

15 Minute Cities - Are They Worth It?

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Abstract

15 minute cities are cities in which almost everything a person needs is within a 15 minute walk, cycle or public transit ride from any point in the city. This essay assesses the positive and negative impacts that 15 minute cities can have. It also investigates the recent criticism towards 15 minute cities, as well as analysing the future of the urban planning concept. The essay concludes that although the concept offers potential benefits in terms of sustainability, liveability, and community resilience, it may not be feasible for every city, as effective planning and community engagement are crucial to create inclusive and resilient cities. However, elements of this concept are still valuable in guiding urban planning and development schemes towards more sustainable and inclusive futures.

1. What is a 15 Minute City?

A 15 minute city (FMC) is an urban planning concept in which most daily necessities and services, such as workplaces, shopping opportunities, education, healthcare, and leisure facilities can easily be reached by a 15 minute walk, bike ride, or public transit ride from any point in the city ('15-minute city, 2022). This approach aims to reduce car dependency, promote healthy and sustainable living, and improve wellbeing for city dwellers. The concept gained significant traction in recent years after Paris's Mayor Anne Hidalgo included a plan to implement the FMC concept during her 2020 re-election campaign (Morris, 2023; Ullmann, 2023). Since then, this urban planning scheme has grown in popularity and there are numerous UK cities that have implemented this concept, including Birmingham, Canterbury, and Ipswich. Oxford is currently in the process of becoming a FMC, although this has created high levels of controversy. Whilst this concept is currently popular in European cities, the model can be crafted to respond to the challenges of other geographies, including those of the Global South.

2. What is the Origin of This Concept?

There is nothing new about the FMC concept as many neighbourhoods around the world were historically built this way. The idea of reducing distances, and therefore travel times between homes, workplaces, and shops has been promoted by town planners for decades, partly as an alternative to typical low-density housing estates many miles from the nearest shop. However, the term FMC was initially coined in 2016 by Carlos Moreno, a professor at the Sorbonne University in Paris (Shauenberg, 2023), as a way of rethinking urban planning. In his original vision, nobody would live more than a short walk away from essential services such as shops, work, school, or a hospital. The idea has since been adopted by several cities around the world, with the Mayor of Paris being one of its most high-profile supporters.

3. What are the Benefits of 15 Minute Cities?

3.1 Environmental Benefits

By minimising the need for long commutes and car trips, FMCs can help reduce traffic congestion and lower carbon emissions, contributing to a more sustainable environment. In 2022, 58% of all trips in England were made by car, either as a driver or passenger (RAC Foundation n.d), and vehicular transportation accounts for more than 78% of emissions in urban areas (Zaheer, 2022). By ensuring that essential services and amenities are within a short distance from residential areas, people spend less time travelling to work or running errands. This not only reduces traffic congestion but also contributes to lower levels of stress associated with long commutes. In Paris, Hidalgo invested significantly in the transportation and sustainability sectors, including the repurposing half of the 140,000 car parking spaces in the city (Vaughn, 2023), and as a result, individual cars only provide mobility to 13% of the city's population (Verma, 2023). Furthermore, if services are local to the homes of people, fewer people will drive to the services, as walking or riding a bike there takes approximately the same amount of time. Although it would be difficult to completely removed the need for mobility achieved by vehicles, car usage would significantly decrease if FMCs were implemented, reducing fuel consumption which contributes to efforts to combat climate change.

3.2 Improved Quality of Life

Easy access to essential services and amenities can enhance residents' quality of life by saving time and fostering a sense of community. With shorter commute times and easier access to amenities, residents of FMCs have more time to spend with family and friends, or to pursue hobbies and leisure activities. This can lead to greater overall wellbeing and satisfaction with urban living. Moreover, when services are located within proximity to residential areas, communities tend to

become tighter knit. Residents have more opportunities to interact with each other, fostering a sense of belonging and social cohesion. This can lead to the establishment of vibrant neighbourhood cultures, stronger community bonds, and a greater sense of belonging.

3.3 Improved Health

Encouraging walking and cycling as primary modes of transportation can lead to a population leading more active lifestyles. Active travel is a great way to get regular exercise, which can help improve cardiovascular health and mental health by reducing stress and helping to fight anxiety and depression. Just a 30 minute walk per day can drastically reduce the risk of developing conditions such as heart disease and type two diabetes (Better Health Channel, 2023). Paris currently has over 1000km of cycling routes (Gongadze, 2023), and the success of these is evident because Parisians use bicycles for 11.2% of their trips inside the city centre, whereas cars account for only 4.3% of journeys (Frost, 2024). Furthermore, FMCs reduce air pollution levels, and this is particularly important as the World Health Organisation warns that the number of urban residents exposed to air pollution is now 2.5 times higher than recommended (Zaheer, 2022), leading to an increasing number of respiratory diseases, cancer, and heart diseases globally. However, a more active lifestyle, with reduced air pollution can have positive effects on health, including reduced rates of obesity, cardiovascular diseases, and air pollution-related illnesses, as well as reducing healthcare costs.

3.4 Supporting the Local Community

Concentrating amenities and services within neighbourhoods can support local businesses and create a more vibrant, diverse urban environment. FMCs encourage residents to shop at local stores and eat at local restaurants. This subsequently supports local businesses, creates jobs, and promotes economic vitality through the multiplier effect. When local businesses thrive, they are more likely to hire local workers, which further contributes to the local economy increasing tax revenue for local governments to fund more essential service such as schools, roads, and healthcare facilities. Thriving local businesses are also more likely to invest in the local community, including supporting local charities, sponsoring community events, and participating in community development initiatives, which helps residents enjoy an improved quality of life. This has been evident in Barcelona, where the El Poblenou neighbourhood has implemented elements of the FMC concept and as a result has seen a 31% increase in the number of ground-level commercial establishments (C40 Knowledge Hub, 2022), indicating a positive impact on commercial activity.

4. What are the Drawbacks of 15 Minute Cities?

4.1 Expensive Infrastructure

Transforming existing cities into FMCs may require significant investment in infrastructure, such as pedestrian-friendly pathways, bike lanes, and public transportation systems. Implementing necessary infrastructure to support FMCs requires significant investment and planning. Retrofitting existing urban areas to accommodate these changes can be complex and costly, particularly in densely populated or older cities with limited space. For example, Paris's 1000km of new cycle paths have been funded by a \$291 million budget (O'Sullivan, 2021), and the French government plans to spend a further \$2.2 billion through 2027 to further improve cycle infrastructure (De Clarcq, 2023). However, where governments push the agendas for FMCs, infrastructure would be paid for through taxes, but one must consider that this will stretch the budget of families already struggling to cope with the rising cost of living.

4.2 Special Circumstances

The feasibility and desirability of FMCs may vary depending on cultural norms, preferences, and lifestyle choices of residents. Some communities may embrace the concept of walkable neighbourhoods and mixed-use developments, while others may prefer and continue to lead car-centric lifestyles. Despite efforts to provide essential services within a 15 minute radius, there may still be instances where certain specialised services or amenities are not readily available in every neighbourhood. For example, while FMCs aim to reduce commute times, they may also limit job opportunities, particularly for specialised industries or higher-paying positions such as in the quaternary sector or knowledge-based economy. This could pose challenges for residents with specific needs or preferences, requiring them to travel outside their immediate area for certain services. In addition, inclement weather may deter some residents may be deterred from walking or riding a bike to local services which is likely to result in them driving. Although driving is not forbidden, it is strongly discouraged, as the aim of FMCs is to have all services nearby, only a short walk, bike ride, or public transit ride away.

4.3 Increased House Prices

Properties in FMC neighbourhoods are likely to see a significant increase in house prices due to easy access to essential services and amenities. Investment in infrastructure and amenities can attract higher-income residents and businesses, potentially leading to gentrification, especially as people are willing to pay up to 30% more for housing to live in an FMC (McMillan, 2023). This process can push

up housing prices and private rents, causing potential for the displacement of poorer locals. Thus, resulting in affluent neighbourhoods having better access to amenities and services, while marginalised communities may be underserved, perpetuating inequalities in access to opportunities and resources. Furthermore, rental units for businesses will also be significantly more expensive, posing a problem for local businesses that do not have the purchasing power of chain stores and cafes owned by corporations. However, Cees van der Spek, corporate relations director at the pioneering developer Edge claims that the FMC concept can be implemented with affordable housing. He says, in Valley, Amsterdam, a mountain-inspired mixed land-use complex, "there are properties for all budgets" (Farrow, 2023). Without careful planning and measures to address affordability, FMCs could exacerbate socioeconomic disparities and displace vulnerable populations, leading to a loss of urban diversity.

5. What are the Criticisms Towards 15 Minute Cities?

A coalition of conspiracy theorists and far-right influences have positioned the FMC concept as a totalitarian plot (Zuidijk, 2023; Rudgard, 2023). Social media posts have suggested that the FMC idea is part of a broader scheme by international bodies to confine people in areas where they can be under surveillance and easily policed. However, conspiracy theorists often make false claims about the policy, like the idea that people will be stopped from travelling more than fifteen minutes away from their home. UK Secretary of State for Transport, Mark Harper, stated that he was against local councils dictating "how often you go to the shops, and ... who uses the roads and when" (Zuidijk, 2023; Rudgard, 2023)). However, this is not the aim of FMCs, and many conspiracy theorists have made assumptions about the concept, such as that there would be a ban on cars. These are false claims; cars would not be banned but dependency on them would be reduced. In Oxford, this sparked a misinformation storm. Local campaigners point to a December 2022 tweet by Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson (Zuidijk, 2023), an influential voice among the far-right, attacking FMCs for supercharging the conspiracy theories associated with the campaign. On 19th February 2023, 2,000 people joined a protest in Oxford (McCartney, 2023) against a plan to introduce Low Traffic Neighbourhoods, which was part of the local government's wider FMC scheme. Those against the plans claimed they were an infringement to residents' rights and threaten the freedom of motorists, as well as affecting local businesses.

6. The Future of 15 Minute Cities

Cities currently make up 70% of the world's CO2 emissions, and industrial and motorised transport systems that rely on fossil fuels are the biggest culprit, according to the World Bank (Djinis, 2023). Today, more people than ever are living

in cities and urban areas. According to the United Nations, two thirds of the roughly ten billion people that will inhabit planet Earth by 2050 will live in urban areas (Shauenberg, 2023). Therefore, there is clearly a need for cohesive urban planning solutions that can reduce emissions at the same time as increasing urban liveability. Increasing urbanisation and urban growth further raises the question of how urban planning concepts for just and sustainable societies, including FMCs, might be applied to suburbs, exurbs, and even rural communities. There is hope that through using smart technologies it will be possible the FMC model to match the needs of varying geographies.

Overall, the concept of FMCs offers potential benefits in terms of sustainability, liveability, and community resilience. It is clear that in order to mitigate any negative impacts and create inclusive and resilient cities for the future, planning, community engagement, and policy interventions are essential. This urban planning concept may not be feasible or appropriate for every city, but elements of the concept can still be valuable in guiding urban planning and development schemes towards more sustainable and inclusive outcomes in the future.

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