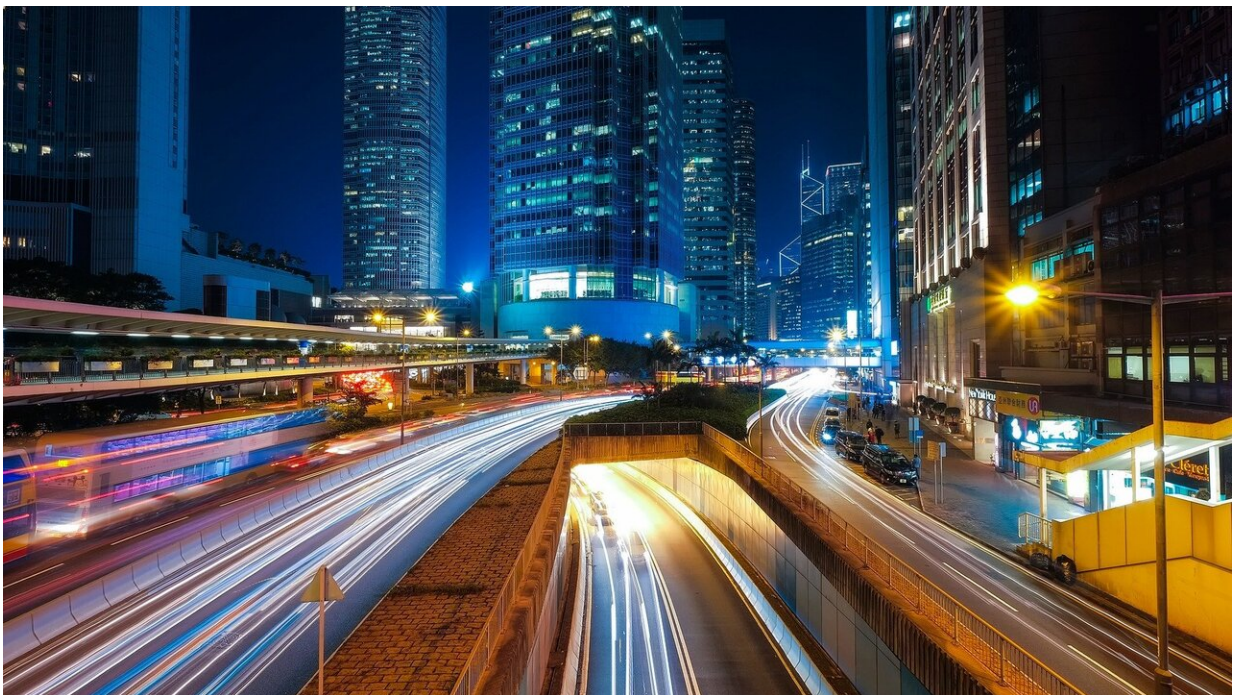


Researcher: The 15-minute city is a popular planning approach, but relies on ableist assumptions

November 21 2023, by Ronald Norman Buliung



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The 15-minute city is a popular urban planning concept that promotes people living close to essential services, and encourages the use of walking and biking. Public transit is sometimes included in the transport mix, preferred to automobiles, which are largely absent.

Developed around 2016 by Paris-based urbanist [Carlos Moreno](#), the idea of the 15-minute city has spread globally. Moreno subscribes to [chrono-urbanism](#), or the idea of organizing cities around time including the 15-minute city.

For his work, Moreno has received numerous accolades and negative attention, particularly from the political [right and conspiracy theorists](#) claiming it will restrict people's [freedom of movement](#).

Moreno isn't the only contemporary urbanist who thinks about time as a key organizing principle for the design of sustainable cities. Variations on the theme include: [15-minute walkable neighborhoods](#), the [20-minute city](#), the [30-minute city](#), and so on.

None of these, however, have gained as much traction as the 15-minute city. Moreno's work has been plugged into the global [conversation about UN Sustainable Development Goal 11](#): making cities and communities "[inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable](#)."

Can one planning concept possibly lead us toward sustainable and inclusive urban futures?

Health, time and the past

One unifying feature of the 15-minute city—or 20-, or 30-minute city—seems to be that by making most [everyday activities](#) doable by moving actively over shorter distances, we will become healthier. Research has already shown that [driving less will likely produce health benefits for some people](#).

Another area of consensus appears to be that these approaches, employed globally, will successfully treat our [largely urban](#) and catastrophic engagement with the environment.

While the 15-minute city might be considered revelatory by some, the relationship between cities and time is as old as cities. In the North American context, before the car and before and during the [bike boom of the 1890s](#), amenities and services were located close to where people lived.

Ableism and disability

I think about planning, cities and transportation through a critical ableist and disability studies lens. My lived experience as a parent of a disabled child also informs my [research on urban accessibility](#).

When considering the 15-minute city, I think about the relationship between [ableism](#)—the practices and abilities considered [normative by society](#) and the social model of disability. The [social model of disability](#)—one of several frameworks—is the idea that disability is produced by discriminatory barriers in society. Ableism produces disability.

The 15-minute city relies on residents' abilities to walk and bike. This raises several questions: What if a resident's body [doesn't walk or bike](#) in what is considered a normative sense? What if someone [uses a mobility device or moves at a slower pace](#)? What if a resident requires [public or school transportation vehicles to be adapted](#)?

There is no universality to 15 minutes spent in any city. Marginalized people, for example, are more likely to be [harassed](#) or [over-policed](#).

Planning policy and regulation

Urban planning and city building occur with a regulatory context. The 15-minute [city](#) is unlikely to materialize without professional scrutiny and regulatory compliance.

In Ontario, the [Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act](#), the [Integrated Accessibility Standards Regulation](#), the [Ontario Building Code](#) and zoning by-laws regulate accessibility in cities. The [Ontario Human Rights Code](#)—which prohibits discrimination—protects the right of equal access to services.

The details of this regulatory environment reveal an emphasis on physical disability and serious [limitations](#) in terms of revision and enforcement. It would therefore be foolish to rely on such a relatively inflexibly narrow regulatory environment to make up for any ableist limitations of planning concepts used to shape sustainable, inclusive urban futures.

Educating planners

Disability is often an [afterthought in planning education and practice](#). Perhaps this reflects a lack of representation of disability, and disabled persons in planning education and professional practice.

Designing sustainable, inclusive urban futures, however, requires inclusive education, thinking, rhetoric and design from the beginning. My challenge to those involved in urban design and planning—including planners, engineers, geographers and architects—is to consider what cities or neighborhoods might look like when [designed](#) with [disability in mind](#).

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