

The 15 minute city concept

The pandemic brought unimaginable change to our lives. The overriding instruction to 'stay at home' completely changed our routines and the hearts of our cities. Previously packed trains that would take commuters to and from offices, shops, schools, and colleges are running almost empty, and city centres, once frantic with activity, are now deserted. With many companies set to embrace flexible working for good, will things ever return to the way they were before?

Although we all hope some form of 'normal' life will resume over the coming months, there can be no doubt that the legacy of Covid-19 will be lasting change. 2021 could be the year that we begin to fundamentally re-think our cities and make them fit for the 21st century. To share and discuss the fascinating ideas around this, we've invited Andrew Carter, Chief Executive of Centre for Cities, to be interviewed by Samantha Simmonds, host of Sunday Politics as part of our **Invested in the Future** < <http://www.sanlamfutureseries.co.uk/> > series. He'll be talking on Thursday, April 29, about the cities of the future and how technology, the drive for sustainability, and the impact of the pandemic will alter our metropolitan centers.

Among the various ideas for how our cities will evolve, the concept of the '15-minute city' is a new model for urban design that is starting to gain traction from Paris to Portland and Melbourne and Milan. Here we explore this model for the future of our cities.

The 15-minute city

The 15-minute city has been promoted by the mayor of Paris for six years now, and has been enthusiastically received by Parisians. The aim is that everything an inhabitant needs – from food, shopping, education, and work, to entertainment, medical care, and green space– should be within a 15-minute walk, bike ride, or commute by public transport[i]. In the 15-minute city, the car is downgraded in importance and pedestrianisation, enhanced cycling routes, and improved bus and train services take precedence.

A host of benefits

Going everywhere by car has been shown to lead to unhealthier inhabitants and less social cohesion [ii]. Conversely, there is increasingly positive news about the benefits of promoting walking and cycling as the main modes of transport in a city. In New York, where efforts to improve mobility without cars are underway, bike lanes have made streets safer for children and the elderly. In addition, businesses on streets with cycle lanes have seen sales increases of around 50%, because the streets become places where people want to spend time[iii].

If the school car rush hour is replaced by walking and biking to and from school, city air becomes cleaner, traffic congestion reduces, and children become fitter, which leads to more uptake of sport[iv]. This is a powerful, virtuous cycle of benefits.

The modern commute

One of the main causes of transport congestion in cities is the commute to work. But Covid has brought the realisation that most businesses can function well even if most of the staff is working from home. During the pandemic, many workers enjoyed the flexibility of a home-working week. With less time swallowed by a commute, they had more time to spend with their families, their pets, on their homes and gardens, as well as hobbies, fitness and relaxation. There's evidence that although the office is far from gone, many companies will scale down their city centre spaces and allow people to work remotely[v].

This means that more people will spend more time in their local neighbourhoods. So, there's a chance for local businesses – coffee shops, specialist food, and independent shops and services – to thrive. We may also see more communal spaces on local high streets. Entertainment venues, shared office spaces, and local community hubs could all play a part in the future local neighbourhood[vi].

Where are the challenges?

Of course, the idea of the 15-minute city is much easier to put into action in Paris and other older cities, which were laid out at a time when every journey was made by foot or by horse. It's much harder to implement in modern cities, such as those in the USA, which have designated shopping, working and residential areas, plus a 'super school',

where the only connection between these spaces is the freeway. In many parts of the US, even moving from the school to the school playing fields requires a bus or an SUV. An entire way of life has been built around getting into the car, and in the case of the 'drive-thru', not needing to get out again.

For cities that are keen to embrace the '15-minute' idea, there is often much expensive infrastructure required. If people are to walk and bike everywhere, they must be safe. This requires re-directing or slowing traffic, lighting paths and cycle routes, and adding security at night. Local authorities also need to consider a network of well-maintained public toilets, benches for rest, and water fountains. High streets and busy shopping streets are often major thoroughfares, so re-routing traffic to allow pedestrianisation may involve major construction of new roads, tunnels or bridges.

London: the 23-minute city

The evidence from one survey is that whereas Madrid and Milan are 13-minute cities, with everything to keep a resident happy within a mere 13-minute journey, London is a 23-minute city, with almost half of Londoners describing amenities as 'too far away' [\[vii\]](#). London has a huge population, set over a large area. Traditionally, its residents have been willing to commute for longer to live somewhere that gives them more space for their money.

If working from home becomes more typical, this might allow the 600 High Streets [\[viii\]](#) within the city to rejuvenate. Being discussed on the mayor of London's website are innovative ideas such as local culture hubs and night-time entertainment zones, so residents of one neighbourhood don't have to travel all the way to the city centre for theatres, cinemas, nightclubs, bars and restaurants. It's clear that people are starting to re-think the high street. Fresh food markets, independent stores, part-time shops or services, communal spaces... these are all some of the ways that local streets could become places where people want to be.

City space reimaged

There are also calls to make much better use of city spaces when they are empty. Office parking lots and school playing fields could have another life in the evenings as skate parks, exercise areas, running tracks, or markets.

The city centre retirement block is another new development. One French company [\[ix\]](#) is planning to build 5,000 retirement homes in UK city centres because older people want the convenience of apartment living close to the vibrant facilities in the heart of a city.

The future of our metropolitan centres will affect all of us, regardless of age, occupation, or location. To learn more, **REGISTER NOW < <http://www.sanlamfutureseries.co.uk/events/cities.php> >** for the third in our Invested in the Future series where we'll discuss the future of cities.

[\[i\] Paris Plans To Become a 15 Minute-City \(smartcitylab.com\) < <https://www.smartcitylab.com/blog/governance-finance/paris-15-minute-city/> >](#)

[\[ii\] Paris Plans To Become a 15 Minute-City \(smartcitylab.com\) < <https://www.smartcitylab.com/blog/governance-finance/paris-15-minute-city/> >](#)

[\[iii\] Janette Sadik-Khan, former NYC Transportation Commissioner: Freedom is about being able to go anywhere without having to use a car \(tomorrow.city\) < <https://tomorrow.city/a/janette-sadik-khan-interview-freedom-is-not-using-a-car> >](#)

[\[iv\] Paris Plans To Become a 15 Minute-City \(smartcitylab.com\) < <https://www.smartcitylab.com/blog/governance-finance/paris-15-minute-city/> >](#)

[\[v\] Business leaders rethink office space reduction plans - Personnel Today < <https://www.personneltoday.com/hr/business-leaders-rethink-office-space-reduction-plans/> >](#)

[\[vi\] Future proofing our cities with the 15 minute concept - Arup < <https://www.arup.com/perspectives/the-fifteen-minute-vision-future-proofing-our-cities> >](#)

[\[viii\] 15 minute cities – the city on your doorstep | TalkLondon < <https://www.london.gov.uk/talk-london/communities-regeneration/15-minute-cities-%E2%80%93-city-your-doorstep> >](#)

[\[ix\] Property developer plans 5,000 UK retirement homes in city centres | UK news | The Guardian < <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/apr/12/property-developer-plans-5000-uk-retirement-homes-on-urban-sites> >](#)