The Healthy Connected City
Portland, USA
Cities included in this series

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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.
Portland, Oregon was the first city in the country to develop a plan for countering global warming in 1993, and has since been successful in reducing its per capita emissions rate by investing in and incentivizing light-rail transit, cycling, and walkable neighborhoods. Portland also boasts the highest bicycle modal share of any other city in the United States. But at only 6.5 percent, it still pales in comparison to that of many European cities and points to the magnitude of work left to be done. Since 2012 the city has been refining a plan to transform urban development toward more walkable, mixed-use, and green neighborhoods. Now in the thick of its implementation, city planners and developers are confronting challenges common to many US cities: retrofitting landscapes of unmitigated postwar sprawl proves expensive and difficult, and ensuring that these retrofits do not reproduce inequities is equally so. The city’s policies and actions that seek to confront these challenges are likely to serve as a model for US cities pursuing similar walkability retrofits in the coming years.
What makes this project supportive of infants, toddlers, and their caregivers?

- Active transportation: The strategy seeks to improve active transportation modes, providing a safer environment for children and offering caregivers more equitable options for getting around.

- Green space: The strategy seeks to improve green space as well as build a network of green corridors for more pleasant active travel.

- Clustering services: The “neighborhood hub” concept of the strategy focuses on bringing a concentration of social services to communities, such as libraries and healthcare clinics.

- Anti-displacement: The strategy’s attention to the risk of displacement means that more children and caregivers will benefit from neighborhood improvements if prevention is carried out successfully, even, or especially, if they are lower income.

BACKGROUND

The Healthy Connected City, a variation of the twenty-minute city, is a key component of the Portland Plan, the city’s 2012 master plan (replacing a strategy from 1980), which focuses on an overarching equity strategy, alongside education initiatives and economic prosperity and affordability programs. Unlike other cities with similar time-based concepts, twenty minutes functions less as a metric (this, as some disability advocates have noted, can never be universally consistent) and more as a planning ethos that proposes a more human-scale, convenient, and communal form of placemaking. The plan distinguishes itself through its people-focused perspective and four core priorities: prosperity, education, health, and equity. It serves as the basis of the city’s target to increase to 80 percent the number of Portlanders with safe and easy access to services and amenities. This goal will be pursued through increasing density, improving economic development, expanding public transport networks, and attracting grocery stores and other key amenities to underserved neighborhoods. The main strategy is to create service hubs that anchor parts of the city that are currently car dependent, so as to disincentivize driving and build more “complete” neighborhoods.

After its original debut, the twenty-minute neighborhood concept was integrated into policy and infrastructure planning in Portland’s 2016 Comprehensive Plan, and has been in the implementation phase for three years. In that time, the city has identified several sites for “neighborhood centers” and light-rail stations in areas not currently walkable, established an “Anti-Displacement Action Plan” and task force, and started an “Age Friendly City” program, ensuring that improvements are made accessible to Portlanders of all ages. Over the next twenty-five years, the Comprehensive Plan will continue to guide the development of the city with an emphasis on cultivating neighborhood hubs that offer concentrated access to local businesses and social services, affordable housing, healthy and affordable food, as well as reliable and well-connected public transportation.
The Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability began gathering data for the twenty-minute concept by conducting a “20-Minute Neighborhood Analysis,” where the quality and accessibility of the walking environment in different parts of town was assessed based on key features identified in walkability research. This assessment expanded on traditional measures of walkability by not only looking at proximity, but also analyzing barriers to pedestrian access and positive features of pedestrian ways. The analysis included infrequent street connections (pedestrians want to minimize out-of-direction travel, and a weak walkshed does not allow them to cross and navigate streets easily and safely), and, on the positive end, a variety of pathways, such as sidewalks with proximity to greenery or active facades.

Based on an extensive literature review, the analysis proposed seven key elements of a walkable environment: concentrations of housing close to transit and neighborhood services, a street grid or a similarly intuitive network of local streets, accessible sidewalks and other pedestrian connections, building scales and designs that are pedestrian friendly, distinct public spaces and neighborhood centers, a diversity of transport options, and low-speed streets. The Bureau of Planning developed an index based on these elements and built a GIS model that allowed it to map different features of the physical environment in each of the twenty-four census neighborhoods of the city. Each neighborhood was evaluated and scored based on five indicators: the proximity to a grocery store, a park, a full-service community center, an elementary school, and transit frequency. If the neighborhood received a score of 70/100 or higher, it was considered a “complete neighborhood.” The study found that the majority of Portland’s prewar inner-city neighborhoods could be considered “complete neighborhoods”: they were relatively well serviced, residents could walk to most of their daily needs, and pedestrian infrastructure was satisfactory. The neighborhoods that didn’t do as well in the walkability assessment were built in the postwar auto age, located in the eastern and western peripheries of the city. Many of these neighborhoods consisted of predominantly single-family zoning and large shopping malls. Bill Cunningham, a planner and primary author of “20-Minute Neighborhood Analysis,” says about the results of the study: “We already have a lot of good twenty-minute neighborhoods in the older parts of the city. Part of what we need to do is cultivate these neighborhood hubs or neighborhood centers in areas where they’re lacking, and work on making improvements to really boost the walkability and performance of those areas.”

The study showed that large portions of Portland are not planned or designed at a high standard, but the city also has a scarcity of resources. The strategy seeks to address these shortcomings by targeting investments in neighborhood centers, which would be designed to be the most walkable, accessible, connected, and dense areas of any given community.

The idea is that these centers wouldn’t just be denser areas for shopping, but hubs of community services such as libraries and health clinics, as well as areas with a range of inclusive, affordable housing options for the aging and
families. Much of this vision has been influenced by feedback from disability advocates, who have argued that facilities such as elder housing, and affordable housing more generally, should be sited near neighborhood hubs if they are to be the most physically accessible areas of a community. In Portland, as in many other cities, new affordable housing is often, by default, built on the fringes of the city, where the land is the cheapest, which ends up reproducing inequities, as people with less income are made to live in places where they have fewer affordable transportation options.

As Cunningham notes, part of the strategy of the Portland Plan is that the city is more intentional about where it puts affordable housing, and that this housing is located in areas with some of the best access. The city, however, lacks a lot of the power it needs to bring critical services to communities. Cunningham argues that a major shortfall of the

What the Portland Plan reveals, particularly when compared to other plans in Europe or Australia, is that US cities generally do not have the public infrastructure to build community hubs that are truly well serviced, and they lack the jurisdiction to easily implement them. Portland’s libraries, for example, are regulated at the regional rather than municipal level, and its health clinics are all private, making them more likely to be sited in business districts and other wealthy areas. Cunningham explains that the city does indeed work with the county and other bodies that have more leverage over such matters, but it still amounts to a very incremental

The results of the “20-Minute Neighborhood Analysis” found that neighborhoods become significantly less walkable farther out into the peripheries.

Source: The City of Portland, “Portland Plan.”
approach that makes the process more arduous than it would be in a European city.

Cunningham also notes that concerns about displacement as a result of increased land and property values from neighborhood improvements have been central to the implementation process.

The inner city of Portland has already been heavily gentrified, as recent urban development has made it a popular and expensive place to live, ultimately pushing lower-income residents, primarily African American residents, to the eastern edges of the city—places without complete sidewalks or walkable access to daily needs. Cunningham says: “A major concern is that if we work to improve these parts of the city so that they have great twenty-minute neighborhood hubs with all the services you need, the people who could most benefit from it—lower-income people who maybe can’t afford a car—could likely be displaced as a result of making these places maybe more desirable.”

The city has responded to concerns from residents and local activist groups through their Anti-Displacement Action Plan, in which they explore strategies pursued by other cities, as well as the tools that they could leverage to mitigate the effects of increasing land values, such as acquiring land, land banking, or inclusionary zoning. The basic premise of the Anti-Displacement Action Plan is that all neighborhood improvements should be accompanied by displacement-mitigation measures, such that these processes are confronted together rather than after the fact. As Cunningham acknowledges, the risk of displacement doesn’t just apply to residential areas, but to commercial ones as well. In this vein, residents and activists have emphasized the importance of commercial spaces in the neighborhood hubs being rooted in the community and reflective of cultures in the area. This means keeping commercial space affordable so that local businesses such as a Latin American grocer or a restaurant that serves a predominantly Latinx community is not driven out by a Starbucks. The city has updated its commercial zoning to include a development bonus for affordable commercial space, but Cunningham knows that these mechanisms are only so effective when many of the decisions made about urban development are still in the hands of the private sector.
IMPLICATIONS FOR TIRANA

There are three compelling reasons why the Portland case is worth analyzing: its choice to dissociate from the explicitly twenty-minute metric, its approach to urban data gathering, and its efforts to integrate anti-displacement work into urban design interventions.

Importantly, the issue of whether to refer to the concept as a “twenty-minute neighborhood” in Portland elicited productive feedback from disability advocates, who argued that the twenty-minute metric is not inclusive of non-able-bodied people, the elderly, and children. Urban planners and designers that are attentive to child-friendly city principles know this well: it can take much more time for a caregiver with a toddler to walk three hundred meters than it can for an able-bodied adult. In response, the city changed the official term for the concept to “Healthy Connected City,” though this was not well taken by the public given its vague nature. While it is clear that a phrase highlighting twenty minutes is more immediately resonant, the argument about exclusivity is also important. Rather than fixating on a specific time metric, it may be more helpful to think about this form of neighborhood planning in a layered way: there are hyper-local services that need to be accessed daily, semi-local ones that may need to be accessed weekly, and city-level services and amenities that are not necessarily part of a routine. What exactly is included in each of these three layers can be left to individual cities to decide with their residents, but the basic idea of localizing the work of social reproduction in a city as much as possible can be universally pursued.

Finally, what is exemplary is Portland’s effort to treat anti-displacement work as integral to the plan, rather than supplementary. The Portland Plan takes an explicitly equity-focused lens, and sees the twenty-minute neighborhood as an opportunity to bring a better quality of life to lower-income residents of the city that are often housing insecure and living in areas with poor transit infrastructure. It is important then that their access to housing is protected as neighborhoods improve. With so much evidence that gentrification is not only a byproduct but often a constitutive goal of neighborhood revitalization, planners cannot feign ignorance or treat street design as a matter disconnected from the larger problems of land use and transit planning. While Portland’s Anti-Displacement Action Plan is in its early stages and has yet to yield concrete results, its establishment marks an important step forward. In Tirana, tenants in the rapidly gentrifying inner city are not protected from displacement. In cities with an absence of prevention and mitigation policies, as well as a marginal stock of public housing, neighborhood improvements are likely to generate displacement, and this is an issue that planners and designers must grapple with and actively address.
NOTES

1 See the case studies in this series, *The Twenty-Minute Neighborhood* and *The Fifteen-Minute City* (Tirana: Qendra Marrëdhënje, 2020).


3 Bill Cunningham et al., *20-Minute Neighborhood Analysis: Background Report and Analysis Area Summaries* (Portland: Bureau of Planning and Sustainability, June 2012).

4 Cunningham et al.

5 Bill Cunningham, interview by Lorina Hoxha, May 22, 2020.

6 Cunningham.

7 Cunningham.
Qendra Marrëdhënie (Relationship Center) collaborates with local institutions to build just spaces for children and those who care for them.

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CASE STUDIES IN NEIGHBORHOOD PLANNING FOR YOUNG CHILDREN AND THEIR CAREGIVERS

The Healthy Connected City

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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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