

COMMENT

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Evolving from proximity to experience in the 15-minute Happy City

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Abstract

The 15-minute City promotes access to essential services within short distances by walking, cycling, or public transport. While reducing travel distances is important, focusing on proximity alone overlooks travel experience quality and does not ensure a shift to sustainable modes. By prioritising both proximity and worthwhile travel time, we propose the 15-minute Happy City, a broader planning agenda that incorporates urban and travel experiences to achieve greater satisfaction, enjoyment, and well-being.

1 The 15-minute city

The 15-minute City concept, although essentially inspired by the long-established 5D's of urban development [1] (Density, Diversity, Design, Destination Access and Distance to Transit), has revitalised interest in planning around proximity principles. The goal is to ensure easy access to all basic needs within a 15-minute trip from home by walking, cycling [2] or public transport use [3], thereby giving explicit priority to sustainable travel modes. The concept was recently outlined along eight planning principles: proximity to essential services, walkable and cyclable streets, proximity to public transport, public space and placemaking, inclusiveness, density, land-use mix, and ubiquity of all the above characteristic [3]. From a sustainable transport perspective, the 15-minute city aligns with the 'distance reduction' strategy (reducing the need for long-distance, high-carbon travel) together with the 'modal shift' strategy (encouraging the use of more sustainable transport modes), as described in David Banister's seminal paper on 'The sustainable mobility paradigm' [4]. These strategies are now central to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11 on sustainable cities and communities. In other words, a key pathway to achieve zero-carbon mobility is by minimising the need for motorised travel.

1.1 Why 15 min?

Research on travel behaviour and travel time budgets shows that people typically spend around 70 min per day travelling, an anthropological constant across culture, language, region, or even time [5]. City size has evolved, not because of longer travel times, but



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because of increased travel speeds and daily activity spaces [6]. A 15-minute access time allows for multiple daily trips to work, shops, healthcare, entertainment, or social and natural spaces, although 15 min does not need to be a fixed rule. The benefit is that it offers a simple, relatable guideline for reducing distances to an acceptable, 'reasonable' travel time [7, 8]. It is also a powerful and direct way of communicating this concept among stakeholders, citizens, policymakers, and politicians, as it simplifies and condenses a complex idea. The downside is that it stems from the traditional view in transport planning that travel time is inherently wasted and should be minimised to maximise utility [9]. This efficiency-driven focus, rooted in utility theory, prioritises reducing travel time as a cost, reflecting a broader emphasis on chrono-urbanism in urban and transport planning. Yet, this largely overlooks the potential benefits and experiential qualities of travel and associated urban time - including waiting, lingering, and transitions between activities - that could enhance people's both hedonic (e.g., pleasures of sensory experiences, comfort, and relaxation) and eudaimonic (e.g. enhancing personal growth, social connections, and purpose) well-being [10, 11]. If travel is understood not merely as a cost to be minimised but as a meaningful part of everyday life, including the time spent around trips, planning must place human experience at its core.

1.2 What about people's travel experience in the 15-minute city?

The idea of placing human experiences at the centre of urban planning can be traced back to urban thinkers such as Patrick Geddes, who viewed cities as living and evolving organisms, giving emphasis to civic life rather than infrastructure alone (*Cities in Evolution*, 1915). In the 1960s, Kevin Lynch showed how people understand and navigate cities through mental maps shaped by legibility and urban form (*The Image of the City*, 1960); Jane Jacobs emphasised the importance of sensory and everyday social life of streets (*The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 1961); and Colin Buchanan highlighted the tensions between accommodating traffic and maintaining urban liveability (*Traffic in Towns*, 1963). Donald Appleyard later demonstrated how traffic volumes directly affect social interaction and quality of life on residential streets (*Liveable Streets*, 1981). More recently, Jan Gehl translated these ideas into actionable urban design principles focused on human-scale experiences (*Cities for People*, 2010). However, while experiential dimensions of urban space have been widely discussed, the multiple values of urban and travel experience, as well as the experiential factors that shape them, remain under-researched in planning literature and only partially integrated in planning practice. Recent research has conceptualised and unpacked what makes travel time valuable from the perspective of travellers through the concept of worthwhile travel time (WTT) [12]. WTT draws on literature from psychology, economics, public health, and travel behaviour, indicating that benefits can be derived from travel itself [13], which may vary based on travel distance, trip purpose, transport mode, travel conditions, trip complexity, personal preferences, other passengers or co-travellers, and even the weather. The concept of WTT suggests that experience factors (e.g., perceived travel conditions) can enable travel activities (i.e., the trip itself or activities on-the move) (Fig. 1). These, in turn, unlock varying degrees of enjoyment, productivity, and health benefits, shaping how worthwhile a trip is perceived. Moreover, additional factors like door-to-door trip characteristics, personal characteristics and attitudes of the traveller, as well as spatial and temporal conditions, also influence the perceived worthwhileness of a trip [14]. The

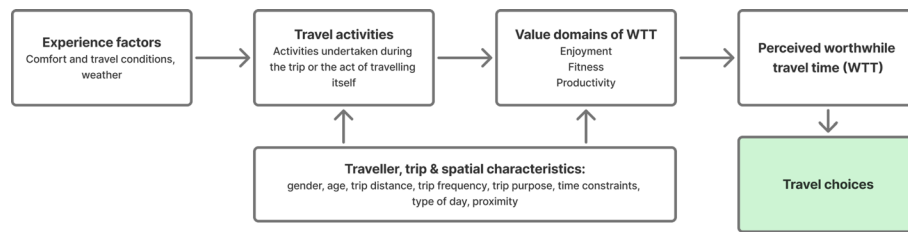


Fig. 1 The concept of worthwhile travel time (WTT) and its influence on travel choices. (adapted from 14)

green box in Fig. 1 indicates the influence of travel experience, in terms of perceived WTT, on travel mode choice within the 15-minute city.

1.3 Does travel experience influence mode choice in the 15-minute city?

Starting with the value domains of WTT in Fig. 1, we examine whether travel experience influences mode choice for trips under 15 min. Such trips, especially those made by walking or cycling, can offer measurable physical health and enjoyment benefits, motivating people to choose these modes over a car. In an analysis of 4249 validated short trip legs (under 15 min), collected in 2019 in eight European countries comprising walking, cycling, public transport, and private motorised travel [15], we found that travellers who reported a high value of fitness are 21 times more likely to choose walking, and 79 times more likely to choose cycling compared to choosing the private car (detailed model results are provided in the Supplementary Information). Additionally, the simple joy of travelling is a significant factor positively influencing the choice to cycle over using a private car. Interestingly, the value placed on fitness also affects the use of public transport, possibly motivating travellers to be more active in the process of taking the bus and engaging with their surroundings. These results do not imply a causal relationship between short trips and health outcomes, but rather illustrate how the perceived value of fitness and enjoyment influences mode choice within short-distance travel. Extensive evidence nevertheless shows that regular walking and cycling are associated with improved physical health outcomes compared to car use [16].

It is important to account for variations across population groups (e.g., youth and children, women, older people, people with disabilities), trip purposes, and specific contexts. For example, women are less likely to cycle than men, but are more likely to walk. In all countries studied, the likelihood of choosing public transport over the private car is generally low. However, for work-related trips, the ability to perform personal tasks while travelling, such as reading, messaging or planning the day, significantly increases the likelihood of choosing public transport. In contrast, cycling shows greater variation. The odds of choosing cycling over driving for short trips are two to four times higher in France, Belgium, Italy and Norway, but remain extremely low in Portugal, Spain and Slovakia. If people still prefer to use the car for trips under 15 min, reversing this trend requires greater attention to what makes alternative modes attractive, such as fitness benefits and the pleasantness, comfort, or joy of the journey.

1.4 The 15-minute Happy City

These empirical findings highlight the need to ensure that short trips are designed to promote active, pleasant, and health-enhancing experiences. While the planning objectives of the 15-minute City are valuable, they remain insufficient if experiential dimensions

of daily travel are not treated as a primary planning objective alongside proximity and accessibility. It is likely that within a 15-minute radius, private vehicles may still be preferred over walking, cycling, or public transport. In other words, we argue that proximity alone does not determine how short trips are experienced or valued in everyday life, and is therefore insufficient to make the 15-minute City a sustainable model from a mobility perspective. These trips must also be satisfying, convenient, and “worthwhile”, by providing urban and travel conditions that can release these experiences in addition to the inherent value of the walking and cycling activity itself. To address this, we propose expanding the concept of the 15-minute city to integrate the enhancement of travel experiences for active modes and public transport as a core element. We introduce the idea of the “15-minute Happy City”, a framework that focuses on the quality of the travel experience, as much as the proximity of destinations. By focusing on WTT, we prioritise not just efficiency, but also the joy, productivity, and well-being derived from daily travel. Theoretically, this implies that utility theory needs to be complemented with perspectives from theories such as affective appraisal (how people emotionally evaluate travel and urban experiences), hedonic adaptation (how repeated experiences shape expectations and satisfaction over time), and place attachment (the emotional bonds formed through repeated use of places), to address the broader human experiences within the “15-minute Happy City” [11, 17, 18]. These broader set of perspectives would underpin the intrinsic value of pleasurable or meaningful experiences, and would allow planners to view urban and travel experiences within the city as an enriching part of daily life.

1.5 Policy implications

Key policies to make walking, cycling, and public transport more attractive within the “15-minute Happy City” include enhancing the quality, safety, and comfort of infrastructures, reducing external stresses like noise and crowdedness, ensuring seamless connectivity, and creating a more pleasant and user-friendly environment across all modes [14]. For example, wider sidewalks and safe crossings can make walking safer and more accessible, while segregated bike lanes can encourage cycling by improving safety and convenience. Similarly, providing benches and shade enhances comfort for pedestrians, while greenery and public spaces contribute to an inviting and enjoyable urban environment. For public transport, comfortable seating, reliable Wi-Fi, and well-designed shelters can improve both the perceived worthwhileness of waiting or travel time. Moreover, the WTT concept extends beyond movement, including ‘urban time’, even when stationary, such as sitting on a bench, where the experience of time contributes to quality of life. In this sense, worthwhile travel time should be understood as a complementary perspective that helps inform policy design. For example, children’s journeys to school embody both travel and stationary experiences, highlighting the importance of considering groups whose experiential needs are often overlooked.

1.6 Future research

Future research on the “15-minute Happy City” could focus on three main pillars. First, deepen our understanding of what makes a valuable travel and urban experience across diverse populations and urban environments. Second, designing and implementing novel, unobtrusive data collection methods before, during and after everyday experiences, such as children’s daily trips to school, offering valuable insights into the

conditions that enhance positive travel and urban interactions. Third, exploring how experience-based data can be more effectively integrated into planning, appraisal and decision-making processes. By incorporating these insights, urban and transport planning could enhance well-being and quality of life for all city residents, making proximity-based living genuinely appealing and sustainable.

Supplementary Information

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Supplementary Material 1

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Author contributions

Y.C. and D.M. wrote the main manuscript text (Writing – Original Draft). E.M. prepared data in Supplementary Material (Formal Analysis, Data Curation, Visualization). V.V.A. and J.D.V. validated the text and the analysis (Review & Editing, Validation). All authors have read and approved the final manuscript and consent to its publication.

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Data availability

No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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The authors declare no competing interests.

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