

Famous for 15 minutes?

Speculation about the death of commuting may turn out to be premature, but the legacy of lockdown could promote a place-making revolution in urban planning.

Mark Sutcliffe investigates the 15-minute city model

The Covid-19 lockdown forced millions of people to spend much more time in their immediate neighbourhoods and many of them began to see their communities in a new – and often more favourable – light.

Liberated from the daily grind of their journeys to work, commuters have enjoyed the additional opportunities for recreation, exercise, interaction and collaboration provided by working from home.

Is it possible this new-found sense of community could precipitate a revolution in urban planning which prioritises a decentralised, devolved approach? Such a solution would need to focus on transforming cities and their suburbs into networks of urban villages where everything important is just a 15-minute walk or bike ride away.

The 15-Minute Neighbourhood concept has been around for a while. Transport is at its heart given the fundamental principles rely on active travel and good public transport to give residents access to all essential amenities without making long journeys by car.

Instead of sucking workers, shoppers and students into congested city centres, the 15-minute approach devolves the provision of day-to-day needs to a neighbourhood, so nobody needs to travel more than 15 minutes to earn a living, buy food, see a doctor and educate their children.

The aim is to create a dense interconnected mesh of self-sufficient urban villages or 'complete communities', reducing car use and, with it, the need for space to accommodate and park private cars, leaving more space for humans.

FROM THE SUBURBS TO THE CITY CENTRE

The concept of the 15-minute neighbourhood originated in the US and Australia, where sprawling suburbs with scarce public transport created congestion problems as hundreds of thousands of commuters drove into the city centre every day.

In Europe, some planners believe we are closer to the 15-minute neighbourhood than Australia and the USA, but many European cities remain overly reliant on cars and the continuing



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Sutcliffe has a background in automotive journalism, specialising in the corporate fleet and company car sector. More recently, he has taken a special interest in electric vehicles and sustainable mobility. He launched the #walk1000miles initiative in 2014, authored a white paper on company car fleet uptake of electric vehicles in 2016 and writes for a number of transport and business publications.

growth in traffic and resultant declines in urban air quality have forced a re-evaluation.

A major turning point came with the election of Anne Hidalgo as Mayor of Paris in 2014. Uncompromising anti-car policies were a significant plank in Hidalgo's election platform and the concept of the 15-minute neighbourhood was another eye-catching policy which contributed to her emphatic re-election this year.

Since Hidalgo's election, local government officials across Europe have shown greater enthusiasm for taking back control of city streets from cars and trucks and giving the space back to residents.

C40 Cities' urban planning programme manager Flavio Coppola says: "Most European cities are closer to the ideal – primarily because their cores were built before the arrival of the car – but there is still a lot to do in the suburbs of European cities that are mostly car-oriented."

"There is the potential to set more ambitious goals such as building schools at the local level to reduce school run traffic or ensuring everyone has access to green spaces such as parks and creating smaller local health centres to handle day-to-day medical issues."

According to Greg McClymont, assistant director of the National Infrastructure Commission, to an extent, parts of London already operate on this basis.

"London already feels like a collection of villages, but it's more of a challenge in the outskirts of big cities, where transport in some of the suburbs is geared to getting people into the city centre," he says.

The obvious exception to the establishment of 15-minute neighbourhoods in larger UK cities such as London, ►

2014
the year Anne Hidalgo became mayor of Paris and anti-car policies followed

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Hélène Chartier,
C40 Cities

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► Birmingham and Greater Manchester centres on where people work.

"Work is the exception to the rule," says McClymont – this is the only reason I have for travelling into central London and that certainly takes more than 15 minutes from where I live in South London.

"In the future, the expectation to be in the office five days a week may give way to a more flexible approach with a larger element of working from home."

DUMP THE 'ZONING' PHILOSOPHY

Top-down, centralised strategic planning has delivered 'zoned development' in cities around the world, where residential, leisure and economic activity have increasingly become siloed in designated areas of the city that are often miles apart.

Hélène Chartier, head of zero carbon

▲ **The desire to separate places of work from where we live gave rise to giant developments such as Canary Wharf in London's former docks**

development at C40 Cities, felt that for 15-minute neighbourhoods to thrive, it's time to abandon those policies.

Chartier says: "In the '80s and '90s, we became obsessed with zoned development and separating the places where we worked from places where we lived. This gave rise to huge office developments like La Défense in Paris and Canary Wharf in London.

"15-minute neighbourhoods are about the deconstruction of this way of thinking. Today's city neighbourhoods need to be more diverse and multifunctional. If you go to Bank in London or Grand Central in New York at the weekend, they are deserted – which doesn't make sense. We need to make good use of all parts of the city every day of the week – we need 'life everywhere'."

"But, out in the suburbs, Paris is very

segmented and we can't adopt a 'life everywhere' model. So, I think the model for the suburbs is to encourage the development of retail and amenities around a series of 'polycentric' high streets which become a focus for life in each suburb."

McClymont adds: "The majority of our residential and commercial property has already been built and it's hard to change people's behaviour simply through improving their transport choices.

"But, when it comes to deciding what we build in the future, there is more scope to shape behaviour. Demand for urban living continues to grow, but the rate of development isn't keeping pace with demand.

"Decision-making about planning and infrastructure needs to be devolved down to city and region level and it's essential local bodies have access to the funding that makes all of this possible. Local planners and mayors have a better grasp of what their residents need and are better placed to make the right planning decisions than people sitting in offices in Whitehall."

ACTIVE AND PUBLIC TRANSPORT AT HEART OF THE 15-MINUTE MODEL

Provision of safe walking and cycling infrastructure and access to frequent, reliable, affordable public transport is what makes the 15-minute model work. Without these fundamentals in place, some residents will continue to use their cars, reducing the environmental, economic and safety dividends that flow from the model.

In Liverpool, the combined authority already had detailed plans to introduce more active travel and integration between transport modes as part of a wider decarbonisation strategy.

The Covid crisis enabled city authorities to introduce 'pop-up' active travel infrastructure, which is now being converted to more permanent solutions.

Liverpool City Region's interim director of integrated transport Shane Fitzpatrick says the focus was on creating self-sufficient communities with easy walking and cycling access to the full spectrum of essential services, shops, recreation and workplaces where feasible.

"The school run is a major focus for us because many of those journeys are less than 2km (just more than a mile), which is walkable or cyclable, so we have been focusing on creating clearways near schools to almost blanket out car provision.

"We produced a short journey strategy three years ago and went on to create a 10-year strategy for walking and cycling. So, when Covid arrived, we looked at planned interventions and accelerated them.

"The pop-up walking and cycling measures we have introduced are a prelude to the

permanent interventions we were already planning. We've secured the initial funding to implement the pop-up measures – and how that is delivered and performs will unlock the longer term funding required to make these measures permanent.

"The mechanisms are in place to encourage delivery of this active travel infrastructure rather than just talking about it."

Rachel Lee, of place-making thinktank Living Streets says: "In the UK, we tend to talk about low traffic neighbourhoods and London is the only place they've really been tried. There are some 'home zones' and similar ideas elsewhere, but they never really took off, because we have never really committed to the vision of what a low traffic neighbourhood could be.

"In the Netherlands, a home zone comes with speed limits and a whole host of measures that prioritise walking and cycling over car use. If you're going to do it properly, you need to invest in traffic calming and safe walking and cycling infrastructure rather than simply advising people that they might want to consider walking and cycling more.

"But, it's not a question of banning cars. You put in modal filters which make it possible to access the neighbourhood by car, but make it very difficult to transit by car. It's about making it less convenient to use a car in those neighbourhoods and certainly slower than walking or using a bike for a short journey."

THE LOCKDOWN LEGACY

Until this spring, millions of people in and around our large cities still spent hundreds of hours a year commuting. But Covid has ruthlessly exposed the fragility of this daily migration into the city centre while also revealing some potential solutions.

Many large corporates and multinationals were quietly beginning to question whether they needed quite so much office space in costly city centre locations and – according to some analysts – the pandemic has accelerated these reviews.

Coppola says: "Decentralisation of jobs is essential to fully realising the 15-minute model, because jobs are one of the fundamental drivers of where people want to live. If the location of jobs becomes more spread out, people will have shorter commutes."

Many advocates of the 15-minute neighbourhood believe employers will begin to embrace a more decentralised model in which employees work within a hybrid framework of online collaboration with access to smaller local offices and less frequent commutes to large city centre HQs.

Chartier adds: "Work is the last pillar of the zoned development approach we need to deconstruct to fully embrace the 15-minute model. And teleworking is the key to

devolving work for office-based workers who rely on computers to do their jobs.

"But, there are many essential workers who can't work from home on a laptop and we need to make sure these workers have access to a stock of good quality housing near to where they work which they can actually afford to live in.

"Currently, millions of these key workers, who aren't always very well paid, are maybe living 90 minutes away from where they work, which places a huge burden on them in terms of costs and the time spent travelling.

"And it's this combination of flexible teleworking for knowledge workers and

improved access to central housing that transforms the demand for transport – especially during the peak rush hour – and makes cities more liveable for everyone."

COULD PLACE-MAKING DRIVE THE COVID RECOVERY?

The Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES) has conducted research showing that encouraging consumers to spend at local independent retailers creates a more circular economy in which a higher proportion of spend remains in circulation within the local economy.

As part of its Covid recovery strategy, the Manchester-based thinktank has ►



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► launched a new community wealth-building handbook, *Own the Future*, which aims to retain as much wealth as possible in the economy – making it stick.

At its core is a focus on forms of business which are locally-owned and create a multiplier effect of benefits for local people, employees and communities.

Local 'community wealth hubs' of social, retail and recreational activity implied by the 15-minute model could not only revitalise struggling local high streets, but also recharge local economies, creating more jobs which don't require a long commute.

"Now is clearly the moment to seriously mobilise a decade of community wealth-building work by local government, citizens, businesses and a host of anchor institutions," says Frances Jones, associate director at CLES.

"The concept of 15-minute neighbourhoods aligns closely with this approach and provides a useful framework for local authorities at all levels – from metro regions to town councils – grappling with building back healthier, more resilient and self-sufficient local economies.

"These proposals constitute a profound reimagining of 10 years of mainstream economic development practice and run counter to the thrust of much UK national policy.

"But, if we are to build an economy that works for communities, that works to address climate change and creates resilience where there is risk and precarity, then this is the approach we must take."

A BASIS TO BUILD BACK BETTER?

According to C40 Cities' Coppola, the reason the 15-minute neighbourhood is getting a lot of traction right now is the mobility restrictions imposed by lockdown.

"We've seen the space within which we move shrink quite a lot," says Coppola. "We have become more dependent on our immediate proximity and some of us have realised that the doctors, pharmacies, food shops and places to exercise aren't always available.

"That's why the 15-minute neighbourhood has suddenly provided such a powerful vision for recovery from the Covid pandemic – not just by building more liveable cities – but by creating the resilient, diverse, less polluted communities which we may need to rely on more in the future.

"This model can help cities deal with and bounce back from crises like the pandemic, but also from other shocks which may become more widespread – such as the impacts of accelerating climate change in the form of heatwaves or flooding."

Metro mayors like Dan Jarvis, Steve Rotherham and Andy Burnham have made it clear that returning to normal is not good enough; we need to build back better.

Jenny Holmes, assistant director of strategic transport at Sheffield City Region says Covid had accelerated patterns that were already emerging.

"Covid has highlighted weaknesses in all sorts of areas and focusing on more robust and resilient communities will be a big part of our strategic response. Our planning

90%

of residents to be able to easily walk or cycle to all basic needs by 2030 is the Portland goal

frameworks have got to start reflecting the risks we now face in the very complex environment we have created.

"Working quickly to make temporary active travel infrastructure permanent is going to be a priority and we need to inject some agility into the way we work in the public sector to deliver on this.

"In Sheffield, we hope to accelerate our Low Traffic Neighbourhoods initiative, which, we believe, will work well alongside schemes to create more active travel corridors in our cities. Together, these policies create huge opportunities for place-making and starting a really positive planning conversation with residents and policymakers."

GARDEN VILLAGES OR A NEW GENERATION OF DORMITORY TOWNS?

Although the ideal of 15-minute neighbourhoods may be within reach in many UK cities, outside the city limits a novel form of urban sprawl is undermining the concept.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson has promised to "build, build, build" our way out of the Covid recession, but planning experts have raised concerns that we may be sleep-walking into recreating US-style suburbs in the middle of the countryside.

Britain's much-vaunted garden villages and towns programme is in

danger of producing higher density copies of the sprawling suburbs the 15-minute neighbourhood was designed to tackle.

Centred on rail connections and new interchanges, many of these supposedly desirable residential areas are in danger of being built without any of the social, civic and transport infrastructure that reduces reliance on the car.

According to a study by Transport for New Homes (TfNH), the 50 garden developments currently under construction across the UK have tiny gardens and more space allocated to the cars and roads which their residents are dependent on to get to work and amenities.

The report says because of their comparatively small size, garden villages will struggle to find enough passengers for commercial public transport services to be viable.

Instead, residents of new towns like St Cuthbert's near Carlisle, Tresham near Corby and Churchill Garden Village in Somerset may be forced to travel as far as seven miles to buy a pint of milk.

Jenny Raggett, project coordinator at Transport for New Homes, says: "It looks like garden communities are to become car-based commuter estates just like any other – exactly what the Government wanted to avoid.

"Although the theme of the 'local' and 'self-sufficient' is the official line, the language adopted in the promotion of garden villages makes great play of their

strategic location for long-distance commuting. It is doubtful, given this emphasis, that local shops and services will flourish."

Steve Chambers, sustainable transport campaigner at Transport for New Homes, adds: "Our visits to sites of garden towns and garden villages highlighted the chasm between the visions and the built reality.

"We found that because of remote locations, public transport was rarely already provided and funding had not been secured to make it available when residents move in.

"Walking and cycling were clearly afterthoughts and even in the better examples did not provide safe and convenient routes to basic amenities beyond the development boundary.

"Car dependency is being built into garden towns and garden villages by design."

Rachel Lee, of Living Streets, endorsed the TfNH report and says it highlighted more fundamental issues in the wider planning system. "The main thrust of planning policy now seems to focus on getting as many houses as possible built as quickly as possible and the problem with that is that you don't then plan places appropriately," she says.

"This leads to the approval of large, car-dependent developments outside of towns usually utilising banked land which a large house-builder has been sitting on for years.

"Local authorities are then expected to get the developers to provide the associated services by allocating funds via Community

7 miles

is the distance some new town residents may have to travel to buy a pint of milk

Infrastructure Levy or section 106 payments, meaning you only get the bare minimum of infrastructure within each development. That leaves only a very small pot of cash to pay for extras like active travel infrastructure, so the place-making aspects get lost along the way.

"The whole point of planning is to make sure places function at every level and transport is key to that.

"We should be prioritising within place-making, active travel first and public transport second and private vehicles last. But, under the current planning framework, that's very difficult to do."

C40 Cities' Coppola sums up the current state of play well: "Planning is all about encouraging private enterprise within a public framework and the irony is that we now seem to want to recreate a lot of the spontaneity that was happening before there was any form of planning regulation.

"The power of this vision is that it doesn't pitch one group against another: it really is aiming for something very basic that everyone cares about – which is making the area in which you live as pleasant as it can be and avoiding the need to lose a lot of time getting from where you live to wherever you need to be for whatever reason." ST

TURN OVER FOR THE PEER REVIEWS

15-minute cities around the world

PARIS

Mayor Anne Hidalgo has already invested in making the city more walkable and safer to cycle in. Buoyed by her re-election, the next phase of Hidalgo's 'Paris en Commun' reforms could include the introduction of more neighbourhood co-working spaces, a further increase in active travel infrastructure at the expense of road space for cars, more office space in the suburbs and a greater use of multifunctional spaces.

MILAN

It's early days, but mayor Giuseppe Sala has committed the city to a green recovery from Covid-19 by converting 35km (22 miles) of streets to encourage safer cycling and walking. There is also provision

for a low traffic neighbourhood, pedestrianised school streets and lower speed limits.

OTTAWA

City authorities want to transform Ottawa into the most liveable mid-sized city in North America by creating a community of 15-minute neighbourhoods which will incorporate integrated residential hubs with a wider spread of amenities and retail, improved public transport and an expanded role for active travel.

MELBOURNE

Launched in January two and a half years ago, Melbourne's 20-minute neighbourhood trials focused on active travel and improved public transport to create healthier communities

in three city suburbs. Following successful completion of the trials, the 20-minute model is now embedded in Melbourne's planning strategy.

UTRECHT

The new Merwede district involves the construction of 6,000 new homes linked to new schools, health centres, shops and businesses by a network of pedestrian and cycle routes. The amenities will be constructed and open by the time the first residents move in.

PORTLAND

The Oregon city aims to extend 20-minute neighbourhoods to allow 90% of its residents to easily walk or cycle to meet all basic, daily, non-work needs by 2030.



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