

Towards the 20-minute city

A new idea in urban design that puts people at the centre of planning has emerged - the 20-minute city. Now research at the University of Waikato is looking at New Zealand communities to see if this could be useful here.

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THE IDEA OF a 20-minute city came out of Portland, Oregon, in the early 2010s. Melbourne added its own twist on the concept later in the decade. With the emergence of the COVID-19 global pandemic, the buzz around 20-minute cities moved beyond urban planning circles to become a hot topic internationally.

In 2020, the 15-minute city was famously adopted by Anne Hidalgo as part of her election platform as Mayor of Paris, and the concept is now being explored in multiple cities including Tempe in Arizona, Ottawa and Sydney.

Amenities within 20 minutes of home

The 20-minute city, simply defined, is a city that enables residents to access most of the activities needed for good living within a 20-minute walk, cycle or public transport trip from their homes. This means that shops for everyday essentials, health and community facilities, education, parks and playgrounds and ideally employment should all be locally accessible to everyone without the need of a car (Figure 1).

It suggests moving away from planning approaches that focus on managing land

use proposals to be more vision-led and placing greater emphasis on building liveable communities at the neighbourhood scale.

COVID highlighted urban design's impact on wellbeing

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has put the spotlight on how urban planning and design has a significant effect on health and wellbeing. Movement restrictions associated with the health crisis, including lockdowns, have seen behavioural changes including increases in working from home. The experience of this has highlighted spatial inequities in accessing local services and amenities, in particular, the value of neighbourhood green spaces, which are recognised as important for wellbeing and health.

The global pandemic has also revealed failures in existing methods of planning and spatial organisation that place a heavy reliance on vehicles and facilitating access to a city centre.

Promising option for change

Within this context, the 20-minute city feels like an idea whose time has come.

A 20-minute city approach implies more sustainable forms of transport - promising less time spent in traffic congestion, lower levels of noise pollution, reductions in greenhouse gas emissions and improvements in air quality. Each of these is a move in the right direction towards New Zealand's Paris Agreement carbon emission targets.

More opportunities for walking and cycling provide more-active travel choices, which bring their own health benefits and improvements in quality of life and more time and more opportunities for social connection. 20-minute cities imply greater local vibrancy and support for local economies and employment.

In short, the 20-minute city promises better lifestyles, more time, more social connections within the local community and improved quality of life.

Driver for higher density and more local amenities

The changes also emphasise links between transport and urban form. While sprawl will need to be replaced with greater density, by thinking about time and access to different ➤

kinds of amenities, there is a much greater emphasis of the benefits density can bring.

More people can support more amenities and reduce the need to travel. This local focus will also contribute to greater economic viability at the local level - another factor that we have seen is important during the COVID-19 crisis. Local shops and economic activities within walking distance will have greater chances of success.

Existing infrastructure will need to be modified and cycleways retrofitted, with obvious costs, but this can also save money in comparison to the costs of greenfield development or new roading schemes as well as potentially increase housing choice and affordability. The politics of pursuing these goals will be challenging and need to be negotiated carefully.

The notion of the 20-minute city can be seen as a way to drive conversations about the design of urban spaces that centre on people and wellbeing and open up discussions about density and amenity trade-offs that changes will entail.

Putting people first, not cars

The 20-minute city has been compared to the more-traditional, pre-automobile approaches found in older Mediterranean cities that put people, rather than cars, at the heart of planning. It combines both traditional and new urban design elements, with many of the concepts typically associated with the 20-minute city such as walkability, density, a mix of land uses, accessibility and design diversity already widely promoted within urban planning.

Some elements, however, have a more innovative stamp.

Vision-led concept

Firstly, the 20-minute city concept is vision-led. This means that, rather than relying on ‘predict and provide’ forecasting paradigms, it develops future-focused spatial visions that can be communicated and developed with local stakeholders, iwi and communities. This initiates a cascade of conversations about what communities value and whether and how the vision would look to reflect local values and aspirations.



Figure 1: 20-minute cities or neighbourhoods should have access to these features. Image – State of Victoria Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, Melbourne.

Implementation of the 20-minute city concept could vary significantly but would typically be achieved by an integrated approach within existing legal and administrative frameworks and would be implemented across local authority planning instruments. These would include district plans, regional land transport plans, regional public transport plans, long-term plans, asset management plans, walking and cycling strategies and reserve management plans.

Combined time-space dimension

Secondly, the 20-minute city differs from urban planning ideas such as compactness or walkability through its emphasis on the combined time-space dimension.

Services, activities and people are close to one another - timewise and spacewise. For example, basic infrastructure can be made available for different uses by different sectors of society at different times of the day or week, such as publicly owned school playgrounds being transformed into parks after school hours.

Reduce the need to travel

Thirdly, the 20-minute city brings activities and services to neighbourhoods rather than

moving people to activities. This reduces the need for people to travel by supporting the idea of time as well as physical proximity.

Research to provide foundation for NZ

The 20-minute city concept has not yet been applied in Aotearoa New Zealand. Despite increasing interest in its potential to enhance wellbeing, as well as achieve various goals around quality of life or climate emissions, there is currently little underpinning research that establishes how much time different people allocate to accessing services and amenities and how they get there.

The University of Waikato will be the first in New Zealand to do this, examining these questions for different ages, abilities, ethnicities, socio-economic status and settlement sizes. The data will then be used to analyse current urban forms, future spatial planning policies and infrastructure investment.

The research will provide a foundation for future work and be a valuable resource for local authorities and communities developing their own visions for 20-minute cities. ◀