The Twenty-Minute Neighborhood

Melbourne, Australia
Cities included in this series

Antwerp
Barcelona
London
Melbourne
Paris
Philadelphia
Portland
[...]
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Our work is to rapidly convert cities into places whose systems nurture human life. An important facet of this work is to share information and analyses of such experiments with a broad audience, from practitioners, advocates, and zealots, to newcomers who are curious or concerned about the future.

Each case study in this series is analyzed through the lens of how it benefits the health of young children and their caregivers, and details how it was carried out. These cases are one part of “Born Thriving,” a suite of publications created to mainstream infant, toddler, and caregiver-focused neighborhood planning in Tirana, Albania.

Born Thriving is carried out in collaboration with the Municipality of Tirana, with the support of Bernard van Leer Foundation’s Urban95 program. This research benefited from the work of TUT-POL (Transforming Urban Transport Political Strategies and Tactics) at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, led by professors Diane E. Davis and Lily Song.

We are also indebted to review from our Bernard van Leer Foundation colleagues, especially Julien Vincelot, Andrea Sansotta-Torres, and Ankita Chachra. As well as Taylor Reich and Iwona Alfred at Institute for Transportation and Development Policy. The cases in this series use comparative city data from ITDPs Pedestrian’s First Tool—specifically, data on weighted population density, people’s proximity to services, and average block size. For more information on the tool’s methodology visit: https://pedestriansfirst.itdp.org/.

Finally, we extend our gratitude to the many people we interviewed for these cases, and their generosity to candidly discuss the challenges in their work from which we can all gain so much.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Weighted population density</th>
<th>People near services</th>
<th>Avg block size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Melbourne, Australia</td>
<td>5,078,193</td>
<td>3,509/km²</td>
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<td>37 blocks/km²</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tirana, Albania</td>
<td>906,166</td>
<td>10,786/km²</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>39 blocks/km²</td>
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</tbody>
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Key actors: Victoria State Government, Victoria Walks, Maroondah City Council, Moonee Valley City Council, Brimbank City Council

Keywords: walkability, mixed use, active transportation, clustered services, holistic neighborhood health

Melbourne’s recent urban planning initiatives offer an inspiring example of how a city originally planned around the car is building a new vision of its urban future in the face of a sustainability crisis. Like many major cities, Melbourne is becoming increasingly strained by population growth, with projections at 1.2 million new residents by 2030. Worsening traffic congestion and air pollution have steered the Victoria State Government toward a new idea: the twenty-minute neighborhood, an urban planning concept that emphasizes “living locally” and strives to ensure that all of residents’ daily needs—primary and secondary schools, fresh food, social services, and parks—can be accessed in a round-trip twenty-minute walk. After completing several pilot projects, the initiative developed a series of recommendations that emphasize a coordinated whole-of-government approach, performed by a broad coalition of ministries and agencies, for ensuring careful implementation and long-term sustainability.
What makes this project supportive of infants, toddlers, and their caregivers?

→ Proximity: The twenty-minute plan is more ambitious than others of its kind, as it aspires to have daily services within a twenty-minute walk round trip (rather than each way), making it more accessible for children who can only travel short distances.

→ Active transportation: The strategy is investing in active-transportation modes, so as to reduce car dependency and provide infants, toddlers, and their caregivers (ITCs) with more equitable options for getting around.

→ Greenfield: There is potential for the plan to be employed in greenfield sites, where new neighborhoods can be built according to the mobility and service needs of more vulnerable groups, such as ITCs.

BACKGROUND

The twenty-minute neighborhood framework is central to the city of Melbourne’s long-term plan (2017–2050) for making neighborhoods more walkable, mixed-use, and healthy, while reducing congestion and air pollution. The concept of the strategy was derived from a similar plan in Portland, Oregon’s, but its specific interpretation was developed in accordance with local research on how far the average person is willing to walk to an everyday destination. This turned out to be about eight hundred meters, or ten minutes. In the Melbourne plan, then, the twenty-minute neighborhood refers to the total travel time.

The principal objective of the twenty-minute-neighborhood strategy is to improve walkability, though other sustainable transport modes such as cycling and public transport make up key elements of the plan. Walkability is encouraged for its many environmental, economic, social, and health benefits. These might take the form of a more active citizenry, reduced congestion and pollution, feelings of safety from the “passive surveillance” of a strong community, reduction of household transport costs, or a greater return on investment for cities in comparison to other transport modes such as rail and road.

At the onset of the project, municipal councils of Maroondah, Moonee Valley, and Brimbank collaborated with community partnerships to conduct three pilot projects in suburban neighborhoods. They focused interventions on changes to the streetscape, new cycling lanes, and public art and pop-up shops.

Following the pilot projects, the government released a report with a set of recommendations for scaling up the strategy through broadening implementation, and through increasing capital-investment interventions in service densification and public-transport expansion. The recommendations emphasized the need for government, on all levels, to be involved in the project in all appropriate capacities, and for a twenty-minute neighborhood model to be integrated into major infrastructure projects so as to better coordinate investment.
The project is currently in its second stage, and has commissioned research from Monash University and Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University to test some of the features of the twenty-minute neighborhood concept in greenfield areas earmarked for development. The government’s objective is to work with public and private partners to create a best-practice development that can be referenced in future implementations.

Recommendations include:

→ Integrate the twenty-minute neighborhood model into the existing policy and planning framework so that provisions in planning law do not become roadblocks to implementation, but rather support the implementation of the neighborhood projects.

→ Develop design guidance and strategic toolkits to support a coordinated approach for implementing the twenty-minute neighborhoods, and to address challenges of increased density and the preservation of neighborhood character.

→ Embed twenty-minute neighborhood hallmarks into major infrastructure plans.

→ Develop scalable strategies by pursuing targeted funding programs, streamlining approval processes of small-scale projects, and connecting neighborhood opportunities to larger regional policy and investment priorities.

→ Formulate community-oriented communication tools and messaging to support a coordinated whole-of-government approach.
as the project expands. The research thus far has shown there to be many hurdles to implementing walkable neighborhoods in greenfield sites, particularly due to the development impact of major supermarket chains and housing developers seeking to maximize supply. While there are many issues in greenfield sites, the government is committed to continued research, engagement, and negotiation with relevant partners to build a twenty-minute neighborhood plan.

**PROCESS**

The twenty-minute neighborhood strategy was crafted by the Victoria State Government, which has been in charge of defining, communicating, and monitoring its implementation. According to James Mant, the project’s lead strategist in the Department of Environment, Land, Water, and Planning, the concept was initially not well defined, which led to many disparate interpretations and impeded implementation. The government has since worked to define the concept more precisely in terms of ten-minute walking distances to daily needs, though it is largely up to local councils to determine what exactly constitutes a “daily need.” According to Mant, while certain resources like fresh food should be universally accessible within walking distances, there is some room for flexibility for other services, and the role of the government is to guide rather than enforce what is to be considered necessary. The implementation process began with the Victoria government reaching out to specific councils as potential pilot neighborhoods. The government worked to clarify the strategy’s details and objectives, and subsequently monitored how effectively the strategy was enacted in each site. A good example of place-based planning, local governments and agencies work directly with the community, identifying needs and aspirations that will give shape to future developments in the neighborhood. In
addition to resident participation, local councils worked with NGOs like Victoria Walks (an umbrella organization for national pedestrian advocacy groups) to conduct technical assessments to identify and assess “principal pedestrian networks” (PPNs) and recommend improvements. According to Duane Burtt, policy director at Victoria Walks, the recommendations emphasized the need to improve pedestrian infrastructure near “neighborhood activity centers”—otherwise known as neighborhood shopping streets—since these areas were likely to have the most foot traffic. The Victoria government then incorporated these lessons into a report with policy recommendations. These recommendations emphasized that implementation on the ground should be led by local actors, but that the state government must actively support the initiative through continued guidance, resourcing, and facilitation for it to be sustainable long term.

The second stage of the process is focused on future twenty-minute neighborhood developments in greenfield areas. Research from RMIT has shown that new suburbs often have shopping centers built according to a standard model of self-enclosed big-box buildings surrounded by car parking, with a few major corporate tenants that tend to be supermarkets and department stores, alongside other smaller chains. This model is counterposed to the mixed-use, small scale, walkable, and active-frontage street type that the twenty-minute neighborhood strategy promotes. Many city transportation officials are still car-oriented and unlikely to resist such a big-box model. Furthermore, there is no state policy that limits the predominance of out-of-town shopping centers in new suburbs, meaning that planners are left with little option but to negotiate with the few tools they have. This often means making major compromises. According
to Mant, the lack of political will to stop major shopping-mall developments from becoming dominant fixtures of new neighborhoods presents a major hurdle.\(^7\) The governmental team leading the initiative is currently focused on producing research showcasing the economic benefits of walkability—in addition to health and social benefits—and investigating how various pop-up commercial sites can be supported in greenfield neighborhoods in order to generate more small-scale business activity. With regard to housing, greenfield neighborhoods have the potential to be the most affordable in the city. However, in the absence of government policy to support housing affordability, housing built in the area is unlikely to meet the need that currently exists.

The project has also faced some difficulties with other areas of government and councils that hold different objectives, particularly regarding car-centric infrastructure and planning. According to Mant, provisions for cars (especially parking) remains a contentious issue in Australia, and the concept of walkability can often be a hard sell to planners or transport engineers that might have different priorities.\(^8\)

With most of the work in the transport sector currently focused on huge multibillion dollar megaprojects, active transport has not received much attention, and there is still a lot of work to be done to make the shift toward more walkable neighborhoods.\(^9\) However, Mant believes that the conversation around urban mobility is slowly moving in the right direction, and the twenty-minute strategy has been able to resonate with many different constituencies. Some of the more progressive councils in the Victorian government, such as Melbourne City Council, have released transport plans prioritizing pedestrians and cyclists, and other bodies are developing guidelines around streets for people.

The Melbourne case offers a framework for a coordinated whole-of-government approach to neighborhood planning that is useful for Tirana. It emphasizes hyper-local implementation through collaboration with residents and local NGOs, while also ensuring that the state government remains involved.
long term, through sustained resourcing and guidance. This kind of approach can ensure that interventions are sensitive to the particular needs of local communities, while still remaining sustainable and coherent on a city-wide or district level. Melbourne’s struggles with guiding walkable and less car-centric development in the absence of government action show how difficult this kind of coordinated approach can be, particularly when actors working on different scales have different priorities. The effort to embed twenty-minute neighborhood principles within major infrastructure plans represents a good attempt to align these priorities, but is not enough on its own. Organizing residents around transport, housing, and other servicing issues in their neighborhood can be a useful way to initiate dialogue about how national and subnational policy can be reshaped to better support local needs.

Another takeaway from the Melbourne plan is the way it mobilizes arguments not just about the health, environmental, and social benefits of walkability, but its economic benefits as well. Cars are often associated with conceptions of economic progress, even though cities do much better economically when their residents do not use cars for short, intracity trips. This is even more true in the case of cities like Tirana that are compact and walkable in comparison to the sprawling city of Melbourne. A report that the Melbourne plan cites from Victoria Walks and Arup (a multinational engineering and consulting firm) notes that walking interventions can increase foot traffic in shops by up to 40 percent. Employment density in walkable areas has also been shown to have an impact on productivity, ultimately adding value to the economy.

Additionally, walking infrastructure brings more return on investment than other modes of transport, such as road and rail. As the Arup study notes, evidence based on over twenty different studies shows that for every AUD$1 of expenditure on walking interventions, AUD$13 of benefits are generated. This comes in the form of household savings, reduction in travel delays, and environmental health benefits. For example, investing in walking and other active modes can reduce congestion during peak hours, which costs cities billions of dollars in lost productivity. Finally, giving citizens a chance to be active and breathe clean air will significantly reduce the disease burden, which will bring economic benefits to the health-care system. However, these amenities should not come at the expense of affordable housing. This is something that the Melbourne plan struggles with because of the limited policy tools available to the city and the political economy of real estate development. Walkability cannot be promoted as a key element of holistic health and well-being while simultaneously being turned into a luxury amenity. Well-being is clean air, safe streets, and proximate access to services, but it is also protection from housing insecurity and other financial stress.

Much of the research cited by the Melbourne plan advertises walkable street design as a means of raising property values, but the economic toll that this can create for communities—particularly renters—is not addressed. Much of downtown Melbourne is already walkable, and, unsurprisingly, it is also the most expensive place to live. As walkable street design begins to expand to both second-ring neighborhoods, where housing is less expensive, and to greenfield areas, where there is a chance to build more affordable housing, it is important to take socioeconomic impacts into account. A walkability strategy that does not address these impacts risks exacerbating existing inequities and forestalling the possibility for more equitable neighborhoods throughout the city.
NOTES

1 See the case study in this series, *Portland: Healthy Connected City* (Tirana: Qendra Marrëdhënie, 2020).


5 Victoria Department of Land, “20-Minute Neighborhoods,” 42.


7 Mant, interview by Hoxha.

8 Mant.

9 Mant.


CASE STUDIES IN NEIGHBORHOOD PLANNING
FOR YOUNG CHILDREN AND THEIR CAREGIVERS

The Twenty-Minute Neighborhood

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These case studies are part of “Born Thriving,” a multi-year program to mainstream neighborhood planning principles focused on the needs of young children and their caregivers in Tirana, Albania.

Born Thriving’s written guidance consists of three volumes: neighborhood design guidelines (vol. 1); the neighborhood indicator baseline (vol. 2), and neighborhood planning case studies (vol. 3).

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Bernard van Leer Foudnation
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