

A city accessible to everyone. The 15-minute city

- The idea of 15-minute cities, where we can meet our basic needs in our immediate vicinity – is becoming increasingly popular around the world.
- ... but won't it lead to us closing ourselves off in small communities? Is this possible in metropolitan areas that are much larger?
- We ask Gil Penalosa, a world-class expert on designing people-friendly cities.

Is the idea of the 15-minute city a return to the past?

Instead of talking about a „15-minute city“, I prefer to rather talk about a „15-minute community“. It is impossible to have a city in such a small range. The city, and its offerings, are much broader. A city is universities, museums, large parks, cultural centres, etc. It is not possible to have this in every 15-minute area, which, after all, is rather small. Instead, within this distance, one can have access to all basic services, such as grocery stores, public transportation, schools. In this sense – the concept of a „15-minute community“, is a step into the future, a step towards a more sustainable development. It is not a return to the past. Most of the cities we've created in the last 80 years are simply bad and unsustainable – both environmentally and financially. We need to create radically different cities.

But is the goal to make our community self-sustaining?

It is not possible, because it will never be so. We can see this in the example of access to food, among others – but it

also applies to other types of needs that the city provides us with. In this context, we not only have access to it in other parts of the city, but also, more broadly, through international cooperation with other countries. The concept of the 15-minute community assumes that we can walk to every service that is basic and necessary for us. However, other of our needs – but equally important to us – will be more distant from our homes, such as our place of work or cultural and entertainment centres, where we spend our free time.

But doesn't such an approach isolate us in some sense? Since I will now be able to keep my slippers on while doing the groceries and child's school run.

Therefore, we must be very careful when implementing this concept. So that we don't end up with 15-minute enclaves in our cities, which will divide people into, for example, those living in more affluent neighbourhoods and those living in poorer ones. The city is supposed to connect in every way – socially, financially, etc. That's why we need „15-minute communities" within the „one-hour city."

Well, exactly. How can we relate this idea to metropolitan areas? They are, by definition, big cities, where a trip may take us more than a quarter of an hour, but we have access to much more beyond the 15-minute range.

That's why I'm advocating for a 15-minute community in a 60-minute city. Within a 15-minute walk, we should have access to a school, a store, a neighbourhood park. But within a 60-minute commute, we should have access to more interesting jobs, the opportunity to go to the opera, to spend time in a big park, to teach at a great university. In other words: in a 60-minute city, taking public transit for an hour should give

us access to all these amenities that are not available in a 15-minute community.

So how will this affect our mobility?

It is best for the sustainability of our city to maintain the ability to meet basic needs – on foot. This does not preclude further travel, that is. But what is important in this is that within that short walking distance we have access to public transportation to get to more distant places.

So the question arises: should the idea of the city, the 15-minute community, be treated as a lifestyle or something more?

It is more than a lifestyle. It is a way of planning space in our cities. This is how we lived until the advent of cars. But today, these 15-minute communities within the city must be connected and intertwined. This will increase the comfort of life and prevent the divisions in our society from deepening, as we mentioned earlier.

Are such 15-minute communities a happier city, in your opinion?

Yes. People can be happier if they waste less time commuting to work, for example, and can spend more time with family and friends and pursuing their interests.

The diagnosis carried out so far for our development strategy shows that these

distances in our region, in the GZM Metropolis, are much greater. This is partly due to the specificity of our post-industrial cities. Is it possible to develop the idea of – as you emphasize: the 15-minute community – in places that have so far functioned according to other assumptions? What should we pay attention to?

Here it is extremely important that the development of this concept takes place within the existing space. The point is that on the one hand – of course in accordance with the law – the outward growth of new buildings should be stopped. But on the other hand – densified. But not necessarily with 40-storey buildings, but with lower ones – maybe 4 or 8 storeys. This will create a „critical mass” – our 15-minute community. The truth is that the vast majority of things we need: grocery stores, schools, art classes, small parks, churches, access to public transportation – should be within our immediate reach. It also relates to my idea of „8 80 Cities”: if everything we do and build in our cities – pedestrian crossings, sidewalks, parks, libraries, stores, restaurants, etc. – are designed so that eight- and eighty-year-olds can use them, it will be good for everyone – from babies to centenarians. This is not about creating great cities for healthy and wealthy 20- to 50-year-olds, but about creating healthier, more equitable and sustainable communities for everyone.

Interviewee: Kamila Rożnowska

Collaboration: Krystian Gryglaszewski

Gil Penalosa is passionate about cities for all people. He advises decision makers and communities worldwide on how to

create vibrant cities and healthy communities for all, regardless of age, gender, ability and social, economic, or ethnic background. His focus is on the design and use of parks and streets as great public places, as well as the promotion of sustainable mobility: walking, riding bicycles, using public transit, and new use of cars.

Gil is the Founder and Chair of the successful Canadian non-profit organization 8 80 Cities, as well as first Ambassador of World Urban Parks, the international representative body for the city parks, open space and recreation sector. In addition, Gil leads a private international consulting firm – Gil Penalosa & Associates, providing services as an inspirational keynote speaker, instructor of Master Classes and advisor to decision makers. Recently he created Our Third Act, an advocacy group focused on helping older adults live healthier and happier.

Throughout his career, Gil has been a strong advocate for improving city parks, making his first mark in Bogotá, Colombia, where he led the design and construction of over 200 parks – including Simon Bolivar, a 113-hectare park in the heart of the city. His team also initiated the ‘new Ciclovía’ / Open Streets – a program that sees over a million people walk, run, skate and bike along 121 kilometers of Bogotá’s city roads every Sunday of the year, and today is internationally recognized and emulated.

Because of Gil’s unique blend of experience, pragmatism and passion, many cities and organizations worldwide seek his leadership and valuable advice. He has worked in over 350 different cities in all continents.

Gil holds an MBA from UCLA’s Anderson School of Management, where he was selected as one of the “100 Most Inspirational Alumni” in the school’s history. Gil received a Doctorate Honoris Causa from the Faculty of Urban Planning at the prominent Swedish university, SLU. He is a Certified

Professional Speaker by the US-NSA. Two years ago, he was in Planetizen's Top 50 Most Influential Urbanists, and last year received in Australia the World Urban Parks Annual Distinguished Individual Award.

A 15-minute city in GZM. You can check it on the interactive InfoGZM map

The Metropolis has launched an interactive map where everyone can check what they can do within a short walk from their home – how many schools, stores, pharmacies, clinics, bus or tram stops there are. The map is available on the Info GZM portal.

The concept of the 15-minute city is one of the assumptions analysed by the Metropolis in the development strategy being prepared. – The interactive map, which we have launched, allows us to understand and illustrate this trend even better – says Andrzej Kolat, director of the Department of Strategy and Spatial Planning.

The idea of the 15-minute city stands in opposition to the solutions used in the last century, when the so-called zoning was applied, i.e. a separate residential zone, industry and green areas. It is also a kind of return to the idea of a city „on a human scale”, where a large part of transport was carried out primarily on foot or by bicycle, and not, as today, by car.

The idea of the 15-minute city is gaining popularity globally. Its principles are already being employed by such large urban centres as Paris, Barcelona, Melbourne, Ottawa, New York or Copenhagen.

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