

# 15-minute cities

## Where ignorance is believed to be bliss: 15-minute cities – or back to the ghetto, asks Paul Cheshire

Probably the most serious problem facing humanity is global warming. Humans need to reduce their carbon footprints. Polluted air, especially small particulate pollution, is also a serious problem in cities. Considered policies to combat these life threatening dangers are vital for survival let alone the liveability of cities. Gesture policies or displacement activity, however, is not a solution, especially when it comes at high cost. Low Traffic

Neighbourhoods the 15-minute city made manifest, are just such a displacement activity. They displace traffic to pollute elsewhere, but in the medium term, will also displace people who need, or just want to use cars; and they take their carbon emissions with them.

Sometimes urban ideologues come up with the craziest ideas that somehow gain traction. They seem appealing until one thinks them through and



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assembles evidence with which to challenge them. The 15-minute city is one such. If implemented it would seriously damage all the pleasures and the economic advantages of big cities; and the bigger the city, the greater the damage to welfare and productivity.

The city-size distribution is a statistical regularity that has been established for more than a hundred years. Not only do cities come in all sizes, there is a structure to the distribution of city sizes. The distribution of city-sizes approximates the Pareto distribution, or the rank-size rule. The largest city in any country tends to be twice the size of the next largest and the second largest tends to be twice the size of the third largest, and so on. There is a reason why cities come in all sizes.

Urban growth or decline is a slow business. Cities have been about for 12,500 years and have continuously evolved. 'Evolved' in an almost Darwinian sense for some 99% of that time. What worked and improved the quality of life for their citizens, lasted and spread: what did not, disappeared. Markets were one of the earliest and most successful innovations and, although not as vital now as 2,000 years ago, have stayed. Defensive walls were one of the earliest city innovations. First the security provided by the emerging nation-state, however, and then modern warfare, rendered them irrelevant; so they have disappeared as functional elements of the modern city.

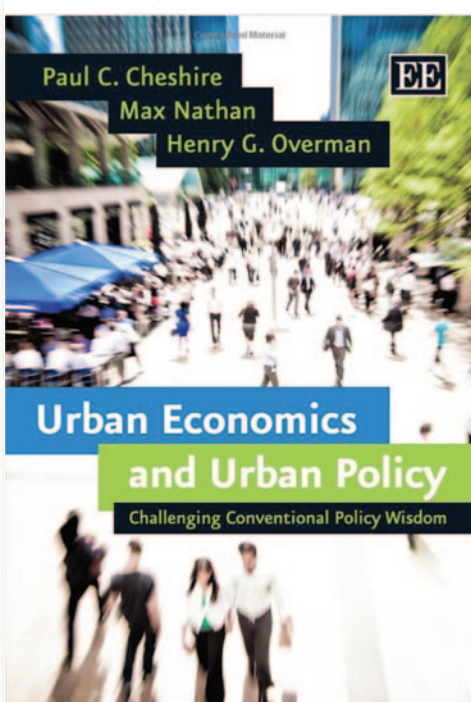
Some of the most recent innovations have been sewage, clean water and mass transit. The Victorian era transformed cities and allowed them to grow. London increased more than 7-fold during the 19th Century, exceeding 7.2 million people by 1901: perhaps the first modern mega-city.

Reactionary anti-urbanists like Cobden (the 'great wen' of London) were repelled; romantic worshippers of some non-existent historic rural idyll, like >>>

>>> the Arts & Crafts movement, tried rhetorically and visually to resist. In both cases it is instructive to see that their base remained firmly metropolitan, however. The metropolis – London – was where the culture and money was. We may think of Morris as living in a rural manor house in Kelmscott but in fact his main residence stayed in London. His patrons and cultural life depended on the affluent city.

The cities, with London at the pinnacle, were affluent because of agglomeration economies. Much research in urban economics over the past 25 years has focused on estimating how significant these are. There are agglomeration economies in both production – workers are more productive in bigger cities, all else equal, and the bigger the city the more productive they are. Research shows that doubling city-size increases total factor productivity by some 3 to 9 percent. However, opportunities for all types of consumption, material, cultural or spiritual, also increase with city size. In a city as large as London, a couple, one of whom likes opera and the other football, are in easy reach of some of the world's best

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Paul Cheshire's opus



examples of both. Not true in a 15-minute city.

There has been a study of 'power couples' – couples each with more specialised skills – showing how they benefit from living in bigger cities: and pay for the advantages. My own life is an example: my partner is, like me, a very specialised academic. It took 30 years of trying for us to both find jobs in the same city: that city was naturally London. A high proportion of my coupled colleagues have partners in highly specialised fields such as contract law or high end architecture. But this also generates an advantage for productivity: it is easier and cheaper for firms in cities like London to recruit very specialised labour because of the skill-matching such a large labour market generates. But again, not in a 15-minute city.

Cities have always had costs and those costs grow as cities get bigger. Historically they included risk of disease, from inadequate sanitation, ignorance about the source of disease or a terrible environment, causing rickets or respiratory diseases. They always included rising congestion and rising costs of space and usually crime. But people and firms pay these extra costs because the benefits from higher productivity, higher wages and a more interesting life, offset the costs.

Cities are the greatest invention humanity has ever come up with in terms of enhancing welfare and living standards. And – if policies are sensible – the bigger they are, the better they are. By sensible policies one means policies that mitigate their costs of scale so we can just enjoy their benefits. Policies like high quality, non-polluting transport; policies to ensure the provision of adequate space to grow into (so not rigid 'containment'); policies to ensure an efficient and adequate supply of urban public goods and amenities – public open space, law and order or

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an attractive public realm.

All the benefits bigger cities generate are absolutely reliant on access. Having neighbourhoods with a good range of sustaining services is positive but city-life is only worthwhile and cities can only produce more prosperity as they get bigger, if access is maximised.

15-minute cities cannot support world class theatre, restaurants, sport, research, universities, hospitals, financial institutions, designers or planning consultancies. London does all that but accessibility, so transport, is the foundation of it all. Higher taxes on petrol, targeted congestion charges and better public transport or cycling facilities are solutions: barriers to interaction are not. ■

