

PARIS

New Ways of Living for a Post- COVID Future

TEXT: TOH EE MING

Amid a devastating coronavirus pandemic, Paris inspires urban planners to rewrite the playbook on how to reimagine cities for a more sustainable future.

 PARIS

Paris mayor Anne Hidalgo (centre) campaigning on a cycle in June 2020. The 15-minute city idea was a central pillar of her re-election campaign.
Image: Alain Jocard / Getty Images





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As Parisians slept soundly in May, a crew of street workers worked steadily through the night, blocking off traffic and painting yellow bike icons on roads. The next morning, residents awoke to a city transformed—one in which they could go to work via miles of “corona cycleways” around Paris and outer suburbs.

This move to create pop-up bike lanes fast-tracked Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo’s grand plan to create a “15-minute city”. Says Hidalgo: “My ambition is to transform Paris into a town where everything you need can be found within 15 minutes of your home, on foot or by bike.”

According to Carlos Moreno, “Smart City” Special Envoy of the Mayor of Paris and Scientific Director, Panthéon Sorbonne University-IAE Paris, “The 15-minute city is a polycentric city,

where density is made pleasant, where proximity is vibrant and where social intensity is real.” Thought to fundamentally reshape how people move, work, live and play, these ideas have gained even more traction during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Reimagining the Way Parisians Move

Although cars have been king in Paris, with traffic snarls causing air pollution which kills 3,000 people a year, cycling advocates were hopeful that Paris would overcome these issues to become a leading cycling capital. This dream was fast-tracked during Paris’s lockdown, as people avoided crowded buses and metros to reduce the risk of coronavirus transmission.



A Velib cycle sharing station on the Ile de la Cite, Paris. Use of shared cycles peaked in September 2020, exceeding 200,000 daily trips with over 400,000 subscribers using the system.

Image: Martyn Davis / Flickr



As part of reclaiming road space, arterials such as Rue de Rivoli are now reserved for cyclists, pedestrians and active mobility modes along with authorised vehicles and residents.

Image: Jean-Baptiste Gurliat / City of Paris

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National bicycle group Vélo et Territoire said the number of French cyclists surged by 28% in May as compared to the year before. Parisians also enjoyed cleaner air during the lockdown due to the halt in road and air traffic, while areas with heavy traffic saw drops of 70% to 90% of nitrogen dioxide levels.

This trend aligns with Mayor Hidalgo's hopes to pedestrianise the city centre as part of the 15-minute city plan. When she was elected in 2014, she set out an ambitious plan to double the number of bike lanes from 700 to 1,400 km by 2020. In her 2020 re-election campaign, she vowed to remove 72% or 60,000 roadside parking spaces.

In 2016, she introduced the "Paris Breathes" initiative, which bans motor vehicles from entering certain parts of the city every first Sunday of the month. The city's electric buses, electric vehicles and bike rental systems are free that day.



Customer at a marketplace in Maubert. Markets in Paris reopened with strict spatial and health protocols in place to protect both traders and customers.
Image: Sophie Robichon / City of Paris

Changing the Way Parisians Work

With working from home set to become the new normal in light of the pandemic, the 15-minute city plan encourages workplaces to be located in proximity to residences. It suggests that the city add offices and neighbourhood co-working hubs, and encourages remote working and flexible hours.

French people have a legal right to ask their employers if they can *teletravail* (work from home).

Before the law was implemented in 2017, only 3% of full-time workers worked from home at least one day per week. By the end of March 2020, one quarter of French employees were working from home. Another poll also found that 71% of people who had never previously worked at home before the pandemic now wish to work from home at least one day per week.

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A traffic-free section of the right bank by the Seine in Paris. The project was implemented as part of Paris' ambitious plans to reduce the use of polluting private vehicles.

Image: Cecile Marion / Alamy Stock Photo

A Greener Way of Life

Hidalgo has been among the most high-profile city leaders on climate change since Paris hosted the COP21 summit at which the landmark 2015 Paris Agreement was signed, establishing the global goal to be carbon neutral by 2050. "Since 2014, we have already created 30 hectares of green areas and planted 20,000 trees. Work has been carried out to increase the share of local species most suited to adjust to global warming," says Hidalgo. Under her charge, Paris will plant urban forests around four iconic landmarks—The Hôtel de Ville, Opéra Garnier, Gare de Lyon and Seine quayside—building on a previously set goal for 50% of the city's surfaces to be covered by park and green roofs by 2050.

Paris's 15-minute city plan also looks to improve quality of life and reconnect neighbours by encouraging multiple uses for existing infrastructure. As Moreno notes, "Flexibility is at the core of the concept. During the pandemic, we've seen the conversion of parking spaces into cafés bringing joy and life to Paris." Roads were converted into cycleways. The 15-minute city

plan also envisions that libraries and stadiums could be used outside standard hours, while nightclubs could double up as gyms during the day. Schools could function as parks and play spaces over the weekend. As Hidalgo says, "The objective is to remodel school courtyards and open them to everyone in the summer outside of school hours."

Urban farms are another way to help cities be more resilient. A long-time advocate for urban agriculture, in 2016 Hidalgo's administration launched Les Parisculteurs, a new platform which helped fund 38 new urban farms that produce 800 tons of fruit and vegetables a year. City planners are hopeful that ordinary Parisians will start to introduce more locally grown food into their consumption habits.



An urban farm in 20th arrondissement, Paris. Supported by the City's Les Parisculteurs initiative, urban farms help green the city and increase food production.
Image: Emilie Chaix / City of Paris

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Patrons use the extended terrace of a cafe in Paris during COVID-19. Due to safe distancing measures, Parisian restaurants and bars will be able to extend the terraces of their establishments in the public space until June 2021.
Image: Paul Gueu / Shutterstock.com



The pandemic forced Parisians to stay at home, rediscovering proximity under constraint. The 15-minute city proposes a desirable proximity, a city that citizens want to live in.



Building Back Better

Looking ahead, Hidalgo says, “We will continue our transition to gain additional space over cars for the benefit of pedestrians and cyclists by developing bicycle lanes and opening up the city center to pedestrians.” The upcoming Olympic and Paralympic Games are expected to be the perfect catalyst for urban transformation, with efforts underway to create a park at Champ de Mars and render the River Seine clean enough to swim in by 2024.

With COVID-19 likely to be a chronic threat, urban planners face challenges in adapting to an uncertain future. Moreno thinks the 15-minute city is part of the solution in building urban resilience: “This [approach] proposes to tackle environmental, social and sanitary challenges that were revealed by the pandemic. These challenges are common to cities around the world, and it might be an answer for many of them.”

Experts say that pedestrianising streets is only a start and more can be done. City leaders should prioritise investments like public transport and housing. They should also look beyond central Paris, and rethink how to make working-class neighbourhoods on Paris’s outskirts more liveable.

Says Moreno: “The pandemic forced immobility and forced us to stay at home, rediscovering proximity under constraint. The 15-minute city proposes a desirable proximity, a city that we want to live in. This crisis is a big opportunity to change our lifestyle and define an urban organisation which addresses social and ecological challenges and supports sustainable economic development. But it is also about caring for all inhabitants and being close to public services.”

The coronavirus pandemic has taught Paris an important lesson on the need to plan in a collaborative, interdisciplinary way—one that incorporates creativity and resilience to dream up new ways of living. 🗨️