FIFTEEN-MINUTE CITY

SLOW AND BEHOLD

As moves are made to free our cities from the motor car's grip, intelligent urban planning will allow us to appreciate our neighbourhoods from a more human perspective.

Writer —— Sarah Wigglesworth

About the writer: Wigglesworth is a UK-based architect. She recently completed a bridge and cycling project for the town of Kingston upon Thames in Greater London.

Consider any 19th-century photograph of a European town or village and what is striking is how different it looks compared with today. Even accounting for the slow shutter speed blurring most movement, the traffic is sparse and the pavements and roads are occupied by people.

Although we can't hear it, we can imagine the scene: the noise is low level, so people's voices are audible. The odours are those of horse dung, which would have been gathered and put to good use on farms and market gardens. The environment was centred on people, moving at human speed. Charles Dickens walked all over London and is known to have walked home to north Kent, a distance of almost 50 kilometres. His personal engagement with the city life that he observed on his rambles suffused his novels. In the mid-20th century, Guy Debord developed the concept of the *dérive*, an engagement in city life that involved heightened sensitivity to the atmospheres in the city's fabric and activities. It is about embracing the pull of random opportunities and provocations encountered during a passage through the city. Debord's Situationists intended to open up the imaginative and emotional potential, or psychogeography, of city life.

Modernism changed this for good. The advent of the motor vehicle created a new concept of urban space, to be experienced at speed. The thrill of velocity, the fascination with and mastery over the machine and the promise of autonomy all contributed to ideas of urbanism where the vehicle gained dominance, often relegating the pedestrian and any other form of transit to second best. Vast distances came into the orbit of the city, promoting a culture of long-distance commuting and the division between home life and the workplace.

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And so we built shopping centres surrounded by parking, and multi-storey garages. We installed traffic lights and painted yellow lines along the curb. There were also road-widening projects, motorways and underpasses. We now breathe a fog of pollution, clog our small towns and villages with oversized cars and unthinkingly spoil views with a foreground of parked vehicles.

The car has dominated our spatial thinking, unchallenged, for a century. But the travails of recent times have reminded us of the benefit of fresh, clean air, the importance of regular exercise and the advantages we gain from contact with nature. These things are not optional, they are life-giving because they secure our physical and mental health and wellbeing. We have also noticed how important other people are to us: human contact assures our sense of self and fends off isolation.

If we slow the pace and take notice, if we move by the effort of our own bodies, we are more likely to safeguard these things. Cycling and walking provide these opportunities. By building them into our routines we can adjust our goals, treating the journey as an adventure, not just a period to be endured between its start and end points. Walking and cycling are not just efficient and non-polluting, they promote observation, awareness and engagement with your surroundings.

They are also healthy. The statistics are astonishing: according to an Imperial College London study surveying seven major European urban centres, those who cycle live, on average, two years longer than those who don't and take 15 per cent fewer days off work. Regular cycling has been shown to cut your risk of early death by up to 30 per cent, and an adult who frequently cycles typically has the fitness of someone 10 years younger. In addition to the health benefits, an increase in self-propelled transit will spawn new associations, clubs and interests. It will stimulate new skills and industries, be they craft-based, manufacturing, tourism, catering, design and so on.

We are living in an era that is re-evaluating modernism's love of speed, autonomy and the machine, and are entering a period of slow mobility, networking and organisms. For towns and cities, this transformation will herald the advent of new civic infrastructure to match the vision of the railway, road and canal-builders. A new building type is begging to be invented in response.

My own work in a cycle hub for the Greater London suburb of Kingston upon Thames goes some way to rebalance the town with a bridge and parkland route to the riverside, and provides an advance blueprint for how this could look. In the new townscape such as Kingston's, roads will be quieter and sweeter smelling, and they will be green as well as safer. This could be the start of the 15-minute city: where everything you need is a bike ride or walk away; where we work and shop locally, feed our neighbourhood economy and help build our community.

This type of development is a start but there is so much potential to come. So if you haven't already, get out of your car, buy a bike and get riding. The more interest there is in walking and cycling the better the infrastructure will be and the healthier we'll feel. The slow revolution is here – so get moving. ——— K

'Konfekt' comment: Although speedy vehicles have their uses, cities should put people (and their health) first.