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## BENEFITS OF IMPLEMENTING THE 15-MINUTE CITY CONCEPT IN STIMULATING THE POTENTIAL OF SOCIAL URBAN RESURGENCE

**Abstract.** The issue presented in the article is a proposal to look at a specific vision of the socio-spatial organization of the city, namely the concept of the 15-minute city. In this proposed approach, this concept can become a source of inspiration for urban development, as well as a stimulating factor for the social potential of the urban community, which form the basis for the resurgence of cities after the crisis. In the theoretical realm, the basis for the considerations presented in this text is a socio-spatial perspective, according to which the city is perceived as a socio-spatial structure that is reproduced through daily social practices, reflecting both institutionalized patterns and the material organization of space. This text contributes to the discussion about the potential benefits of applying the 15-minute city concept for the development and resurgence of cities in line with the idea of livable cities, ensuring a high quality of life for their residents.

**Keywords:** 15-minute city concept, social potential, cities' resurgence.

## KORZYŚCI Z WDROŻENIA KONCEPCJI MIASTA 15-MINUTOWEGO W STYMULOWANIU SPOŁECZNYCH POTENCJAŁÓW ODRODZENIA MIAST

**Abstrakt.** Prezentowana w artykule problematyka stanowi propozycję przyjrzenia się określonej wizji organizacji społeczno-przestrzennej miasta, jaką jest koncepcja miasta 15-minutowego. W proponowanym ujęciu koncepcja ta może stać się źródłem inspiracji dla rozwoju miast, a także czynnikiem stymulującym społeczny potencjał odradzenia miast po kryzysie. W sferze teoretycznej podstawą rozważań przedstawionych w niniejszym tekście jest perspektywa społeczno-przestrzenna,

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zgodnie z którą miasto postrzegane jest jako struktura społeczno-przestrzenna, która reprodukowana jest poprzez codzienne praktyki społeczne, odzwierciedlające zarówno zinstytucjonalizowane wzorce, jak i materialną organizację przestrzeni. Niniejszy tekst stanowi wkład w dyskusję na temat potencjalnych korzyści płynących z zastosowania koncepcji 15-minutowego miasta dla rozwoju i odrodzenia miast zgodnie z ideą miast przyjaznych do życia, zapewniających wysoką jakość życia ich mieszkańcom.

**Słowa kluczowe:** koncepcja miasta 15-minutowego, społeczny potencjał, odrodzenie miast.

## 1. Introduction

In the ongoing contemporary discourse on cities, the issues of crisis and renewal, growth and contraction, decline and resurgence emerge with equal intensity. Considering the historical context of urban development, one can conclude that phases of crisis and renewal have followed one another in specific cycles. Political, economic, and natural factors have, on numerous occasions, led to the collapse of many cities. Paradoxically, these factors have also acted as stimulants for their development, as they prompted the search for ways to mitigate adverse situations and transform the unfavorable circumstances in which cities found themselves, thereby introducing new concepts of urban policy.

In recent times, particular attention has been devoted to the concept of urban resurgence, urban policies, or “idea for a city” aimed at guiding these local systems towards a path of development and breaking free from crisis situations (Montgomery 2015; Sim 2020; Moreno 2021). This is not a novel concern, as scholarly literature in fields such as urban planning, sociology, management, and economics, to name a few, has described significant examples of specific visions or ideals for urban development and renewal (Graham 2016; Sagan 2017). However, it seems that there is a current increase in the emergence of ideas, often based on distinct assumptions, about how to “fix” a city. The literature on this subject provides well-established knowledge, grounded in numerous scientific studies, regarding the factors influencing urban development, as well as its barriers and limitations. Over the past several decades, many concepts have been formulated in terms of the description of mechanisms and tools that, when employed by local authorities, can contribute not only to stimulating development but also to mitigating unfavorable situations that impede such development (Stawasz et al. 2012).

Cities worldwide are being engaged in actions aimed at transforming urban spaces, modernizing infrastructure, improving urban services, and striving to create better environmental, social, and economic conditions. Numerous new concepts of cities with specific names have emerged, such as sustainable cities, green cities, liveable cities, digital cities, intelligent cities, smart cities, knowledge cities, information cities, resilient cities, eco-cities, and low-carbon cities (De Jong et al. 2015). The cited examples do not exhaust the repertoire of concepts present

in academic and political discourse, with each aiming to capture and conceptualize the key principles of specific ideas for urban development and renewal.

Despite the numerous diverse ideas, both within the academic community and at various levels of political governance, there is a prevailing conviction regarding the significance of specific directions and goals for urban development that emphasize the principles of sustainability. This concept is arguably the most crucial paradigm that has shaped contemporary thinking about the development of urban areas, and the interplay between environmental, economic, and social aspects has become a fundamental principle of many concepts for livable cities (De Jong et al. 2015; Rzeńca 2016). However, the universally recognized and accepted goal of development has not led to the selection of uniform ways or tools for achieving it. Cities are therefore pursuing distinct paths that are expected to lead them to similar goals, emphasizing the enhancement of their functioning and the improvement of residents' quality of life. A modern city should thus care for our well-being, offer freedom of life, movement, and the shaping of our lives, fortify its mechanisms to withstand economic and environmental shocks. It should equitably share among its inhabitants space, access to services, mobility opportunities, joys as well as inconveniences and costs, allowing people to build and strengthen meaningful connections among themselves and acknowledge and respect the community of fate, thereby fostering empathy and collaboration (Montgomery 2015: 67–68).

Emerging from the work of Montgomery, the objectives increasingly find recognition within the formulated development policies adopted by the local authorities of many urban centers. This recognition is particularly prominent among those cities that, due to various reasons, have found themselves in crisis and are now focusing their efforts on overcoming these unfavorable circumstances. As highlighted by the latest PWC report, which addresses the directions of development and revitalization of British cities following the pandemic crisis, there has also been a noticeable shift in the expectations and aspirations of residents regarding the future of their cities. According to the report, the pandemic has caused a widespread shift in public priorities – people desire stronger connections with their communities and aspire to live in more environmentally sustainable and just places. Research has demonstrated that factors such as secure neighborhoods and vibrant local streets are among the primary expectations of residents (Good Growth for Cities, 2022).

The recent COVID-19 pandemic and the associated examination of urban spaces have prompted a critical reevaluation of urbanized areas and the search for ways to alter their previous functioning, as well as the necessity of effective crisis management (Ugolin et al. 2020; Wronkowski, Główeczyński 2021). This situation has also encouraged the exploration of transformational ideas to ensure residents' safety, ultimately contributing to the long-term enhancement of their quality of life (Moreno 2021).

The subject matter presented in this article proposes an exploration of a specific socio-spatial vision for urban organization: the concept of the 15-minute city. This

concept could serve as a catalyst and stimulator of the social potential of urban society, forming the foundation for post-crisis urban revival. The reference to the social potential of urban revival draws from the concept presented by Paweł Starosta in his book *Social Potential of Reviving Post-Industrial Cities* (2016). According to Starosta, it is precisely the resources of human and social capital, the level of social agency and mobilization, that constitute factors influencing the development and resurgence of a city in crisis. Although the author focused on their role in the transformation processes of post-industrial cities, it seems that this proposal carries universal value, making it significant in the renewal processes of cities experiencing various types of crises.

The presented text concentrates not only on the potentials themselves and their unquestionable role in urban resurgence, but also on the belief that the manner in which spaces are organized and utilized reflects processes occurring across all spheres of urban functioning: economy, social life, culture, and politics (Karwińska 2015). Indeed, the city is a socio-spatial system, with social phenomena finding their reflection in space. This reflection, especially in public spaces, is constructed in specific ways and significantly influences what occurs in urban society (Giddens 2003; Gehl 2009, 2014; Gottdiener 2010; Jacobs 2014; Bierwiazzonek 2016). The theoretical foundation of the considerations presented in this text lies in the socio-spatial perspective, wherein the city is perceived as a socio-spatial structure that is reproduced through daily social practices, which reflect both institutionalized patterns of action and the material organization of space (Smagacz-Poziemska 2015). These practices are treated as manifestations of the accumulated potentials and resources of social action within the local community.

Therefore, this text contributes to the discussion about the potential benefits of applying the concept of the 15-minute city for the development and revival of cities in the spirit of livable urban ideals that ensure a high quality of life for their residents. In the author's belief, the envisioned shaping of the city, as proposed by this solution, can serve as a source of inspiration for urban development and act as a stimulator of the social potential of urban society, which are crucial for processes of urban resurgence (Starosta 2016). Without a defined vision of urban transformation, it is challenging to mobilize these potentials in efforts to "fix the city."

## **2. Social potential of urban resurgence**

Nearly every city faces its own unique challenges and problems associated with periods of crisis and renewal. The crisis of contemporary cities, aside from extreme situations like the recent COVID-19 pandemic or natural disasters, primarily concerns various aspects of urbanization in its spatial, demographic, economic, and environmental dimensions (Szymańska 1995; Biłozor; Cieślak 2021).

The consequences of this crisis have led to increasingly noticeable issues related to access to resources, social inequalities, excessive environmental interference, as well as economic problems manifested in the social and spatial functioning of the city (Florida 2017).

Certain aspects of the discussion on urban crisis seem particularly prevalent in recent times, prompting questions about the role of cities in society, residents' rights to the city, and the ways in which cities are planned, constructed, and managed. This discourse often encourages radical changes in these respects (Le Lefebvre 2003; Harvey 2012). However, as indicated by Andrzej Majer (2011: 36), the crisis of cities has its counterbalance in actions taken within the realm of renewal policies or broader processes of urban revitalization. These actions, focused on specific spatial planning methods intended to bring about economic rejuvenation, also have a positive impact on what the author terms "the organization of the basic aspects of social life." Furthermore, they may contribute to the consolidation of new practices of democratization and social participation. Referring to actions undertaken since the 1950s in the United States through Urban Renewal, Majer (1997) highlights that these endeavors not only alleviate the consequences of economic crisis and prevent their direct outcomes, such as urban space degradation and social disorganization but also possess a social character. Similar efforts have been made in Western European countries (starting in the 1970s) as well as in Central and Eastern Europe (since the 1990s) within revitalization programs. Revitalization has been considered a "response to the processes occurring in the spatial and social fabric of the city due to structural transformations in the economy and culture" (Zuziak 1998: 13). It encompasses a range of initiatives focused on mitigating the effects of deteriorating living conditions, primarily in industrial cities. Its primary goal is to stimulate economic and social activity among residents within degraded urban areas, achieved through comprehensive and coordinated actions managed by the public sector in collaboration with other public, private, and social entities (Jadach-Sepiolo 2017). Importantly, actions conducted as part of social-spatial revitalization are designed to involve local communities.

Numerous examples exist of cities that have experienced revival through the involvement and engagement of local communities, capitalizing on their innovation. As Paweł Starosta (2016: 23) suggests, urban resurgence should not be limited to population growth, increased urban infrastructure, or improvements in production and consumption. It should focus on restoring mechanisms that enhance residents' quality of life, encompassing both material conditions of existence and satisfaction derived from creating social relationships that foster a sense of agency, social support, and security. Achieving this state is possible by harnessing the unique potentials embedded within the community, including human and social capital, as well as mechanisms of social mobilization and local leadership, involving well-defined, thoughtful, and planned spatial changes in cities. This is evident in the ideas propagated within the New Urbanism and Smart Growth movements (Majer 2011;

Starosta 2016), as well as in emerging concepts and urban policies (Gądecki, Kubicki 2014; Sagan 2017; Kubicki 2021).

Analyzing the processes of revitalizing post-industrial cities, Paweł Starosta has reflected on the significance of specific potentials, understood as “a set of social factors enabling social action and ultimately leading to solving local problems and improving or maintaining community welfare” (Starosta 2016: 54). As the author argues, drawing upon empirically researched outcomes (Mattessich 2009; Klekotko 2012; Suchacka 2014), the resources of human and social capital formed through relationships and social networks, social trust, and norms of reciprocity can lead to social cooperation. The effects of such cooperation contribute to the overall well-being of the community (Starosta 2016: 32–33). These resources can be viewed as unique potentials for urban revival, accumulated within the community’s assets, which emphasizes the focus on endogenous factors that drive urban development (Majer 2017: 105). Importantly, in cities, a variety of human behaviors and actions occur within a relatively limited, close spatial distance. This constitutes a crucial condition for interaction, exchange, and forms the vitality of the city (Scott 2008: 549). However, to support the beneficial significance of this limited distance, it is worthwhile to employ solutions in shaping the urban environment that foster social closeness. One such solution is the implementation of specific urban policies, such as the increasingly popular proposal for the development of a 15-minute city, which promotes spatial proximity to places that fulfill residents’ needs.

### **3. How the 15-minute city fosters the development of social potential in urban resurgence?**

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the concept of the 15-minute city as a means of revitalizing urban spaces. This concept is recommended by the international coalition of mayors known as C40 Cities as a way for cities to address the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, improve the quality of life for their residents, build stronger local communities, and mitigate the impacts of climate change.<sup>1</sup> According to the author, this concept could also serve as a significant catalyst for the development of social potential in cities facing other types of crises, primarily those affecting the social dimension of urban functioning.

This idea responds to the challenges that contemporary cities confront: subpar public spaces, environmental pollution, traffic congestion, and inadequate access to essential services, especially in specific areas of the city. The proposed changes associated with the 15-minute city concept aim to address other negative phenomena

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<sup>1</sup> Read more here: [https://www.c40knowledgehub.org/s/article/15-minute-cities-How-to-ensure-a-place-for-everyone?language=en\\_US](https://www.c40knowledgehub.org/s/article/15-minute-cities-How-to-ensure-a-place-for-everyone?language=en_US) (accessed: 30.06.2023).

as well, including escalating social inequalities – particularly in access to certain urban amenities – and a low level of social participation and social bonds.

Articulated by Carlos Moreno (2021), a French architect and urbanist, the 15-minute city concept is founded on a simple premise. Rather than relying on lengthy car commutes, cities should be designed to grant residents easy access to all essential services within a 15-minute walk, bike ride, or efficient public transport journey. As the concept's creator contends, through the appropriate urban design, residents could enjoy a higher quality of life, saving time on burdensome commutes, and effectively utilizing six fundamental urban functions to lead a high-quality life in the city. These functions encompass daily life, work, commerce, healthcare, education, and entertainment.

Implementing the 15-minute city concept necessitates meticulous spatial planning and infrastructure investments. It requires the creation or transformation of existing residential neighborhoods, outfitting them with diverse functions to ensure convenient access for residents. Furthermore, investing in an expanded network of bike paths, sidewalks, and public transportation conducive to unhindered urban movement is imperative (Allam et al. 2021). Incorporating these aspects into urban planning holds the promise of reducing inequalities in infrastructure access and ensures that cities avoid unequal treatment of different demographic groups based on their socio-economic status or age (Weng et al. 2019). This approach aligns with the idea of a just city, founded on the equitable distribution of urban goods to grant all residents access to them (Bramley et al. 2009; Fainstein 2010).

What is particularly intriguing is the influence of specific spatial arrangements on the social functioning of urban communities and the potential to achieve a positive effect in the form of enhanced social capital. Let's explore how the principles of the 15-minute city can contribute to the social resurgence of cities by developing the resources of human and social capital, as well as social agency and mobilization.

In recent years, significant attention has been dedicated to health as a component of human capital (Makuch 2009). Public health is considered a fundamental precondition for economic development in a country. Elevating the health of the population through concerted actions (including healthcare expenditures) and promoting health-enhancing behaviors related to increased physical activity lead to heightened societal well-being and economic growth. Health contributes to augmented income by boosting workers' productivity, constituting a pivotal factor in the economic growth of entire societies (Bloom, Canning 2003).

A pivotal aspect of the 15-minute city concept is the reduction of distances residents need to traverse to fulfill their needs related to various daily activities. This aspect can influence residents to forego individual car transport. Consequently, the emphasis is placed on pedestrian movement, cycling, and efficient public transportation, offering urban community members the opportunity for increased physical activity, the health-promoting consequences of which are well-known. It's worth noting the reduction in the danger of road accidents, which is a prevalent

issue in countries where the car is the primary mode of transportation. Conversely, positive examples emerge in places where cycling is a distinct expression of urban lifestyle. Thus, it's not surprising that Denmark and the Netherlands are at the forefront of European countries with the lowest number of fatalities in road traffic accidents (Raczyńska-Buława 2016). Reducing car use in favor of walking and cycling also diminishes air pollution, a crucial health-enhancing factor. This stance also found recognition in the Europe 2020 Strategy, where the primary goal of European transport policy is to establish a high-quality mobility system that significantly reduces CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. To achieve this measures facilitating pedestrian and cycling movement are promoted (Ciastoń-Ciulkin 2016). Initiatives such as establishing bike parking areas, creating secure and preferential cycling lanes over car traffic, pedestrian pathways, and bicycle rental services – exemplified by Mexico City and Bengaluru in India<sup>2</sup> – are proposed of solutions leading to their realization.

The greater presence of people in public spaces, achieved through their proper arrangement, preparation, and adaptation to social needs, also creates opportunities for spontaneous human interaction. The significance of well-designed public spaces was recognized by Jane Jacobs (2014), who emphasized that streets are vital elements of the urban fabric and should be accessible and appealing to pedestrians. Their presence enhances feelings of safety and offers opportunities for urban activism and the foundation of communal bonds. Criticism of modernist planning, characterized by functional zoning, segregated districts, road networks, and highways that promote individual car transport, negatively affected human connections and the social nature of cities. Spatial planning principles such as proximity, density, and diversity – advocated in the concept of the 15-minute city – provide opportunities for renewing social interaction networks in different city segments (Sim 2020; Moreno 2021). Similar arguments advocating human presence in public spaces are found in the works of Jan Gehl (2009, 2014). He emphasizes the need for pedestrian-friendly urban areas that encourage interaction and social activity. Strengthening the importance of urban public spaces constitutes a fundamental premise for the development and revitalization of cities under the ideas of “cities for people” (Gehl 2014), “happy cities” (Montgomery 2015), or “the well-tempered city” (Rose 2019). These concepts consider their interactive social significance as the basis for building social bonds in local communities (Bierwiazzonek 2021). The role of public spaces that encourage people to gather and engage in various activities becomes increasingly important with their attractiveness. This is achieved through the presence of user-friendly amenities. Jan Gehl, while critiquing city development directions favoring car traffic, calls for a return to pedestrian movement as a more

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<sup>2</sup> For more examples of innovations implemented as part of urban transformation in the spirit of the 15-minute city, see, for example, publications: *Walking and Cycling Benefits Tool*; *Benefits of Walking and Cycling: Mexico City Massive Bike Parking Facilities*, *Benefits of Walking and Cycling: Bengaluru Tender SURE*, available at: <https://www.c40knowledgehub.org> (accessed: 16.08.2023).

natural and genuine way to navigate urban space. Supported by theoretical studies, observations, and research, he demonstrates that this shift has a fundamental impact on the quality of life in cities.

The modernization of urban public spaces to serve the needs of the community also includes the expansion of green areas that encourage outdoor activities. Among the good practices cited in C40 Cities publications are examples of converting floodplains into parkland areas, such as Crystal Springs Creek in Portland, transforming unused spaces into multifunctional community gardens like in Gladsaxe, Denmark, excluding streets from car traffic around parks, improving infrastructure for pedestrians and cyclists around Plaza Parques Nacionales Argentinos in Buenos Aires, and repurposing school grounds as small neighborhood parks, as seen in Paris.<sup>3</sup>

Transformations within the framework of the 15-minute city aim to build social bonds and strengthen neighborhoods and local communities. When residents have access to a full range of services in their immediate vicinity, they become more engaged in social life. Local shops, cafes, and restaurants can invigorate the local economy and encourage interpersonal interactions. Through these social mechanisms, social capital is created, with manifestations rooted in and activated through human relationships. The key resources of social capital are developed within networks formed under social trust and community norms (Bartkowski 2007; Starosta 2016). “Social capital is sustained by diverse incentives for individuals, enabling them to undertake certain actions through networks of mutual acquaintances and recognition. The character of social interactions plays a significant role in this process. Mutual trust arises, is sustained, and develops within specific relationships between individuals” (Bartkowski 2007: 58). A certain approach to city design, facilitating opportunities for encounters, can serve as an incentive for building networks of social interaction and trust.

The 15-minute city concept also addresses local entrepreneurship as a factor of increasing local employment opportunities. It promotes the establishment of local businesses, grocery stores, and service outlets in proximity to residential areas, which can support the local economy and activate local communities economically. In this context, it can also be seen as a way to mobilize the local community in economic spheres. High unemployment rates, especially in certain parts of cities, are a pressing social issue in many places. This approach could serve as a means of addressing this challenge. It leads to easy access to various services and products, as well as benefiting from the development of the local community and enhancing a sense of local belonging. Higher density and availability of services in close proximity facilitate greater interaction among residents and strengthen social bonds (Bramley 2009). As emphasized by former Oklahoma City mayor Mick Cornett,

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<sup>3</sup> More examples in the publication: *15-minute cities: How to develop people-centred streets and mobility*, available at: [https://www.c40knowledgehub.org/s/article/15-minute-cities-How-to-develop-people-centred-streets-and-mobility?language=en\\_US](https://www.c40knowledgehub.org/s/article/15-minute-cities-How-to-develop-people-centred-streets-and-mobility?language=en_US) (accessed 16.08.2023).

implementing these principles can stimulate the local economy. Increased activity on streets, better utilization of buildings and public spaces, a broader array of local and diverse employment opportunities are just some of the benefits of investing in people-focused urban spaces. These investments, he claims in his speech,<sup>4</sup> managed to turn the city's economic prospects around and concurrently reduce obesity issues among residents within just a few years.

Introducing the 15-minute city concept naturally comes with significant challenges for local authorities and requires collaboration with various stakeholders, including developers, architects, and residents. The issue of consulting proposed city changes with residents is particularly important. Numerous successful implementations of similar ideas, such as Anne Hidalgo's "Paris en Commun" project, the Aspern Seestadt new district in Vienna, Västra Hamnen in Malmö, or Vauban in Freiburg, demonstrate that such initiatives are feasible and yield positive results.

#### 4. Conclusion

The concept of the 15-minute city should not be regarded as a panacea for all the challenges contemporary cities face or as the ultimate solution to urban crises. However, as elaborated in this text, it can be viewed through the lens of its unique potential to strengthen specific social resources, human behaviors, and actions. Its implementation through specific urban policies also doesn't guarantee its success, especially if these solutions are imposed from the top down without engaging the urban community.

Yet, changing urban spaces and modes of movement within them can indeed lead to tangible effects, stimulating the potential of urban communities. These potentials are essential resources employed in the process of urban resurgence after crises (Starosta, 2016). In this context, the 15-minute city can also be an opportunity for cities still seeking their identity and experimenting with various, more or less successful, attempts to revitalize and achieve their core goal of ensuring high-quality living for residents.

Urban spaces, poorly developed and underutilized, often degraded, could be rearranged in accordance with the principles of the 15-minute city concept, thereby providing impetus for improving the functionality of space of local communities facing numerous challenges. Actions undertaken within revitalization programs in Polish and European cities can align with the principles of such a characterized concept of urban renewal and serve as a tool for its realization. Revitalization processes based on the principles of sustainable development aim to prevent further

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<sup>4</sup> Mick Cornett's speech is available at: <https://www.tedmed.com/talks/show?id=54790> (accessed 22.08.2023).

spatial degradation, mitigate crises present in cities, stimulate their development through improving living environments, and enhance social and economic activation of the society (Domański 2009; Maciejewska, Turek 2012; Fernández Agueda 2014; Stawasz 2017). Incorporating proposals for cities with short distances would thus complement the main goal of revitalization, which is to improve the quality of life for urban residents. It's worth highlighting the significant role of local community participation in revitalization processes, with social and economic activation as a fundamental objective and outcome of renewing degraded city parts (Sztando 2008; Przywojska 2016). In addition to the undoubted benefits of reducing pollution and increasing social inclusion in accessing certain goods and places without having to travel long distances, the concept can positively impact the local community by increasing its resources of social capital, human capital, and social subjectivity and mobilization necessary for urban resurgence processes.

However, for this concept to be implemented, it requires the goodwill of urban authorities, willingness to bear the high costs associated with urban space reconstruction, and perhaps most importantly, a change in the way we think about the city as a place to live, in line with the guiding theme of World Cities Day celebrated annually since 2014 – “Better City, Better Life.” The role of well-organized residential neighborhoods equipped with necessary infrastructure that encourage public space use, a well-functioning transportation network with a focus on pedestrian, cyclist, and public transportation movement, are challenges that cities aiming for such a vision must face. Yet, to ensure that this city reorganization isn't just another realization of a new form of centralized planning, a criticism raised by some opponents of the 15-minute city concept, increased citizen participation is crucial at every stage of its implementation.

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