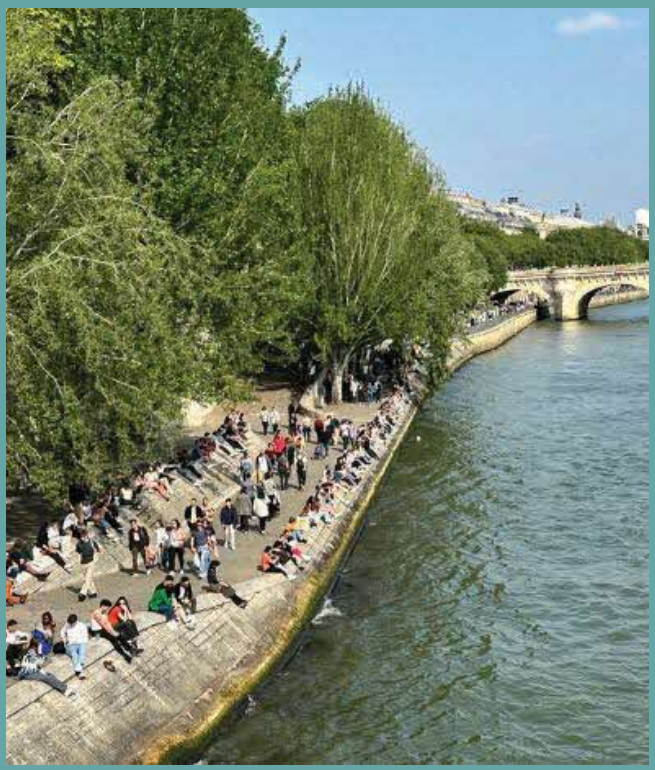


15-MINUTE CITIES
CARLOS MORENO

Carlos Moreno is a researcher at IAE Paris-Sorbonne, internationally recognised for pioneering the 15-Minute City, which has shaped urban policy worldwide. Multi-award-winning, including the UN-Habitat Scroll of Honour and OBEL Award, his work advances human-centric transformation, proximity and quality of life.

Sustainable Proximity: Restoring Time, Trust and Quality of Life





Paris has redesigned its public spaces around proximity, making walking and cycling the natural way to move through the city.
Image: Carlos Moreno

The concept of the "15-Minute City", which I first proposed in October 2016 after COP21 and ahead of the Habitat III Conference in Quito, has gained worldwide momentum. In November 2019, Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo embraced the concept and made it a cornerstone of her urban policy. Since then, mayors, organisations and institutions around the world have adopted and adapted it to their own local contexts.

Today, it appears under many different names. This idea of the "X-Minute City" or "X-Minute Territory" is being applied in large, medium-sized and small cities, as well as in rural areas. Increasingly, countries are also exploring how proximity can become part of national policy.

But the number of minutes does not matter. What matters is the paradigm shift. In the 20th century, we planned cities and organised activities in terms of kilometres and distance. Today, we need to think in terms of time—useful time, time that improves people's everyday lives.

The goal is to create places where people meet, talk, cross paths and interact: a more human city that builds trust and social inclusion, while strengthening the local economy. We need to move beyond neighbourhoods designed primarily as places to sleep, from which people commute long distances to work, always in a hurry, towards cities where everyday life can flourish—where proximity strengthens social ties and gives people back time, and with it, the joy of living close to one another.



Piazza Dergano, Milan: a former traffic junction reclaimed as pedestrian space, part of the city's push toward 15-Minute City planning.
Image: City of Milan

A New Urban Model for the 21st Century

The 15-Minute City is based on a simple but transformative idea: re-organising urban life so that people can meet most of their essential daily needs within a short distance of where they live, using low-carbon mobility—preferably on foot, by bicycle, or by public transport.
We want to develop a polycentric city in which every neighbourhood offers access to the essential functions of everyday life: housing, work, shops, healthcare, education, culture, green spaces and places for social interaction.

At its core, the 15-Minute City is a model of urban proximity. Its ambition is to give people back something that contemporary metropolitan life has increasingly taken away: time. For decades, urban development has separated the different functions of the city. We created residential districts in one place, business districts in another, shopping areas on the outskirts, and cultural and recreational facilities elsewhere. The result has been a fragmented city organised around distance and dependent on mobility.

The 15-Minute City proposes another urban grammar—one based on proximity, mixed uses, accessibility and quality of life.

> The 15-Minute City proposes another urban grammar—one based on proximity, mixed uses, accessibility and quality of life.

Moving Beyond the Car-Centred City

This transformation inevitably challenges the dominant role that the private car has played in urban planning for almost a century. In many dense urban areas, an extraordinary proportion of public space is devoted to cars, through roads and surface parking. Yet private cars are often occupied by only one person and remain stationary for the overwhelming majority of their existence. This raises a fundamental question: what is the best use of a scarce and collectively-financed resource such as public space?

A parking space can remain occupied by an inactive vehicle, or it can become a tree, a wider pavement, a playground, a café terrace, a bicycle lane or a place where people meet. The issue is therefore not simply whether one is “for” or “against” cars. It is a question of spatial justice.

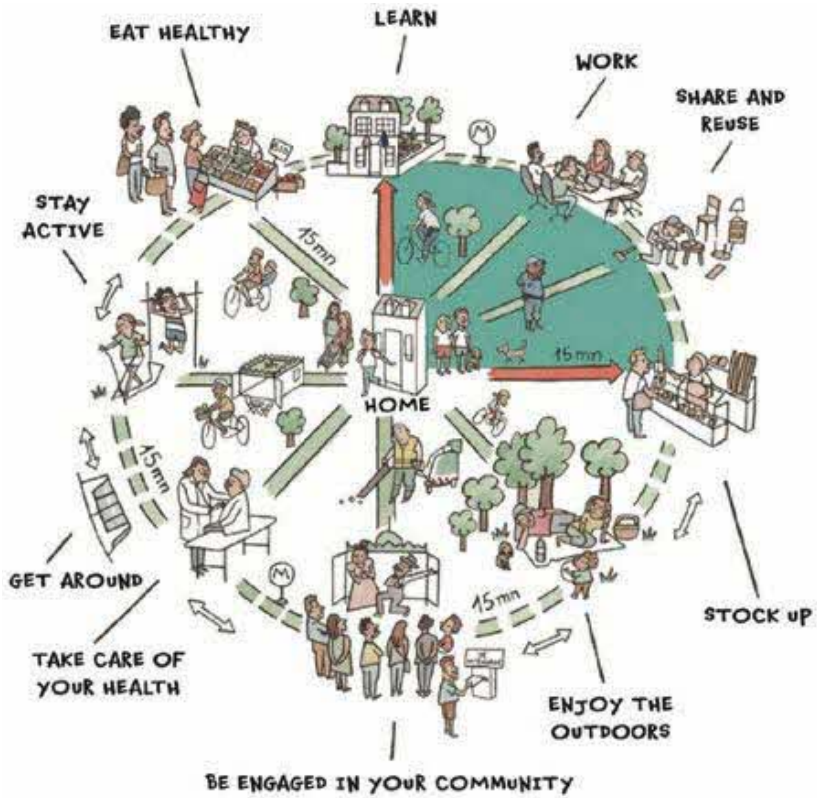
Dense cities offer alternatives: walking, cycling and public transport. Where these alternatives exist, continuing to dedicate disproportionate amounts of public space to private vehicles has consequences for everyone else. These consequences are also environmental and health-related.

Internal combustion vehicles generate greenhouse-gas emissions and fine particles, including PM2.5, which pose serious risks to public health. Electric vehicles can reduce some emissions, but they do not solve the fundamental urban problem: a traffic jam remains a traffic jam whether the vehicles are electric- or petrol-powered. Electric cars also continue to produce particles through tyre, brake and road wear. The transition towards electric mobility is important, particularly in low- and medium-density territories. But electrifying the existing car-centred city is not enough. In dense urban environments, the deeper challenge is to reduce car dependency by making walking, cycling and public transport genuine everyday alternatives.

From Mobility to Accessibility

This distinction is central to the 15-Minute City. For much of the 20th century, urban policy sought to increase mobility—enabling people to travel farther and faster. The proximity city asks a different question: why should people be forced to travel long distances in the first place? Mobility is not necessarily synonymous with quality of life. A person travelling several hours every day to work, shop, study or access healthcare may be highly mobile but may have very poor access to the city.

The objective should therefore be accessibility rather than mobility for its own sake. A neighbourhood should not simply provide a roof under which to sleep while requiring its inhabitants to cross the metropolitan area for everything else. It should be a living ecosystem, with services, activities, public spaces and social relationships. Proximity allows people to recover time previously lost to compulsory travel. That time can be devoted to family, friends, culture, sport, community life or simply rest. This is why the 15-Minute City is ultimately less about distance and more about quality of life.



The 15-Minute City reframes the neighbourhood around everyday needs, including work, health, learning and community—all within reach on foot or by bike.
Image: Micaël

Social Infrastructure: The Power of Multiple Uses

Creating proximity does not necessarily mean building everything from scratch. One of its most powerful principles is transforming existing physical infrastructure into social infrastructure. A school can have another life outside teaching hours. A town hall can host cultural or community activities. A shop can also become a meeting place or training space. Public buildings can accommodate multiple uses at different times of the day and week.

This multi-use approach changes the economics of urban transformation. Instead of systematically asking what new infrastructure needs to be built, cities can first ask how existing buildings and spaces can be used differently and more intensively. Other transformations—such as wider pavements, protected bicycle lanes, redesigned streets, greener public spaces and high-quality public transport—require more resources. But they should be considered long-term investments in public health, accessibility, social cohesion and quality of life, rather than simply as expenditure on mobility.

The key is to move from infrastructure designed primarily for circulation towards infrastructure designed for life.

One Principle, Many Cities

The 15-Minute City is not a model that can simply be copied and pasted from one city to another. Every city has its own geography, history, density, culture, inequalities and patterns of mobility. A European capital, an Asian megacity, a North American metropolitan area and a small town cannot apply identical solutions. The principle of proximity must therefore be adapted to each territory. This adaptability explains why experiments inspired by proximity are appearing in very different places.

Paris has implemented a pioneering approach; Mexico City has developed the UTOPÍAS—territorial facilities that bring together cultural, educational, recreational and other services within neighbourhoods. Different cities in South Korea have integrated the 15-Minute City into their urban strategy, while Scotland has designed a powerful 20-Minute Territory programme. Pleszew, a small town in Poland with 15,000 inhabitants, and Trilport in France with 5,000 inhabitants have also deployed outstanding transformative roadmaps. Recently, Mongolia has created its own 20-Minute Path. This is the virtuous circle of this global proximity community.

Indeed, the principle is equally relevant to medium-sized and small cities. Proximity is not a question of density or metropolitan scale. It is about organising territorial resources so that everyday life becomes more accessible. Even highly car-dependent cities can evolve—cities built around the automobile do not have to remain organised around it forever.



From a car-dominated street to a shared, green public space: cities from Paris to Seoul are adapting the principle of proximity to their own context.
Image: Nicolas Bascop

A Long-Term Transformation

However, changing the urban model requires time, vision and commitment. For nearly 70 years, planning has reinforced long distances, functional separation and automobile dependency. Residential areas, office districts, commercial zones and industrial areas have often been deliberately separated from one another. Such a system cannot be reversed in a single political mandate. Transforming a city requires strategic continuity over decades. Streets must change, but so must land use, housing, services, public transport and the way buildings are used. New local centralities need to emerge. Existing neighbourhoods need to become more diverse and better equipped.

This is a way of building a strong urban regeneration policy. It also requires a cultural transformation. For generations, the car has represented freedom, autonomy, modernity and social status. Questioning its dominance can therefore be perceived as questioning individual freedom itself. But the proximity city does not seek to dictate how people should live—it seeks to expand their choices. Even if people have a bakery, school, doctor, park or cultural facility close to home, they remain free to travel elsewhere. The difference is that they are no longer forced to travel long distances simply to satisfy basic needs. In fact, proximity creates alternatives.

The Challenge of Spatial and Social Justice

This is also why the 15-Minute City cannot be reduced only to attractive cycle lanes, pedestrian streets or greener neighbourhoods. Its deeper challenge is social and territorial justice. Proximity must benefit all neighbourhoods, including peripheral areas and communities where essential services are currently lacking. Otherwise, improvements in quality of life risk becoming privileges concentrated in already prosperous districts. A proximity strategy therefore requires investment in underserved territories and the creation of new local centralities. Access to education, healthcare, shops, culture, public space, employment opportunities and public transport must become part of a broader commitment to urban equality. The question is not simply how close a service is geographically—we need to offer services that inhabitants can actually access and use.





Along the Seine in Paris: reclaimed riverbank space now used for walking and cycling, part of the city's 15-Minute City transformation.
Image: Carlos Moreno



A reclaimed green space in Paris, now used as a playground—part of the city's shift toward proximity-focused public space.
Image: Footage courtesy of the WRI Ross Center Prize for Cities

Towards Humanist Urbanism

The 15-Minute City ultimately represents a shift in the way we understand the purpose of urban planning. The 20th century city was largely organised around movement, specialised functions and infrastructure. The 21st century city must place people, time and quality of life at its centre. This means developing polycentric cities where ecology, economic activity and social interaction foster individual and collective trust, develop otherness, and reinforce one another rather than compete. It means seeing public space as a common resource rather than primarily as a corridor for vehicles. It means transforming buildings into places capable of supporting multiple uses. It means giving walking, cycling and public transport a central role while recognising that different territories require different mobility solutions. Above all, it means moving from an urbanism of distance to an urbanism of proximity.

The 15-Minute City is not a magic formula, nor is 15 minutes a rigid threshold. It is a framework for asking a fundamental question: how can we organise cities so that people can live better without being forced to travel farther? The answer lies in proximity, polycentrism, mixed uses and the regeneration of everyday urban life. The city of the future should not simply help us move faster. It should give us reasons to travel less, allow us to recover time, strengthen social ties and improve our quality of life.

That is the deeper promise of the 15-Minute City: a city of possibilities.