

15-minute neighbourhoods maybe – but cities no!



Arthur Ling's eggs map

"Sometimes urban ideologues come up with the craziest ideas, but somehow gain traction... The 15-minute city is one such" writes Paul Cheshire on page X.

The idea that London has evolved from a bunch of contiguous villages is well established and was famously illustrated in the 1943 County of London Plan 'eggs' map by Arthur Ling. Cities work because of the agglomeration effect and, as Paul Cheshire says, they are the greatest invention humanity has ever come up with in terms of enhancing welfare and living standards. But he also points out that all the benefits bigger cities generate are absolutely reliant on access. Farrells' Alankrita Amarnath on page X says that cities are ecosystems that are made up of interconnected networks and entities, and that there are various layers within each ecosystem: "People constantly interact with these layers, and this gives each city, town, and place its own unique identity". Farrells, using GIS, have simulated their own model of a 15-minute city to understand how various layers of the city, like the access to public transport, to food and open spaces, impact and improve the livability of a region.

The key thing here is the idea of a layered ecosystem. But even at the lowest level the 15-minute Neighbourhood will only work as part of a thriving city if access is not too restricted. Low traffic neighbourhoods were introduced during lockdown when there was no traffic and very little consultation. Not only have many of them remained in place, but more are being created and enforced. To work such areas depend on accessibility and not just for the locals. For example, the shops and small businesses on the surrounding main roads need more than local custom to function and can't survive if parking in adjacent sidestreets is penalised and congestion overwhelming.

An indication that some of these schemes are not really about traffic management but are seen by authorities as cash-cows is that rather than charge, say £2, to enter such an area from outside if you are not a resident, you are fined outrageous amounts like £120!

Extreme examples may not be typical, but one such is that traffic driving east along the New Kings Road is unable to turn right anywhere or to get onto Wandsworth Bridge but is instructed to turn around and go back to Putney Bridge. Putney Bridge of course, is already overloaded because of the outrageous negligence of the maintenance of Hammersmith Bridge by Hammersmith and Fulham Council and the Mayor which extraordinarily is still closed.

This and the Third World condition of London's roads are a sad indication of the decay of our urban infrastructure but creating fictional 15-minute cities is as likely to endure as the banning of new vehicles with hybrid and internal combustion engines. ■

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Planning in London has been published and edited by Brian Waters, Lee Mallett and Paul Finch since 1992

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It's not the market that's broken, it's the rules and the political shibboleths on both sides

Proposals to replace S106 agreements with an Infrastructure Levy and eliminate the negotiations that accompany every planning application are unlikely to become reality any time soon even if Mr Gove's amended Bill gets through Parliament.

And although any attempt to remove uncertainty is welcome, while S106s stay they will continue to be an up-front development tax levied locally, bedevilled by controversy and wasteful expense that diminishes resource for 'beauty', whatever that is. No matter how justified they are, and Mannah only for lawyers, planning consultants and viability advisers.

Forgive the cynicism but in the Government's few remaining moments there is insufficient time to do much about the lack of affordable housing, in London or elsewhere. Ample time for a few more housing ministers, probably.

London is now an 'inheritocracy' where only rich young people can buy a home, having taken advantage of Bank of Mum and Dad, and Help to Buy - the equivalent of subsidising a bonfire with gasoline. Shoreditch, Hackney, Bethnal Green, Walthamstow, Peckham – these are the new Low Traffic Neighbourhoods of bourgeois inheritors. Local people who cannot afford to buy have to be content with reservations of ageing public or poorly managed private rented homes, or move much further out.

The gulf widens. Renting too is increasingly unaffordable. The opposite of what what the planning system was designed to ameliorate – social inequality – is being precisely and rapidly achieved to the detriment of London's economy. And where inequality increases, there will be dissatisfaction with democracy for failing to deliver, opening doors for demagogues and populists.

The Centre for Cities has made some disadvantageous comparisons. We've built 'far fewer homes' per person than most other European countries since 1947, according to its latest research paper. The research is based on new UN statistics and authored by Samuel Watling and Anthony Breach (see page 15 on). Furthermore, it was the advent of The 1947 Town & Country Planning Act, not 1980 and the arrival of Mrs Thatcher, when our diminishing performance began. We have built up, or rather not built up, 'a backlog of 4.3m homes missing from the national housing market', measured on a ratio of new homes to population.

It will require 442,000 new homes a year, the Centre for Cities' analysis suggests, rather more than the recent target of 300,000, to close our backlog with that of the average European country over the next 25 years. Stick that in your Bill Mr Gove.

With the possible exception of making ameliorating climate change a core planning consideration, nothing is more important than figuring out how to get the affordable homes we need. It will not be achieved by policies that ignore causes of the failures of past decades. It's not the market that's broken. It's the rules and the political shibboleths on both sides.

Those that tax development too heavily, too uncertainly, too restrictively, and those that obstruct the public and private sector from working together to deliver homes. ■

IMAGE: from *The Spectator*