The Future is 20 minutes away? 20-minute neighbourhoods.¹

By Carolyn Kagan

As we move towards a future in urban areas where people travel less, buy locally and live more convivial lives, we need vital and liveable neighbourhoods. This means we have to think carefully about neighbourhoods and how they can be either built or ‘retrofitted’ to work well.

It is always good to see what is happening elsewhere and to learn what we can use for our own, usually quite different contexts. One such innovation in neighbourhood thinking is the 20 minute neighbourhood. This is a very simple idea, a neighbourhood in which we can all get the goods and services we need within a twenty minute walk of our house. But it’s an idea that has come into its own – Sustrans, for example, has included a call for Twenty Minute Neighbourhoods in their 2019 general election Manifesto.

The idea originated in Portland, Oregon, and has been taken up by Melbourne in Australia. The Portland Plan was developed by a wide coalition of public sector agencies, businesses, residents and the not for profit sector. They say the Plan is about ‘boosting prosperity and educational outcomes, and helping to advance health and equity’. Indeed, vibrant 20 minute neighbourhoods, in which 90% of Portland’s residents can easily walk or bicycle to meet all basic daily, non-work needs, forms part of the city’s Climate Action Plan, and could be an important component of our own local authority plans.

Melbourne’s 20 minute neighbourhoods

The idea was taken up and adopted in Melbourne, in their Plan Melbourne 2017-50, and a summary can be found here. So, as in a previous blog on this site, where we were discussing ‘Retrofiting Suburbiae’ we turn to Melbourne for a greater understanding of the 20-minute neighbourhood. It is Melbourne that has led the way in thinking about, and researching, not only the advantages of a 20-minute neighbourhood, but also what it will take to move from where we are now, with housing developments and urban infrastructure designed around the car, to where we would like to be.

Research undertaken by the Heart Foundation (Victoria) for the Victorian Government identified the following hallmarks of a 20-minute neighbourhood:

- be safe, accessible and well connected for pedestrians and cyclists to optimise active transport
- offer high-quality public realm and open spaces
- provide services and destinations that support local living
- facilitate access to quality public transport that connects people to jobs and higher-order services

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• deliver housing/population at densities that make local services and transport viable
• facilitate thriving local economies

The following diagram, taken from Plan Melbourne, summarises the components of a 20 minute neighbourhood.

20-Minute neighbourhoods are one way to underpin strong and sustainable communities, where people enjoy good access to local jobs, services, amenities, social infrastructure, green space, diversity of housing, safe walking and cycling networks, good public transport and a rich social and cultural life.

Of course, the built form of individual neighbourhoods will vary. However, a planning system based on the 20-minute neighbourhood, is a place-based design approach that has the potential to lead to improvements in public health and well-being as well as social cohesion, and a part of this is an increase in the efficiency of the transport and active travel network (public transport, walking and cycling). Let’s look at some of the requirements of a 20-minute neighbourhood. For more information see the projects that Plan Melbourne 2017-50 have in progress.

Attributes of a 20-minute Neighbourhood

Getting about (and transport)
The core of a 20-minute neighbourhood is its walkability and priority given to pedestrians. 800 metres (about half a mile) is the distance of a 20-minute neighbourhood or 20 minutes in time (based on average walking times of healthy adult and taking into account waiting at junctions and meandering routes). It can be a bit tricky working out the walkability of an area, but there is a methodology, based on work carried out in Australia, known as a PEDSHED analysis. Look here for information about how to conduct a PEDSHED analysis. Whilst of course public transport is to be supported, these kinds of distances within a neighbourhood are not usually covered by public transport: it is more helpful to think of public transport linking neighbourhoods. Cycling might do, if there were good cycling infrastructure, but the idea of the 20-minute Neighbourhood is to give priority consideration to pedestrians and walkability. Moving towards pedestrian friendly neighbourhoods would certainly create more active places, and it has been argued they create more economically productive places. Furthermore, walkable neighbourhoods promote healthy lifestyles, while ensuring community facilities are accessible to people of all ages and abilities. Get access right for the least mobile, and we get it right for everyone.

So, pedestrian infrastructure, connections and streetscape design should be considered during any local planning process with priority given to pedestrians in neighbourhoods, particularly in community hub spaces (what, in Melbourne are called activity centres) - not always so easy now the car is king. Even the walking infrastructure we do have (pavements) is often blocked by cars parking on them – an issue raised persistently by Living Streets.

**Housing**

Diversity of housing, near to local facilities, such as shops and public amenities are needed for a 20-Minute Neighbourhood. Research underpinning Plan Melbourne has identified a number of different metrics that can be used in the establishment of 20-minute neighbourhoods. In terms of housing density, this work reckons that a minimum housing target of 25 dwellings per hectare is needed to support built form features that align with the 20-minute neighbourhood hallmarks. Our estimates of density in Manchester was 40 people per hectare – which sounds about right.

**Community hubs and activity centres**

Community hubs, known in Melbourne as neighbourhood activity centres are at the heart of the 20-minute neighbourhood. These are more than the local high street, about which there is much attention and interest in the UK, as if high streets can be divorced from other public services and amenities. In contrast, a neighbourhood activity centre is defined as any place that attracts people for shopping, working, studying, recreation or socializing. An activity centre is a mixed use centre where people work, shop, relax, meet friends and family and also live: it is a mixture of commercial and other land use, including recreation, learning and living. As such activity centres, or community hubs have the potential to be an integral part of community life and are certainly fundamental to the creation of 20-minute neighbourhoods.

Public realm space is, then a part of 20-minute neighbourhoods. Gone are the patterns of zonal development, separating housing, workplaces, retail opportunities, services, education and leisure. Gone are the out-of-place shopping centres, the leisure centre that is located on a busy commuter road but away from other amenities, the work places to which people
have to travel. In many parts of Greater Manchester, what could be considered
neighbourhood activity centres are incomplete, with shops being central, but with less
consideration of nearby housing, health, leisure and work facilities - and of course many fail
the walkability test. However, there is the potential to create cohesive community hubs, or
activity centres, which will also serve to afford neighbourhoods a clear identity and
residents a strong sense of pride in place, by building on facilities that already exist, but
carefully targeting conversion of and creation of space to be more comprehensive and
cohesive.

There is some support for this kind of neighbourhood place-making.

The UK Government’s future of the High Street Fund recognises the need to move to more
integrated neighbourhood centres (without adopting all of the attributes of the 20-minute
neighbourhood). The Government says ‘We want to encourage vibrant town centres where
people live, shop, use services, and spend their leisure time’. Although the Government is
talking about Town Centres, rather than neighbourhoods, these initiatives could help us
move towards neighbourhood activity centres, and this momentum is maybe something on
which we can build.

Participation in planning

Local government has a role in supporting both the development and vibrancy of
neighbourhood activity centres and also a network of neighbourhood activity centres within
their jurisdiction, and ensuring that diverse housing and other facilities are all within 800m
of the activity centres. 20-minute neighbourhoods may already exist in some places (see
below for Melbourne’s approach to established and new neighbourhoods); in others they
will have to be nurtured. They are unlikely to happen without a coordinated, collaborative
community partnership approach, within which people living in those neighbourhoods play
an important part. Both the Portland Plan and the Plan Melbourne, were developed through
an extensive participatory planning approach.

Plan Melbourne’s Five-Year Implementation Plan argues that community participation is
critical to the principle of living locally within 20-minute neighbourhoods. Action 52 of the
Implementation Plan seeks to create resilient communities by increasing community
participation early in the planning and development of urban renewal precincts. As it says,
community participation and engagement can strengthen community resilience, increase
knowledge and understanding of change, and empower local groups to be part of shaping
the communities’ future. (Furthermore, Plan Melbourne points out in a way that we rarely
see in the UK, that community participation in the planning process and creating a city of
20-minute neighbourhoods align with the Sustainable Development Goals: Goal 3 good
health and wellbeing; and Goal 11 sustainable cities and communities)

A different approach for established and new ‘greenfield’ developments

The implementation of Plan Melbourne began with established neighbourhoods, and moved
on to new ‘greenfield developments’

Established neighbourhoods
In some of Melbourne’s established neighbourhoods, the council collaborated with communities to identify strategies to create more healthy, vibrant and inclusive neighbourhoods. These strategies were discussed in a workshop with project partners, and informed the development of a Pedestrian report and Planning report for each neighbourhood.

The strategies in both reports reflected the Heart Foundation’s [Healthy Active by Design](#) guidelines and the relevant 20-minute neighbourhood attributes, and included:

- Movement Network - Install safe school crossings
- Housing Diversity - Review residential zoning
- Destinations - Streetscape improvements
- Public Open Space - Improve access to local parks
- Community Infrastructure - Upgrade facilities
- Sense of Place - Install public art with youth groups
- Healthy Food - Investigate a community garden

‘Greenfield’ developments

The aim for Greenfield developments was to test, in 2018-19, 20-minute neighbourhoods in growth areas and showcase the benefits of community decision-making in these areas. The projects set out to deliver:

- An academic Literature Review of liveability outcomes in greenfield areas, based on the hallmarks (for example, [general indicators](#) and [health and wellbeing indicators](#));
- Pedestrian Report assessing the pedestrian infrastructure in one area; and
- Social Infrastructure Report recommending stages for delivery of facilities in one area.

The sequencing of infrastructure development has been seen to be crucial in moving away from a car culture – for example if active travel and public transport infrastructure are not in place until after people have started to live in houses, then cars will predominate.

**What is not to like about 20-minute neighbourhoods?**

All the evidence, particularly from Melbourne and Portland, suggests that 20-minute neighbourhoods help us move towards more resilient, convivial and viable ways of living.

One commentator reminds us that young people increasingly choose to rent and live in 20-minute neighbourhoods. For all of us, they would be places that are inviting to walk or linger for a chat, indulge in people watching, and just ‘be’. Places where people can meet, become hives of creativity and the development of new ideas and industries – they are also enjoyable.
However...

Are 20 minute neighbourhoods really accessible? Does the walkability test discriminate against older, mobility impaired or pram pushers? Key to achieving 20 minute neighbourhoods is their walkability. There is a methodology for assessing the accessibility of 20-minute neighbourhoods, and others have proposed using GIS to help in the assessment, concluding that higher levels of walking are linked to dwelling density, street connectivity, land-use mix, and net retail area.

Carolyn Whitzman, an urban researcher has reported a number of challenges that Melbourne has not yet overcome (although she still considers the 20-minute neighbourhood idea a worthy goal). Perhaps most importantly is a failure to list the essential social infrastructure or distance measurement methods to be used to create the 20-minute radius for each neighbourhood. In contrast, she says, Portland’s strategic plan for a 20-minute city requires four key pieces of social infrastructure located close to affordable residential housing. These are: public primary schools, grocery stores, green parks, and public transport stops with minimum travel frequency standards. (Although note the point made above about walkability surpassing public transport for within-neighbourhood mobility.)

Clearly one of the tasks for planning 20-minute neighbourhoods is to identify the key infrastructure requirements within and between neighbourhoods. In addition, proposals are needed to improve infrastructure in under-serviced areas (in recognition that the City and even the neighbourhood centre is often well-served) and introduce affordable housing to well serviced areas, rather than confine it to the periphery.

What should we do?

The first step is to map what already is – to get together with residents, businesses, services, and all those with an interest in a particular neighbourhood and look at existing public life, use of spaces and quality of public space infrastructure in our neighbourhoods and to ask how is public space performing for people? We need to use the People for Places thinking promoted by Jan Ghel, former city architect of Copenhagen. His approach stresses first life, then space, then buildings, rather than the other way round, which is often the way our urban space is developed. From there we can plan, in the knowledge that the future should only be 20 minutes away.