to readjustments towards proximity, with a reduction in the massive twice-daily commute to computer terminals, now available in their homes. But not everyone will be able to telework. Admittedly, contrary to popular belief, teleworking is by no means reserved for the most highly-skilled jobs. One of the major impacts could be the return of a large wave of low-skilled, outsourced service jobs¹², not only on an urban scale, but also nationally and internationally. Nevertheless, many jobs will continue to involve physical presence and temporal synchronization. This is the case, in particular – and this has been repeated a lot during the pandemic – for a large part of those so-called “essential” workers: without them, the 15-minute city dwellers’ peaceful residential life would simply cease to be possible. Yet, these so-called essential employees are, in the big cities, by no means able to afford to live in the 15-minute city!

This brings me to my fundamental reticence: the 15-minute city (in practice) pays little attention to inequalities in people's location choices and living environments.

Consider again the emblematic example of Paris-Centre. More than a million jobs are held by employees who live outside the ring road, and often very far away indeed. What does the 15-minute city promoted by Paris future "bioclimatic PLU" mean for a nurse at the Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital who lives in Saint Maur or Lognes, for a cab driver who lives in La Courneuve, for the cashier at the local organic convenience store who comes from Trappes? And what does it mean for an employee working on the Roissy or Orly platforms, or in the logistics centers that dot the outlying highways, inaccessible except by car! The Paris conurbation certainly has a very specific set of problems, but the situation is not very different in Lyon, Lille, Marseille and many other metropolitan areas. And what about rural areas, where the corollary of low density is the lengthening of distances traveled?

Taken together, these are not isolated examples, but our country's reality. The true test of a concept that claims to be innovative is to apply it to difficult cases, not just easy ones like Paris-Centre or other city centers. This is certainly not Carlos Moreno's vision, but the caricature of a 15-minute city would be the following: a well-off city, where the majority of people work at home, or in their country houses, with abundant local services supplied by people from multiple backgrounds who, even in their wildest dreams, will never have access to housing in the city centers, unless we bring back servants' quarters in the attics. So, I will be all for the 15-minute city when someone explains to me how it is accessible, not only to my neighbors in the Fifth Arrondissement (a wealthy part of Paris), but also to my cleaning lady, who lives in La Courneuve (a deprived area).

Retrenchment and hospitality

I would like to add a final remark, concerning the normative dimension. One of the main virtues, as I see it, of the 15-minute city should be openness and, better still, hospitality. Here again, I am not accusing Carlos Moreno. But I am disturbed by these representations of closed circles, found, for example, on the city of Paris site. Should each neighborhood become a self-centered isolate? When the city of Paris proudly announced that bicycles had now displaced cars, some pointed out that commuters and tourists still came to clutter up the city, which had finally been returned to its inhabitants. This is the heart of the matter, indeed. Is my nurse from Lognes a "Parisian" or not? She does not vote in Paris, of course, but without her, what would become of the city? Paris is but one example among thousands of these communes (boroughs) where "the democracy of sleep" dominates, as Jean Viard put it. Only those who sleep there can vote (fewer and fewer of them, besides, if double residences and wealthy Parisians' massive absenteeism are taken into account). We wish that, in Parisian documents, the presence of non-resident Parisians (employees, craftsmen, occasional workers, visitors of all kinds, migrants...) was affirmed, as well as the city-center's responsibilities in their regard.

Behind the image of the 15-minute city, therefore, immediately arises the matter of the scales of governance, decision-making, participation and responsibility, all of them increasingly dissociated from real lives. If the 15-minute city leads to opening up such issues, so much the better. But it should not obscure them in the name of an essentially localist vision of living space.

This is not just a theoretical risk. Whether we like it or not, these visions of the quiet, peaceful, shady city, entirely oriented towards the nearby, that is, more or less, the similar reek of closure. What happened to energy and otherness, the twin engines of the urban creative adventure? I spent my entire childhood and youth in a small town, which was the perfect illustration of the 15-minute city. I knew its charms, but I could not wait to get away from it. Surely, I am not the only one.

Notes

- 1 <https://www.telos-eu.com/fr/societe/municipales-tous-villageois.html>
- 2 I will only mention the case of the French territory, which itself shows much variation.
- 3 See Jean Coldefy et al. Décarboner la mobilité, ATEC, ITS, January 2021
- 4 It should be remembered that residential France is divided roughly into three thirds: agglomerated areas close to the heart of the metropolis, small towns and rural areas, and the large areas that make up the remote outskirts of large cities, the latter being the area that has experienced the strongest growth.
- 5 See Jean Coldefy et al. Décarboner la mobilité, ATEC, ITS, January 2021
- 6 Rüdiger Safranski. Quelle dose de mondialisation l'homme peut-il supporter ? Actes Sud, 2005
- 7 Pierre Veltz, L'économie désirable, Seuil, 2021
- 8 <https://www.paris.fr/dossiers/paris-ville-du-quart-d-heure-ou-le-pari-de-la-proximite-37>
- 9 <https://www.ibicity.fr/qui-seront-les-operateurs-de-la-proximite-de-demain/>
- 10 Séverine Chapus, Pierre Veltz, Les Echos, 25 août 2020 <https://www.lesechos.fr/idees-debats/cercle/opinion-lisolation-thermique-nest-pas-la-solution-miracle-1236502>
- 11 Beyond the nearby suburbs which are often, but not always, richer than the centers themselves.
- 12 Richard Baldwin, Globotics Upheaval, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2019.

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Associate Professor at the IAE Paris of the Panthéon Sorbonne University and Scientific Director of the ETI Chair, Entrepreneurship, Territory, Innovation, Carlos Moreno has gained international recognition thanks to his pioneering concepts, bringing an innovative perspective to urban issues. Picture: Thomas Baltes



Pierre Veltz

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Pierre Veltz is an engineer and sociologist by training, but he favours interdisciplinary approaches. He is interested in the transformations of industry, technologies, cities and territories. In recent years, he has focused his work on the ecological bifurcation (see his latest book: L'économie désirable, sortir du mode thermo-fossile, Seuil, 2021). He has always intertwined research and practice. He has directed the École des ponts, contributed to the Grand Paris projects and piloted the great Paris-Saclay project. He is heavily involved in the IHEDATE (Institut des hautes études d'aménagement des territoires en Europe), of which he chairs the scientific council. He received the Grand Prix de l'urbanisme in 2017. He has five grandchildren, and hopes that the world they will live in will be habitable and peaceful.

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