

20-Minute Cities and Smart Cities in New Zealand

The urban planning concept of “15-minute cities” has gained popularity among councils in many countries since the concept was reportedly termed by Professor Carlos Moreno in 2016¹. In Australia and New Zealand the terms “20-minute city” or “20-minute neighbourhood” are more commonly used by city councils, advocates, and consultants².

According to its promoters¹ “*The 15-minute city is a new urban model that promotes a human-centric and environmentally sustainable urban future.*” Professor Iain White³ describes it with “*In simple terms, it is about living locally and aiming to give you most of what you need for a good life within a 20-minute walk, cycle, or public transport trip from home. So things such as local employment, shopping, health and community facilities, education, playgrounds or parks should all be easily accessible by everyone.*” Promotional documents will also describe the concepts with phases such as “Ecology”, “Proximity”, “Solidarity”, “Participation”, “Complete neighbourhoods”, “People-centred streets and mobility”, “A place for everyone”, and “Connected places”. Potential benefits of the 20-minute city concept are stated as “A boost to the local economy”, “A more equitable, inclusive city and stronger sense of community”, “Better health and wellbeing”, and “Lower transport emissions and better air quality”².

Despite the nice-sounding wording and proposed benefits used to promote the 15- and 20-minute city concepts, there has been considerable opposition to the concepts in many countries⁴. Much opposition has focused around city councils proposing or implementing restrictions on private vehicle travel. The councils in the English city of Oxford proposed that residents applied for permits to allow them travel through traffic filters for 100 days per year. Traffic filters were intended to “*reduce the number of cars on the road*” and the filtering “*will be enforced using automatic number plate recognition cameras*”⁵ with the threat of £70 fines for unpermitted travel by drivers⁶. While major media organisations acknowledged that the Oxford councils had a 15-minute neighbourhood proposal, were implementing traffic filtering with cameras while also using bollards and barricades to restrict vehicle movements at some intersections (called the “*Low-traffic Neighbourhood scheme*”), those organisations dismissed the concerns about the three schemes as “*conspiracy theories*”⁷.

In the New Zealand context, an engineering/consultancy firm named WSP produced a document called “*20-min city in Aotearoa*”². This document mostly focused on promoting the potential positive aspects of the urban planning concepts and how the concept could be implemented in local cities. However, this document also contained a section on “*Opposition to change*” which focused on “*identifying mitigation strategies*” to manage potential opposition from residents and travellers. This section proposes that the issue of “*Measures to reduce private vehicle travel are seen as a threat, a loss*” could be mitigated by “*A staged, gradual model that makes it increasingly difficult to drive or get around by car, with strong alternatives in place*”. Similarly, the document proposes a mitigation strategy of “*Removal of on street car parking and replaced with public realm installations – playgrounds, cultural events*” as a response to the issue of a “*Ban on cars seen as too dramatic*”. Behind the pleasant, promotional language used to market the 15- and 20-minute concepts to people and officials, a strategy of incrementalism is being used in an effort to reduce public resistance to the longer-term plans of restricting and reducing private automobile travel.

1 15-minute city at a glance, web.archive.org/web/20230413213744/https://obelaward.org/the-15-minute-city/

2 WSP Future Ready® 20-min city in Aotearoa, www.wsp.com/-/media/insights/new-zealand/documents/20-min-city-in-aotearoa.pdf or web.archive.org/web/20221201000000/https://www.wsp.com/-/media/insights/new-zealand/documents/20-min-city-in-aotearoa.pdf

3 Introducing the ‘20 Minute City’: the real city of the future?, web.archive.org/web/20200603102658/https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/300017910/introducing-the-20-minute-city-the-real-city-of-the-future

4 Debunking the 15-minute-city conspiracy theory — and why it erupted at Essex County council, web.archive.org/web/20230425014617/https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/windsor/15-minute-city-conspiracy-theory-essex-county-council-1.6808005

5 web.archive.org/web/20230127082953/news.oxfordshire.gov.uk/proposals-to-trial-six-new-traffic-filters-in-oxford-announced/

6 Thousands want changes to Oxford traffic filters plan, web.archive.org/web/20221004103120/https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-oxfordshire-63129299

7 Why do traffic reduction schemes attract so many conspiracy theories?, web.archive.org/web/20230110070218/https://www.theguardian.com/environment/bike-blog/2023/jan/10/why-do-traffic-reduction-schemes-attract-so-many-conspiracy-theories, FACT FOCUS: Conspiracies misconstrue ‘15-minute city’ idea, web.archive.org/web/20230303002144/https://apnews.com/article/fact-check-15-minute-city-conspiracy-162fd388f0c435a8289cc9ea213f92ee

Both proponents² and opponents⁷ of the 15- and 20-minute city concepts link the concepts to the “smart city” concept. The smart city concept involves large amounts of camera & sensor installation, data collection, and automation being used to monitor and manage cities (and potentially the human populations within those cities). The smart city concept is related to the emerging “Internet of Things” (IoT) concept of networked monitoring devices installed throughout society. Smart cities and “Internet of Things” are associated with surveillance and privacy issues as well as network security risks⁸. Automated surveillance cameras are a critical part of the enforcement system designed to coercively reduce private automobile travel in Oxford.

The 15- or 20-minute city concepts have been strongly linked to the COVID-19 crisis by both the promoters⁹ and opponents¹⁰ of the urban planning concepts. Some of this may simply be attempts by the promoters to influence where post-COVID-19 “Build Back Better”¹¹ infrastructure spending is directed. However, more troubling statements by promoters^{2,9} indicate that the disruptions, restrictions, and trauma from COVID-19 policy measures such as lockdowns and the fear of disease have made populations more amenable to the implementation of the 15- or 20-minute city concept. Opponents of the 15- minute city concept also refer to harsh COVID-19 lockdowns and speculate that authorities will eventually confine residents to their assigned 15-minute districts and tightly control the out-of-district travel of those residents¹². Promoters of smart cities have also linked their vision of future cities to the COVID-19 crisis with statements such as “COVID offers proof of the benefits of smart cities because cities with a digital platform in place, able to collect and analyse data, can more rapidly understand where adjustments need applying”¹³. While opponents¹⁴ can point to the intrusive surveillance and “social credit system”-linked travel restrictions being implemented in China¹⁵ as examples of where the combination of smart city technology and authoritarian policies could lead.

Despite our small population by international standards, New Zealand’s cities are represented among the top smart cities according to the “World Ranking for Smart City Governments” reports published by the Eden Strategy Institute. In the Eden Strategy Institute’s 2018 world ranking report, Wellington was ranked 37th out of the top 50 cities¹⁶. In the 2021 report, three New Zealand cities featured in this top 50 list; Hamilton was ranked 21st out of the top 50, Wellington had climbed to 33rd in the rankings, and Christchurch had entered the top 50 to rank at 43rd in the world¹⁷.

As New Zealand cities move to implement 15- or 20- minute city concepts and continue installing the infrastructure for smart cities, it is important people look past the superficial marketing designed to sell the idea to the public and mitigate opposition. As these concepts are implemented, they will have practical impacts on people’s lives. Even if the concepts function as advertised, we are still looking at cities with streets designed to be hostile and frustrating to automobiles (from private cars to emergency vehicles). New Zealand cities have installed a large amount of surveillance infrastructure over the last four years and it is reasonable to assume this infrastructure could be used to enforce Oxford-style travel permits and penalties. COVID-19 policies have also set dangerous precedents of authorities tracking people and restricting their movements.

8 Safe Cities and the runaway surveillance economy, <https://web.archive.org/web/20230212073701/https://defsec.net.nz/2020/07/30/safe-cities-privacy/>

9 The surprising stickiness of the “15-minute city”, web.archive.org/web/20230522110646/https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/03/15-minute-city-stickiness/

10 The madness of the ‘15-minute city’, web.archive.org/web/20230425065513/https://www.spiked-online.com/2022/10/25/the-madness-of-the-15-minute-city/

11 How to build back better with a 15-minute city, www.c40knowledgehub.org/s/article/How-to-build-back-better-with-a-15-minute-city?language=en_US

12 The ‘15-minute city’ controversy is based on bunk. The fear behind it is worth considering, web.archive.org/web/20230328143724/https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-the-15-minute-city-controversy-is-based-on-bunk-the-fear-behind-it-is/

13 Exploring Smart Cities in Australia and New Zealand, web.archive.org/web/20230324090821/https://www.apacoutlookmag.com/industry-insights/article/805-exploring-smart-cities-in-australia-and-new-zealand

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15 The complicated truth about China’s social credit system, web.archive.org/web/20190121130331/https://www.wired.co.uk/article/china-social-credit-system-explained

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