

Life & Arts

## Welcome to the 15-minute city

As the switch to home working makes us balk at the back-and-forth of commuting, a new vision of urban living is emerging

Natalie Whittle JULY 17 2020

---

Be the first to know about every new Coronavirus story

Get instant email alerts

When a plague tore through Milan in the 1570s, everything had to change. Shops were closed. Mass was sung outdoors. A large church, the Lazzaretto, became a hospital. By 1578 the disease had fallen back, but the city was in financial trouble and had shed almost a fifth of its population.

This year, in the chaotic fallout from coronavirus, the Lazzaretto is once again part of an ambitious urban experiment. Giuseppe Sala, Milan's leftwing mayor, announced in April that the area would host a pilot scheme for "rethinking the rhythms" of the Lombard capital. Amid the dense cityscape that has built up around the remains of the old hospital, the plan is to "offer services and quality of life within the space of 15 minutes on foot from home".

The “15-minute” idea is based on research into how city dwellers’ use of time could be reorganised to improve both living conditions and the environment. Developed by Professor Carlos Moreno at the Sorbonne in Paris, the concept of “la ville du quart d’heure” is one in which daily urban necessities are within a 15-minute reach on foot or by bike. Work, home, shops, entertainment, education and healthcare — in Moreno’s vision, these should all be available within the same time a commuter might once have waited on a railway platform.

“One of the first lessons of Covid-19 is that we could radically change our ethos for working,” Moreno says. “In a few days, most people changed their remit and their jobs.” The mass, global switch to “working from home” (or living at work, as it may feel) suddenly makes multi-hour commutes appear wasteful, and clock-watching office life inefficient. Ironically enough, the French automobile group PSA (which makes Peugeot, Vauxhall and Citroën cars) was early to seize the opportunity to shift its non-production workforce to permanent remote mode.



Professor Carlos Moreno of the Sorbonne, whose vision is for a city in which work, home, education, healthcare and so on are all within a 15-minute reach

Moreno, scientific director of entrepreneurship and innovation at the Sorbonne, is also special envoy to Paris mayor [Anne Hidalgo](#), and has influenced her vigorous implementation of pedestrian and bike schemes. Re-elected as mayor last month, Hidalgo pushed her “Paris Respire” programme even further during lockdown, turning miles of traffic lanes into cyclist-friendly “corona pistes”.

Moreno models the 15-minute city on his research into the “new relationship between citizens and the rhythm of life in cities”. To achieve a better rhythm, he says, we need to develop multipurpose services — “one building, with many applications through the day. How, for example, we could use a school for other activities, during the weekend. We also want buildings that mix places for living and working at the same time — this reduces the time for commuting.”

## **We don't want to recreate a village. We want to create a better urban organisation**

**Carlos Moreno**

Above all, the 15-minute city is one that cuts down unnecessary journeys: “We need to reduce the presence of cars on the streets,” says Moreno. Hidalgo has already banned traffic along parts of the Seine and on some Sundays along the Champs-Élysées.

Other cities, such as Buenos Aires, have introduced free bike-rental schemes for both residents and tourists, while pioneering

Amsterdam has a new model, the City Doughnut, which aims to reduce emissions and waste in the drive towards carbon neutrality.

But though the “quarter-hour” framework seems convenient and ecologically sound, it implies many limitations. Lockdown challenged an understanding of cities as places that provide the chance introductions and chains of encounters upon which interesting careers (and personal lives) are constructed. Is it realistic to think of this 15-minute lasso as a permanent, practicable feature? “We don't want to oblige people to stay in the 15-minute district,” Moreno says. “We don't want to recreate a village. We want to create a better urban organisation.”

---

**Lashing rain and wind can seem almost constant** in Glasgow, where I live. During one of the more surreal stretches of lockdown, the downpours vanished completely. The wind at least helps the Scottish renewable energy industry, which is part of the city's strategy to become carbon neutral by 2030.

I ask Christy Mearns, Scottish Green party councillor for the city's central ward, how Glasgow can push bolder changes as a result of the pandemic. “It's a really crucial opportunity,” she says. “The pandemic has been devastating but there are opportunities to think about how much of the road space in the public realm is given over to cars.”

Mearns has recently been pushing the idea of “parklets”, in which pavements and corners of car parks are converted into green oases. Mearns and her colleagues are also “using funding from various streams to try and work out how the streets can be widened and pop-up cycle lanes introduced to encourage people to travel in healthier ways. But it does flag up how much work is needed to connect the cycling routes.”



Cyclists enjoying a car-free day in Paris in 2015 © Getty Images

Glasgow has already translated parts of the “live local” philosophy into action. During lockdown, looking for a change of scene, I rented a Nextbike and cycled along the new £6.5m South City Way. This cycle path was developed by Sustrans Scotland, the walking and cycling charity, in partnership with Glasgow City Council, and represents Sustrans’ strategy to push local and national authorities to adopt a “20-minute neighbourhood principle”. (It’s primarily designed to link the south to the centre of town.)

Daisy Narayanan, director of urbanism at Sustrans Scotland, is based in Edinburgh’s medieval Old Town. Rather than “regressing”, she says, “we need to shape how our cities and towns go forward. We’ve created a life around the motor vehicle. People say Scotland will never be a cycling nation — it’s too windy or too hilly, or too rainy. But that’s not true — people are cycling more because there’s less traffic.”

The “20-minute principle” that Sustrans is campaigning for is not a new idea. It originated in Melbourne, Narayanan says, and “it’s about giving people the option to meet their needs within a 20-minute walk or cycle — with Covid-19 we’ve had a taste of that. It’s not that everything needs to be within 20 minutes and you’re stuck within it, but it’s trying to ensure that people don’t hop in their car to get a pint of milk. That doesn’t limit you, it takes away some of the unnecessary journeys; it opens up a more accessible world.”

Under First Minister Nicola Sturgeon’s strict lockdown guidelines, I did not travel more than five miles from my home until the day it was permitted to do so. But after nearly four months I was struggling to stay patient, in spite of the strangely Mediterranean weather.

On the basis of the lockdown experience, there are aspects of a “15-minute city” that I would struggle to welcome — not least an overfamiliarity with one landscape, even if Moreno’s concept also includes ideas to promote a greater “*amour des lieux*”, or attachment to place, with pop-up galleries in markets and more city gardens.



Paris mayor Anne Hidalgo cycling through the city in June. During lockdown, she expanded her ‘Paris Respire’ programme, turning miles of traffic lanes into bike-friendly ‘corona pistes’ © AFP via Getty Images

The friction between personal confinement and public benefit made me think back to *The Glasgow Effect*, a book published last year by Ellie Harrison, an artist who tried to explore the relationship between literal mobility, the environment and social mobility by staying in Glasgow for an entire year and only travelling by bike.

The project, for various reasons, was wildly unpopular in its test-bed city. To those who could not afford to leave Glasgow in any scenario, Harrison's Creative Scotland-funded "lockdown" seemed in poor taste. But it touched on an interesting question: is the ability to move about and switch locations integral to advancement? Is staying in one place the same thing as being stuck in another sense?

Many people may accept a long commute could be necessary for a fulfilling job, but it is possible to achieve significant changes in circumstance without moving to a new city. Peter Lampl, founder and chairman of the [Sutton Trust](#), which campaigns for social mobility, points to recent research with the LSE that challenges the narrative that "those who are willing and able to move to areas where the opportunities are will reap the highest rewards".

London's place in the popular imagination as the city where people "make it" is not quite the full picture, according to Lampl. He notes, "While London since the 1980s has cemented its position as the epicentre of the elites, we found that socially mobile people tend to build their careers near to where they grew up. The Dick Whittington vision of moving to the capital to move up in the world is largely a myth. Those that benefit most from opportunities in London were either born there or are the economically privileged from other parts of the country."

In this context, Lampl says, "The success of working from home during the lockdown has the potential to widen access to opportunities."

Though Moreno and others do not prohibit movement beyond the 15-minute mark, the aspiration to contain work within this distance still seems potentially problematic. Not everyone will have the luxury of choosing a home close to their preferred industry, and not everyone will have a home that could double as a long-term office.

---

**Anthony Breach, lead analyst for housing and planning** at the Centre for Cities, says that what Hidalgo is doing in Paris is “exciting” but he believes the 15-minute principle “would go against the grain of what we know about city life. Workers want to work in places where land values are high, and live in a place where land value is cheaper. That needs to be factored in; workers will try and exploit that mismatch . . . I think [the coronavirus fallout] will only increase the importance of London.”

Part of Breach’s reasoning for London as an ever more dominant city is the strength that comes from its specialised, skilled workers being close to one another geographically. Digital homeworking will not quite bring a revolution either, Breach says.

**There is something about that city centre and its intangible benefits — Alfred Marshall called it ‘something in the air’**

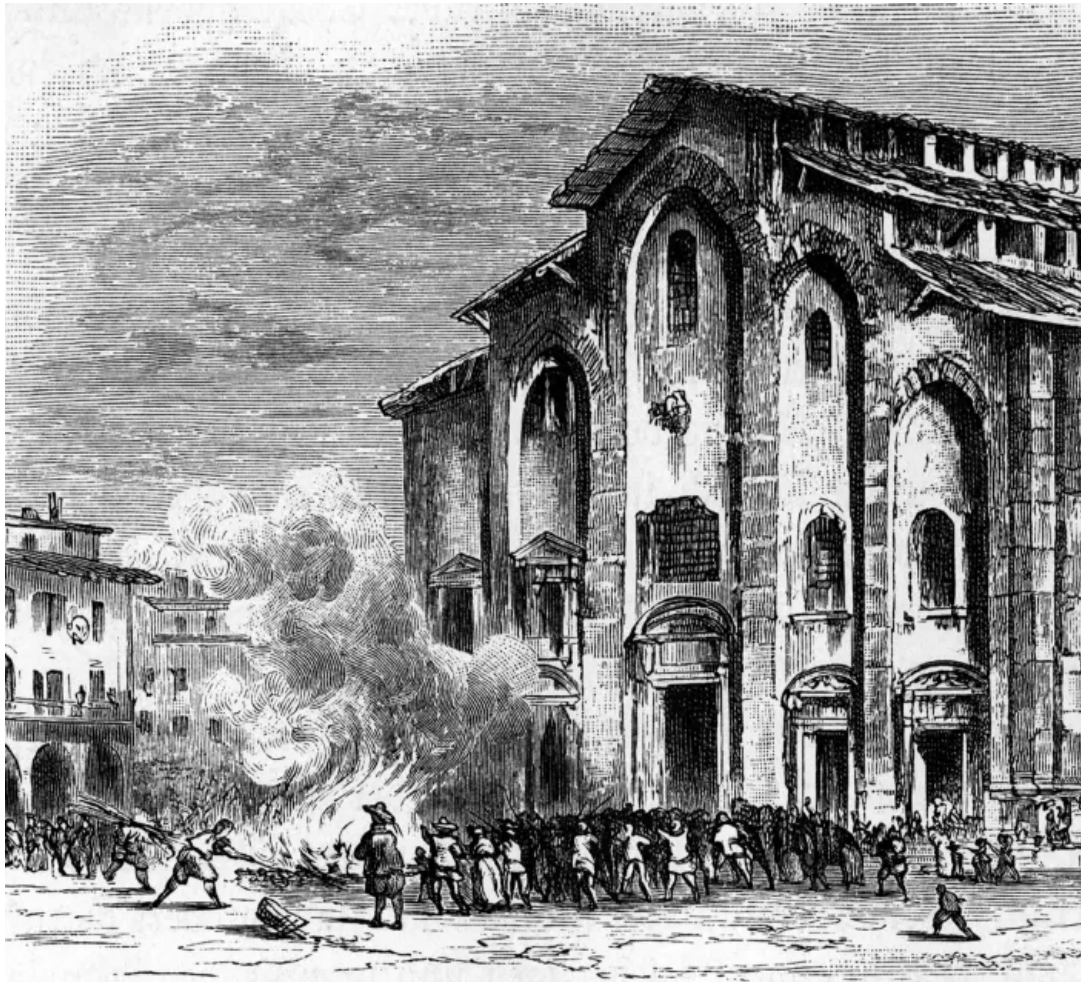
**Anthony Breach, Centre for Cities**

“There are special qualities about information exchanged face to face which video calls have not been able to replicate. We can observe that demand in the price that people are willing to pay to live and work in London. It means there is something about that city centre and its intangible benefits — Alfred Marshall called it ‘something in the air’ about 100 years ago.”

Marshall, a 19th-century economist, asked why companies from similar industries tended to cluster together geographically. He concluded that proximity to competitors was a benefit rather than a threat because connections and shared information created a valuable pool of new ideas.

“Historically, with the invention of the telegraph, phone, internet . . . every time there’s technological progress people predict we will all be able to work in the countryside. But the attractiveness of city centres only increases; the information that can only be exchanged face to face becomes more valuable in relative terms,” Breach says. “There’s not enough housing in the countryside either. We don’t build many houses in the UK, full stop.”





Milan was forced to adapt after plague struck in the 1570s. Today, mayor Giuseppe Sala is introducing plans to ‘rethink the rhythms’ of the city © Alamy

Back in medieval Milan, it was the pious archbishop, Carlo Borromeo, who provided the leadership that saw the city through its bubonic ordeal. He modestly said the recovery came about “not by our prudence, which was caught asleep”, but because God himself stepped in.

There is a sense that cities, if not all caught asleep by coronavirus, are mostly waking up sober and in a different place. Moreno says the vision of the 15-minute city is akin to an ancient idea of a “*ville vivante*” — a living city in which more of life is on a human scale. For this to work, we’d have to celebrate what he calls a “big bang of proximity”.

Not quite Alfred Marshall’s type of creative proximity, but a nearness and a localness against which other explorations could be offset. It’s still hard to imagine, but as a pandemic will teach you, we never know what is coming next.

*Natalie Whittle is FT Weekend’s development editor*

Follow [@FTLifeArts](https://twitter.com/FTLifeArts) on Twitter to find out about our latest stories first



