Transnational Network of Integrated Planning Labs: co-creating knowledge on forward-looking transdisciplinary planning perspectives addressing climate change and urban life in the post-pandemic city.

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# Annotating key concepts of integrated spatial planning

## Accessibility and the “15-min city”

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## Mainstream/Conventional Definition

In mainstream planning discourse, **the 15-minute city** is defined as an urban model in which residents can **access all basic everyday needs within approximately 15 minutes by walking or cycling**. This definition, established by Carlos Moreno and widely adopted in policy and planning debates, frames the model as *"an urban set-up where locals are able to access all of their basic essentials at distances that would not take them more than 15 minutes by foot or by bicycle"*. The core purpose is to reorganise the built environment around **proximity**, reducing the need for private car travel and promoting healthier, more sustainable mobility choices. In this sense, **accessibility is understood primarily as proximity-based accessibility**, meaning that essential urban functions—such as living, working, education, healthcare, commerce, and leisure—are located close to residents' homes.

The concept operationalizes accessibility through **four widely accepted planning principles**: **proximity**, **diversity**, **density**, and **ubiquity**. Proximity ensures short travel distances; diversity refers to mixed land uses and varied social groups; density provides the population thresholds that support local services; and ubiquity emphasises equitable and widespread availability of these opportunities across the whole city. Mainstream applications in cities like Paris and Edinburgh demonstrate how accessibility analysis is used to define 15-minute (or 10-/20-minute) neighbourhoods by measuring residents' ability to reach specific services—schools, parks, care facilities, supermarkets—within a designated travel-time threshold. Moreover, the Athens-based document identifies the model as a proximity-centred accessibility framework explicitly focused on walking and cycling, supported by infrastructure that ensures safe, attractive active-mobility routes and high-quality public spaces.

Across planning guidelines, the 15-minute city is thus understood as a **human-centred, accessibility-driven approach to neighbourhood-scale planning**, aiming to deliver liveable, equitable, and sustainable cities. Its mainstream definition positions accessibility not simply as transport provision but as the spatial and functional **co-location of everyday services**, allowing residents to meet daily needs conveniently and sustainably within their local area.

## Contested Meanings / Debates in the Literature

Critical debates around the 15-minute city highlight concerns that proximity-based planning may reinforce **urban commodification and gentrification**, particularly when accessibility improvements attract investment without parallel safeguards for housing affordability and social inclusion. In such cases, neighbourhood upgrades risk accelerating displacement, touristification, and social homogenisation rather than supporting existing communities.

A second line of critique focuses on **top-down, expert-led planning approaches**. Many implementations rely on predefined accessibility metrics and technical models, with limited participation from local communities. The absence of meaningful co-production can weaken both the legitimacy and effectiveness of interventions, as local knowledge and differentiated needs are insufficiently reflected in planning outcomes.

Debates also question the assumption that proximity alone delivers equitable access. Despite its normative ambition, the 15-minute city can reproduce **unequal accessibility**, particularly when structural barriers, such as inadequate public transport, income constraints, or

mobility impairments, limit real access for vulnerable groups.
Finally, critics point to the model's **overemphasis on proximity** as a simplifying lens that underplays the complexity of urban life. By prioritising local access to a limited set of amenities, the approach may neglect broader mobility needs, metropolitan-scale opportunities, and the interconnected nature of cities, risking an introverted view of urbanity rather than a relational and inclusive one.

## Applications in Practice

**Street reallocation and traffic calming to prioritise walking**

Cities enhance local accessibility by reducing car dominance through pedestrianisation, traffic calming, and the transformation of street space into public and green areas, improving the safety and attractiveness of short walking trips (e.g. Barcelona, Paris, Pontevedra, Milan).

**Expansion of cycling networks for short-distance everyday travel**

Cycling infrastructure is deployed to extend neighbourhood accessibility beyond walking distance, enabling residents to reach daily services efficiently through connected, protected, and continuous bike networks (e.g. Paris, Portland, Hamburg, Oslo).

**Embedding daily services within residential neighbourhoods**

Land-use planning promotes mixed uses and decentralised service provision so that essential amenities—such as food, education, healthcare, and recreation—are reachable within a short travel time from home (e.g. Sydney, Eugene, Oslo, Melbourne).

**Participatory planning and neighbourhood co-production**

Accessibility interventions are developed through participatory processes, including local workshops, walkability audits, tactical urbanism, and pilot neighbourhoods, ensuring that proximity-based solutions reflect lived experience and local priorities (e.g. Melbourne, Paris, Edinburgh).

**Monitoring accessibility through indicators and spatial metrics**

Cities apply accessibility indices and service-coverage metrics to evaluate neighbourhood performance, identify underserved areas, and guide equitable investment decisions (e.g. Portland, Edinburgh, Ottawa).

## Selected References & Key Readings

**Moreno, C., Allam, Z., Chabaud, D., Gall, C. & Pratlong, F. (2021).** ***Introducing the "15-Minute City": Sustainability, Resilience and Place Identity in Future Post-Pandemic Cities.*** https://www.mdpi.com/2624-6511/4/1/6

➔ *Introduces the 15-minute city as a proximity-based urban model grounded in chrono-urbanism, linking accessibility to sustainability, resilience, and place identity, and framing the concept as a human-centred response to car dependency and post-pandemic urban challenges*

**Büttner, B., Seisenberger, S., Baquero Larriva, M., Rivas de Gante, A., Ramírez, A., & Haxhija, S. (2022). *Urban Mobility Next 9 ±15-Minute City: Human-centred planning in action*.** https://www.eiturbanmobility.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/EIT-UrbanMobilityNext9_15-min-City_144dpi.pdf

- ➔ *Provides a practice-oriented synthesis of the 15-minute city concept, focusing on human-centred mobility planning, accessibility metrics, and real-world urban interventions, with comparative case studies illustrating how proximity-based strategies are operationalised across diverse city contexts*

**Marquet, O., Anguelovski, I., Nello-Deakin, S., & Honey-Rosés, J. (2025). *Decoding the 15-Minute City Debate: Conspiracies, Backlash, and Dissent in Planning for Proximity*. Journal of the American Planning Association.** https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01944363.2024.2346596

- ➔ *Examines the spectrum of critiques surrounding the 15-minute city, distinguishing unfounded opposition from empirically grounded concerns related to equity, participation, and environmental gentrification, and highlighting the implications of contested public discourse for planning legitimacy and policy implementation.*

**Silva, C., Büttner, B., Seisenberger, S., & Rauli, A. (2023). *Proximity-centred accessibility—A conceptual debate involving experts and planning practitioners*. Journal of Urban Mobility.** https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S266709172300016X

- ➔ *Develops a conceptual framework for proximity-centred accessibility by synthesising academic and practitioner perspectives, clarifying terminology, distance thresholds, relevant activities, and the relationship between proximity-based and mobility-centred approaches to accessibility*