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DOI

[10.1177/00420980231169174](https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980231169174)

Publication date

2023

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Urban Studies

Citation (APA)

Casarin, G., MacLeavy, J., & Manley, D. (2023). Rethinking urban utopianism: The fallacy of social mix in the 15-minute city. *Urban Studies*, *60*(16), 3167-3186. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980231169174>

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Rethinking urban utopianism: The fallacy of social mix in the 15-minute city

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2023, Vol. 60(16) 3167–3186

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DOI: 10.1177/00420980231169174

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Abstract

The concept of urban living is evolving, and there is a growing interest in creating smaller, more connected, and hyperlocal neighbourhoods, where everything people need is within a 15-minute walk or bike ride. This paper challenges the concept of the ‘15-minute city’ as a panacea for urban ills, by exploring the history of utopian urban planning and regeneration aimed at creating sustainable, inclusive and vibrant communities by desegregating disadvantaged groups. Specifically, we examine social mixing policies, which are recurring top-down interventions that pathologise concentrated urban disadvantage. We trace the evolution of these policies in Europe from the Garden City movement to post-war social housing redevelopment to the current 15-minute city, which we consider to be social mix by stealth. While such policies can reduce the degree of concentrated disadvantage in the short term, they tend to be ineffective in the long term, as deprived neighbourhoods often remain so despite attempts to make them more diverse. The paper argues that the 15-minute city would be implemented through de facto social mix actions at the neighbourhood level, which are insufficient to address the deeper structural issues that perpetuate spatial inequality and deprivation. We propose that longitudinal and comparative analyses, combined with ‘right to the city’ perspectives, should be considered in future research and policymaking to understand – and more importantly address – why urban renewal initiatives that aim for equitable outcomes at the neighbourhood scale ultimately fail to deliver.

Keywords

15-minute city, right to the city, social mix, spatial inequality, urban utopianism

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摘要

城市生活的概念不断发展,人们越来越热衷于创造更小、连接更紧密的和超本地化的街区,在这样的街区内,人们只需要步行或骑车不超过十五分钟,就可以得到所需要的一切。本文通过探讨乌托邦式的城市规划和复兴的历史,对"十五分钟城市"作为解决城市弊病的灵丹妙药的概念提出了质疑,旨在通过消除对弱势群体的隔离来创造可持续的、包容的、充满活力的社区。具体来说,我们考察了社会融合政策,这些政策是反复出现的自上而下的干预措施,它们将集中的城市底层人口病态化。我们追溯这些政策在欧洲的演变,从花园城市运动到战后的社会住房重建,再到现在的十五分钟城市,我们认为这是一种隐性的社会融合。虽然这些政策可以在短期内减少底层人口集中的程度,但从长远来看,它们往往是无效的,因为尽管人们试图使其更加多样化,但贫困的街区往往依旧贫困。本文认为,十五分钟城市将通过街区层面的事实上的社会融合行动来实施,这不足以解决使空间不平等和贫困长期存在的更深层次的结构性问题。我们建议,在未来的研究和决策中应考虑纵向和比较分析,结合"城市权利"的观点,以了解--更重要的是解决--为什么旨在实现街区范围内公平结果的城市更新举措最终未能实现。

关键词

十五分钟城市、城市权利、社会融合、空间不平等、城市乌托邦主义

Received November 2020; accepted March 2023

Introduction

Essential to [tackling inequality] is creating vibrant communities in which individuals and families from various backgrounds interact and engage with one another and their physical environment. Unlike the traditional make-up of cities, where asset classes were unintegrated, a 15-minute city calls for urban masterplans that facilitate a social mix through incorporating residential, commercial, retail, and hospitality assets within communities.

(Maqdash, 2020, n.p.)

The promotion of neighbourhood 'diversity' by income, ethnicity or tenure has long occupied academic and urban policy discourses (Bolt et al., 2010). Apparent neighbourhood ills, seen to result from the accumulation and concentration of socio-economic disadvantages, have been treated with several urban policy 'cures', most of which aim to deliver renewal by ensuring

higher-income households share neighbourhood space with lower-income households. Such interventions assume that disrupting concentrations of poverty produces significant benefits for low-income residents, and as a result, for the wider city region. Operating primarily through investments in housing and public services within targeted neighbourhoods, social mixing policies seek to address the production of negative 'neighbourhood effects' by encouraging newcomers into disadvantaged and (often) stigmatised areas to widen social interactions and promote interethnic coexistence (Imrie and Raco, 2012; Wacquant, 2007). Implicit within this approach is the assumption that disadvantaged neighbourhoods risk 'ghetto' (Wacquant, 2013; Wilson, 1987) rebellions because of their uniformly poor community, territorial stigmatisation, limited public services and/or environmental degradation, whereas 'balanced' mixed communities with a good infrastructure and pleasant

environment are places of integration. Furthermore, opportunities for upward social mobility are ensured by the *proximity* of different socio-economic or ethnic groups within a given residential space. The trajectories of existing residents are not only boosted by the economic and social changes that accompany the influx of more affluent persons, but these newcomers additionally provide a lifestyle and habits to emulate. Of interest is the fact that interventions have overwhelmingly sought to encourage the movement of people into ‘problem’ areas, rather than support the residents of these areas to seize opportunities to improve their situations by moving elsewhere (Galster, 2007).

The literature on social mix has highlighted the limitations of this approach, from its failure to improve social cohesion among neighbourhood residents (Hya, 2015; Jackson and Butler, 2015; Lipman, 2012) to the risk of promoting gentrifying processes and displacement (Colomb, 2007; Kintrea, 2013; Slater, 2006). Despite this, we have seen renewed interest in increasing the diversity of populations in urban neighbourhoods in recent years. Part of the reason for this is that lockdowns and mobility restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic have drawn attention to the importance of local communities, and the local provision and proximity of services and facilities including shops, healthcare facilities, schools and recreational spaces that are accessible by bike or on foot (Staricco, 2022). Current debates on what is called the ‘post-COVID-19 city’ (Camerin, 2021), for instance, have proposed urban transformations where everything residents need can be reached within a very short space of time. The 15-minute – or 20-minute in some instances – city as a model for urban planning has gained prominence in Paris, Milan, London and Barcelona, among other metropolitan contexts, and through it a raft of measures

to (re)create the sustainable and liveable ‘city of proximities’ are proposed. The concept of the ‘15-minute city’ implies that a minimal temporal distance between the locations of an individual’s housing, employment (often framed as offices highlighting the groups for whom this is considered appropriate), medical facilities, retail outlets, recreational spaces and cultural venues fosters a sense of neighbourhood belonging among urban dwellers, thereby resolving the ‘frontiers’ within large cities (Dean et al., 2019). When this minimum set of services and facilities can be ensured, the result is a more liveable and accessible local space that addresses the ephemeral nature of social connections by overcoming any problematic imbalances within the city thus ensuring ‘optimal density’ of people per square kilometre, as well as diversity in people and use. Digitalisation is positioned as a key pillar of this strategy given the potential for digital technologies to improve and enhance service provision alongside opportunities for urban residents to connect and engage locally as well as further afield (Moreno et al., 2021).

The other aspect of the return to social mix is an increased awareness of how cultural difference and distance contribute to feelings of discontent, manifest in polarised electoral politics and abstention from voting. The widening gap between the top and bottom of the income distribution, together with the substantial fracturing of the ‘long middle group’ in which life chances and worlds increasingly depend on intergenerational inheritances, gives rise to perceptions of exclusion and subordination among those on lower incomes (MacLeavy and Manley, 2019). From an urban perspective, this is problematic insofar as it undermines community cohesion. As those at the bottom find certain occupations, leisure activities and forms of consumption harder to access they ‘may perceive that those in the higher social strata deem their lifestyles and

worldviews to be inferior, inspiring feelings of threat and sparking opposition' (Noordzij et al., 2021: 1450). At the same time, real and perceived differences in life-worlds may prompt those with the material resources to avoid living and residing within 'left behind' neighbourhoods segregating groups yet further. The propensity for different 'worlds within the world' to emerge is not new but the visibility of group and area-based differences has increased because of 'surprising' electoral outcomes, such as the election of Donald Trump (in the US) and the 'yes' result of the Brexit referendum (MacLeavy and Manley, 2019), as well as the different experiences and ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the UK, for instance, the level of economic impact of the pandemic varied according to the kind of places people lived, with residents of deprived neighbourhoods reporting the greatest level of economic difficulty because of the restrictions imposed (Cross et al., 2022).

Given that social fractures within cities are lending support for a return to social mix *by stealth*, it is apposite to consider if and how the 15-minute city would improve or hinder socialisation and sense of neighbourhood belonging, as well as whether encouraging people and services to mix is sufficient to counteract social divides, existing inequalities and polarisation between neighbourhoods (Yeung, 2021). There is, we argue, a need to revisit the literature on the origins and outcomes of social mixing policies, acknowledging and advancing Sarkissian (1976), considering proposals now being made across a number of European cities. Additionally, we can draw insights from mixed tenure housing developments, which have historically been seen as crucial for the mitigation of concentrated socio-economic disadvantages and the promotion of equality among urban residents by ensuring the close proximity of residents from different socio-

economic and ethnic groups, and as a corollary the availability of 'positive' role models in (once) deprived urban neighbourhoods (e.g. Arthurson, 2002; Berube, 2005; Hyra, 2015; Mugnano and Costarelli, 2016; Sarkissian, 1976; Tunstall, 2012). While the literature on the 15-minute city has touched upon the legacies of past urban planning and interventions in Europe and the US in terms of city-branding (Gower and Grodach, 2022) and efforts to improve the environment and quality of urban life in general (Pinto and Akhavan, 2022), the link between this new utopian ideal and initiatives to ensure social mix has been thus far overlooked, which is surprising given that – as Marchigiani and Bonfantini (2022) observe – the 15-minute city is principally concerned with the regeneration and renewal of marginalised neighbourhoods.

To explore the resurgence of social mix ambitions in the 15-minute city, this article offers an historical *excursus* from the UK Garden Cities model to experiments with social mix in European cities in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Returning to the roots of social mix in the late-19th century and tracing it through to this most recent phase of use allows us to investigate why social mix previously failed to address inequalities, as well as illuminate how it paradoxically contributed to the creation of micro-scale frontiers within neighbourhoods. As we discuss, the oft-cited purpose of creating mix through mixed tenure development embodies an implicitly paternalistic approach, which seeks to deliver equality through assimilation and control. Analysis from a race and class-based perspective reveals this approach to be condescending and, over time, productive of further inequalities and revanchist attitudes (see Uitermark, 2014). Our intervention goes further in showing that even purportedly 'bottom up' approaches promoting social and tenure mix have led to community

disruption, exclusions and the (re)construction of social fractures at a micro-scale. Hence, we posit that instead of further utopian visions that neglect the spatiality of urban struggles, both longitudinal and comparative analyses, combined with ‘right to the city’ perspectives, are needed to ensure we do not simply reproduce policies that aim, but once again fail to deliver, equality at the neighbourhood scale.

The origins and development of the social mix ideal

While social mix was extensively used as a regeneration vehicle in the latter part of the 20th century, the aspiration of a balanced society with strong bonds and readily accessible public services is not a modern phenomenon. Discussions about the ‘ideal mix’ extend, in Europe, at least as far back as the 19th century. In Victorian England some of the earliest discussions around the advantages of residential mix occurred in response to the social segregation emergent in newly industrialised cities. Drawing on Sarkissian’s (1976) work, two main schools of thought arose in urban studies: a first ‘school’ opposed the densely populated, deprived and divided city based on a sentimental and conservative politics, while the second, which followed, was a more utilitarian movement. Within the former, social critics and philanthropists who believed in anti-urbanism and felt nostalgic for the ‘pre-industrial village’ began to idealise the concept of the neighbourhood as a romantic ideal – a small, self-sufficient area where harmony and social balance worked together as an ‘antidote to new class antagonisms’ (Sarkissian, 1976: 234). By contrast, the utilitarian perspective proposed that mixed communities would provide a fairer solution to the overcrowded and polarised cities resulting from the industrial revolution. Common to these two approaches was a

‘revolutionary’ notion: engineered social balance for equality of opportunity – an ‘Apollonian utopia’ (Blanc, 2010: 269) that aimed to restore the lost community spirit of the small village through residential mix. In Europe, the first urban ‘cures’ to the segregated city ranged from idealistic town planning models to social mixing initiatives at the neighbourhood scale.

The Garden City movement and slum clearance

By the beginning of the 20th century, utopian ideas around the mixed and liveable community were being applied in town planning projects around Europe. Garden Cities movements combined village nostalgia with a desire (of some) to escape from polluted and overcrowded industrial cities (Miller, 2010; Ravn and Dragsbo, 2019; Richert and Lapping, 1998). In Great Britain, Ebenezer Howard’s plans integrated earlier urban planning blueprints based on a first form of social mix in bucolic locations (Rockey, 1983). Influenced by James Silk Buckingham’s model of Victoria, a ‘small utopian city designed to accommodate all classes (albeit segregated) in a semi-rural setting’ (Sarkissian, 1976: 235), he promoted a good infrastructure organised around distinct zones of activity and use. Despite the lack of street level social mix, Buckingham’s 1849 urban model implied a circular, open city where multiple class groups could live near each other and enjoy the same level of access to services and provisions. George Cadbury’s development, Bournville, extended this idea to provide decent housing to ‘workers of many types – employers and employed, managers and operatives, tradesmen and clerks’ (Bournville Village Trust quoted in Sarkissian and Heine, 1978: 22) within a mixed community of dwelling types and social classes not far from Birmingham, UK.

Inspired by the model villages, Garden Cities were intended to offer a compromise between the options and services of a town and the wide spaces of the countryside, resulting eventually in what Howard called the ‘town–country magnet’ (Miller, 2010: 4). Both ‘the growth of slums’ (Batchelor, 1969: 185), where the urban poor were clustered, and the widespread insalubrity of housing within the industrial city prompted the design of smaller settlements, in which agriculture, as opposed to factories and trade, would support and unite communities. Following the example of the British Garden City, similar aspirations for new and ‘healthier’ forms of housing were also developed in continental Europe, where, instead of terraced houses, slums were represented by ‘huge tenement houses with narrow and dark backyards’ (Ravn and Dragsbo, 2019: 5). In both Denmark and Germany, Garden City-like neighbourhoods were built (by the Danish Garden Housing Association and Deutsche Gartenstadt-Gesellschaft respectively) to improve the wellbeing of workers through the revitalisation of gardening traditions. Seen as critical for the health and wellbeing of workers, the regeneration of slums alongside the housing of the urban working-poor presents similarities with contemporary discourses around social mix, including plans for the 15-minute city (Marchigiani and Bonfantini, 2022; Pozoukidou and Chatziyiannaki, 2021). In both instances, we argue, interventions reflect a utopian idea of ‘togetherness’ that is conceived and sold as *the* ‘remedy’ for the many problems affecting the city, including separation, mistrust, crime and clustered unemployment (see also MacLeavy, 2009; Manley et al., 2012). The implicit assumption was and still remains that social housing tenants and homeowners will socialise together, and that this proximity will be sufficient to improve the living standards of poorer residents – not least by raising their aspirations to live more like

their affluent neighbours (for instance by buying a house to secure and incentivise their attachment to and role within the local area).

While continental Europe saw modernist town-planning and large-scale housing development to tackle the post-war ‘housing needs of the masses’ (Ravn and Dragsbo, 2019: 8), in Britain the Garden City movement was followed by the 1946 New Towns Act, which endorsed the decentralisation of London and other large metropolises through the creation of over 20 towns, inspired – at least in ambition – by Howard’s ideas (Batchelor, 1969). Within these, it was suggested that housing should be organised in ‘neighbourhood units’ containing a nursery and primary school, a pub and shops selling staple goods, as well as ideally a hall for clubs and voluntary groups to meet regularly (Gower and Grodach, 2022; New Towns Committee, 1946; Pinto and Akhavan, 2022). This proposal reflected a desire to maintain the spirit of fellowship, comradeship and ‘classlessness’ (Sarkissian, 1976: 239) said to have been experienced during the Second World War, while also recognising that deprived neighbourhoods are not just symptoms of disadvantage, but also potentially causes. Corresponding with plans for social development at the neighbourhood level and inspired by the advent of Britain’s New Towns, French *grands ensembles* or *villes nouvelles* were similarly conceived as a way of building peace and cohesion through the housing of immigrants alongside ‘workers and those who had been displaced from the old, derelict slums of the country’s city centres’ (Lelévrier and Melic, 2018: 313; Vadelorge, 2006). Large social housing estates, made of distinctive tower blocks and located at the outskirts of cities grew rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s, not only in France but over all of Europe, owing to the high demand for accommodation resulting from high birth rates, increased

immigration from colonial territories and increased wealth (Wassenberg, 2018). However, a few decades after their construction, these examples of ‘decentralised modernity’ in Europe (Corbusier, 1942) experienced a rapid decline in physical and socio-economic conditions and since then have been seen as historical symbols of urban poverty, as well as homogeneous and excluded areas (Tyler and Slater, 2018; Wacquant, 2007; Wassenberg, 2018). The poor construction materials and techniques that often allowed for the building of housing estates in a very short time frame precipitated the quick infrastructural decay of tower blocks, which gradually turned into spatial clusters of socio-economic disadvantages, because of the concentration of cheap, high-density housing (Wassenberg, 2018).

Thus, while the original mixed interventions were visionary attempts of town planning, they eventually became targets for neighbourhood desegregation, with social mix again proposed as a means of tackling clusters of concentrated ‘social ills’ within post-war social housing developments (Brophy and Smith, 1997; Gans, 1961). This approach was adopted to improve both suburban areas – as in the case of most post-war social housing estates – and inner-city neighbourhoods, that also came to be seen as homogenous and *dangerous* examples of marginalised and ‘parallel societies [...] cut off from the norms and values of “mainstream” society’ (Kintrea, 2013: 136). Simultaneously, the socio-spatial exclusion of low-income groups was associated with the perceived or effective concentration of minority ethnic and religious communities, whose presence was regarded as equally detrimental to integration, civic participation and city-wide social order. The same terms, ‘inner-city’, ‘social housing estate’ and increasingly ‘sink estate’ have since been used within public debate as synonyms of social decline, failed integration and

economic desolation, contributing to the discourse of poverty and disadvantage as distinctly spatial problems (Rhodes and Brown, 2019; Slater, 2018).

Social mixing policies between late 1990s and early 2000s

Although initially designed as neighbourhood units able to ‘flourish by [themselves]’ (Wassenberg, 2018: 40) through diversity in social and ethnic composition, the latter part of the 20th century saw many large housing estates become segregated, increasingly disconnected from the rest of the city, and (over time) economically and socially abandoned (for an extreme example of this in the US see Wilson, 1987). As physical degradation increased, with critiques and complaints of residents left unheard, a ‘downward process’ (Wilson, 1987: 48) followed, whereby those who could afford to moved out from the high-rise flats and poor-quality housing developments, and incoming residents came increasingly from lower socio-economic classes and immigrant backgrounds via processes of social housing placement or by virtue of the availability and price of (cheap) rental stock. The resulting concentration of deprivation contributed further to processes of decline and territorial stigmatisation, with state actors playing a significant role in the discourse that saw these places marked as problematic zones. What is surprising is that despite the visible failures of the utopian mixed and self-sufficient society (symbolised at once stage by the construction of tower blocks), their downfall prompted further tenure and social mixing interventions to be pursued across France (Bacqué and Fijalkow, 2012), Germany (Busch-Geertsema, 2007), Italy (Briata et al., 2009), the Netherlands (Bolt et al., 2009), Spain (Ponce, 2010), Sweden (Andersson, 2006) and the UK (Imrie and Raco, 2012). The late 1990s and early 2000s can be seen as the

last and most intensive period for the ‘mixed community remedy’ as a means to address social disparities originating from the same urban ideal.

A common European approach to social mix can be identified with regeneration being pursued through the neighbourhood’s physical redevelopment and especially the restructuring and/or demolition of social housing. Now viewed as ageing structures where problems and threats are concentrated, the towers and blocks of uniform post-war housing have been replaced with units that vary ‘by price, range and tenure’ (Galster, 2007: 523-524). Diversification through area-based regeneration has been progressed in France, for instance, with the implementation of programmes to tackle identified *Zones Urbaines Sensibles* (urban vulnerable zones) (Briata et al., 2009); and in the Netherlands, where demolition practices have played a dominant role in the social mix agenda, especially following the Urban Renewal Act in 2000 (Costarelli et al., 2019). In these countries, as well as Germany and the UK, interventions have often focused on housing choice as an important factor for resolving segregation (Kintrea, 2013). Practices of ‘remaking’ social housing by changing the social composition of residents – in terms of income or socio-ethnic background – through the revision of allocation criteria and the selling of housing stock have been employed (van Ham and Manley, 2009). Elsewhere land use planning has bolstered social mix through the use of national or local regulations to support tenure mix. In countries such as Spain and Sweden, for instance, social mix has been sought through tenure diversification projects regulated by national land use laws or local government directives (Graham et al., 2009; Kintrea, 2013). Such interventions, aimed at deconcentrating and improving disadvantaged inner-city areas and suburbs, have largely proved unsuccessful in achieving their goals, highlighting the disjuncture

between the vision of the harmonious mixed community and its realisation in practice.

For example, in the former working-class and immigrant *banlieue* La Goutte d’Or, Paris, the influx of households from higher-income brackets into both rented and owner-occupied properties, as well as the emergence of ‘fancy’ businesses, saw gentrification and growing tensions between socio-economic groups around the ‘right to the city’ (Bacqué and Fijalkow, 2006; Lefebvre, 1996; Milliot, 2015). In London, Brixton’s experience of the City Challenge scheme was a rapid increase in affluent white residents, which instead of multicultural renewal and a balanced social mix yielded ‘separate worlds’ of micro segregation within the district, or what Jackson and Butler (2015: 2358) call a ‘tectonic social structure’ (see also Butler and Robson, 2001). Similar social and tenure mixing policies were implemented in the Milanese neighbourhood of Stadera, where interventions mandated the displacement of ‘problem’ tenants from their social housing flats, in favour of specific social groups such as students. Elderly residents and students now co-exist in the same neighbourhood, but they do not *co-habit* or interact in public spaces (Bricocoli and Cucca, 2016; Smith, 2005).

As noted earlier, social mix (in all its various manifestations) has been applied to and upon deprived communities while concentrations of middle- and high-income groups (the urban *élite*) are rarely seen to be problematic, nor presumed to produce negative externalities. Certainly, gated community enclaves are present across countries where the income disparity levels between the poorest and the richest social groups are extreme, providing a clear example of undisturbed, and often celebrated concentrations of affluent residents (Cséfalvay and Webster, 2012). Thus, it appears that urban polarisation is tackled only through the assimilation of the poor to the norms and lifestyles of those

with greater levels of income and wealth, owing to a constant middle-class normativity: poorer residents are assumed to hold a temporary status, as if they must just be ‘aspirational middle-class actors’ (Elwood et al., 2015: 132). This perspective follows ‘an entrenched stereotype’ whereby the poor are presented as a problem because their life-style ‘choices’ make them ‘dependent and deviant’ (Imrie and Raco, 2012: 16).

The 15-minute city as ‘social mix by stealth’

Although the literature extensively documents the limitations of social mixing policies and the challenges related to their successful implementation, large metropolitan cities, such as Paris (Delaleu, 2020; Paris En Commun, 2020), London (Chen, 2021; Talk London, 2020) and Milan (Comune di Milano, 2020; Rovellini, 2021) are looking to restore what appears to be a form of utopian urban design that, we argue, translates into further social mix. The 15-minute city is not an innovative model for a just and sustainable city, but reworks forms of urban planning already encountered in the Garden Cities and the later forms of neighbourhood regeneration, with aspects of the New Urbanism movement that began in the United States in the 1980s, which sought to make cities more walkable (Camerin, 2021; Pinto and Akhavan, 2022). Through a familiar ideal of decentralised and hyper-local neighbourhoods based on the proximity of residential, commercial and business areas, the pedestrianisation of streets, and the greater diversity of services and demographics, the 15-minute city is directed primarily towards marginalised and underserved neighbourhoods. Hence, behind the ‘city branding’ (Gower and Grodach, 2022) and urban planning ambitions are hiding more usual plans of urban regeneration, and crucially the mixing of populations within

disadvantaged areas (Marchigiani and Bonfantini, 2022).

From this perspective, questions and concerns about inclusivity and ‘right to the city’ emerge as aspects overlooked within the existing literature. Past experience of similar area-based strategies identifies a risk of investments creating exclusions and divides within targeted neighbourhoods. While the 15-minute city could – and should – benefit the residents of a given neighbourhood, positive impact is not guaranteed. Investment in wireless technologies to improve broadband access, for instance, will only be useful for those with the appropriate devices, knowledge and capability to access digital information and resources. A focus on walking, cycling and other active modes of travel needs to be matched with an attention to public transport to overcome the mobility restrictions of elderly and disabled residents (Calafiore et al., 2022). And there remains the ever-present risk of improved services and infrastructural investment inducing people to move into the area, boosting property values and pricing out long-standing communities as observed in earlier forms of social mix (Bright, 2021; Glaeser, 2021; Pozoukidou and Chatziyiannaki, 2021).

Social mix policies and the ‘right to the city’

To create truly accessible neighbourhoods through area-based renewal interventions, such as the 15-minute city, it is essential to consider the diversity of roles that are required for neighbourhoods to function effectively. Incorporating social and residential mix is critical to preventing the displacement of those providing essential services due to unaffordable housing and ensuring equitable access to services for different income groups. Yet mixing interventions must be approached with caution, as there is a risk of perpetuating paternalistic attitudes

towards the urban poor and reinforcing the notion that they require ‘saving’ by more affluent groups. This ideology can contribute to the ‘problematization of the poor’ and the perception of poor districts as the key urban problem (Bacqué and Fijalkow, 2006). For instance, in Stadera (Milan) the displacement of social housing tenants (often labelled as ‘problem groups’) exemplifies the assumption underlying desegregation policy that the most disadvantaged will be deterred from exhibiting ‘deviant’ behaviours by coexisting alongside ‘decent folks’ – a notion first advanced by Hill (1875: 182–183) in the late-19th century. More recently, terms such as ‘diversity’ (Moreno et al., 2021: 103) or ‘hyperdiversity’ (Costarelli et al., 2019: 136), highlight how social mix is still thought to be desirable and secured through systematic housing selection procedures. For instance, in recent housing initiatives in Italy and the Netherlands, prospective residents were required to provide motivation letters and attend interviews to verify their socio-economic status and their commitment to local regeneration, before being granted entry to live in (previously) disadvantaged neighbourhoods. This approach reflects Hill’s arguments, where the poor are considered to lack the necessary exemplars and need to be ‘brought into the presence of the light’ (Hill, 1875: 182–283). The Italian project, in particular, regards newcomers as the ‘driving force’ (Costarelli et al., 2019: 136) of reforms, with the ability to teach deprived residents new skills and thus ‘save’ them (from themselves), following a pathologising narrative (see Alcock, 2004):

The near presence of **honest respectable neighbours** makes habitual thieving impossible; just as dirty people are shamed into cleanliness when scattered among ordinary **decent folk** and brought into the presence of the light.

(Hill, 1875: 182–183, emphasis added).

Resourceful residents might be a **driving force** for vulnerable ones. ... They can bring a

know-how, even basic things like using computers. They can be **reference persons** in the project for other people who haven’t the same skills.

(Practitioner, La Strada, in Costarelli et al., 2019: 136, emphasis added).

While the terminology has changed over time, the underlying sentiment – stigmatising the deprived neighbourhood and the residents within it – is embedded within the policies of supposed mix or ‘integration’, which have more to do with practices of assimilation and ‘social control’ than the alleviation of poverty and disadvantage (Uitermark, 2014: 1422). Crucially, the spirit of emulation results in nothing more than a local, urban form of assimilation, which Lees (2016) highlights mirrors wider, colonialist practices (see also Atkinson and Bridge, 2005; Kipfer, 2007). Lees’ (2016: 209) term ‘class-based colonisation’ refers to a progressive but radical transformation of the demographic composition of a targeted area in favour of more affluent urban residents. In a similar vein, Addie and Fraser (2019: 1369) discuss ‘settler colonialism’ and ‘racial capitalism’ in reference to practices that involve the ‘dispossession of land and property and at the same time disavow[al of] the presence of indigenous other’. In this post-colonial urban scenario, settlers are usually represented by white middle-class tenants and/or homeowners introduced into the desegregating neighbourhood, whereas ‘indigenous others’ correspond with the long-term residents – usually those from lower income groups or minority ethnic backgrounds. Indeed, the traditional approach practiced thus far by social mixing agendas is founded, we argue, on both class and racial pathology discourses addressed to ‘urban marginality’ (Wacquant, 2008: 1), also identified as ‘problem estates’ and ‘problem people’ (Phillips and Harrison, 2010: 229), an entrenched biased approach that is far from ensuring spatial and social justice. Underneath the

social mixing ideal there are not just implicit forms of ‘racial cleansing’ (Lees, 2016: 209) and cultural assimilation, but also traces of social class revanchism. The re-conquest of territory by the most affluent contradicts the once-claimed spirits of ‘classlessness’ and accessibility in social mix and lays the foundations for conflicts over the right to the city (Harvey, 2008). While (unconsciously) pricing out underprivileged groups, affluent newcomers reclaim their right to the neighbourhood and the inner-city ‘from those who had supposedly “stolen” [it]’ (Smith, 1996: 216). This sentiment underlies most housing demolition programmes that ignore the needs and preferences of locals, and their right to be involved in decision-making processes affecting their neighbourhood (Crump, 2002). It was, for instance, laid bare in the UK’s early millennium urban regeneration programme, the Urban Renaissance, which explicitly called for middle classes to ‘re-conquer’ the city (Davidson, 2008); as well as in Goutte d’Or, Paris, where newcomers were encouraged in ‘*la conquête du quartier*’ (the conquest of the neighbourhood) while officials pretended to advocate equality (Bacqué and Fijalkow, 2006: 77).

The façade of equality and social justice for neighbourhoods provides a narrative cover for pathologising spatial deprivation, embedded by the social mix ideal and its promotion in a range of contexts. Crucially, mixing does not represent a solution in and of itself: its implementation is superficial – as demonstrated above – with little attention to the wider structural processes that lead to the concentration of urban disadvantage. To (re)solve disadvantage via mixing negates the structural and external causes of concentrated poverty, and the disconnection of the peripheral housing estates in contemporary cities (recall the arguments of Wilson, 1987 in the US, which can equally be applied to the suburbanisation of poverty – see Bailey and Minton, 2018). Despite the widespread

enthusiasm for mixed-income, mixed-tenure and/or ethnically mixed communities across Europe, spatial divisions between the richest and the poorest, between the least and most vulnerable and between included and excluded groups, remain (see, for instance, Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), 2019). The revanchist approach and pathologising narrative that underpin social mixing create a context in which the interventions are not only ineffective in addressing concentrated urban disadvantage but also responsible for creating new inequalities and tensions – through (state sponsored) gentrification and the apparently inevitable displacement of local residents, both processes which in turn form micro-segregation, that is small sub-neighbourhood scale enclaves of particular groups of people. By regenerating or ‘improving’ the place image of poor and (often) ethnically segregated locales, investment in services induces the entry of new and more prosperous groups and businesses and over time the progressive displacement of longer-standing residents, changing the character of the neighbourhood and resulting in a loss of community feeling and cohesion (Marcuse, 1985: 931). Periodically, urban renewal strategies are abandoned by national governments and a more spontaneous form of social mix involving ‘mass tourism, short-term housing, real estate (re)development and speculation, and even greening’ occurs (Cole et al., 2021: S72). Yet, despite this being arguably more organic or ‘bottom up’, evidence suggests such developments have also delivered ‘gentrification by stealth’ (Kintrea, 2013: 138) or ‘gentrification disguised as social mix’ (Slater, 2006: 751). Indeed, gentrification is one of the most significant outcomes of unfettered neoliberal development: the result of incoming private investments, which are initiated to create diversity and foster social renewal, but which frequently raise prices

and property values in urban neighbourhoods, leading to population displacement and homelessness, and thus continuing rather than diminishing forms of spatial inequality (Lipman, 2012; Rhodes and Brown, 2019; Smith, 1996).

Alongside gentrification by stealth, scholars exploring the long-run effects of social mixing policies have identified further significant limits and failures at the local level. The goal of social mix – enhancing social capital and ensuring equality between different groups of residents – is rarely (if ever) achieved through mere proximity. After a decade of austerity that has strengthened neoliberalism and the socio-economic inequalities with which it is associated, spatial and social divisions remain. There is currently little evidence that merely implementing social mixing increases social capital or the wellbeing of residents within targeted neighbourhoods (Arthurson et al., 2015; Barwick, 2018). Similarly, evidence demonstrates that spatial proximity – in and of itself – is insufficient to create ‘meaningful everyday interactions or mutually supportive relationships’ (Elwood et al., 2015: 127), especially between groups that differ in fundamental ways such as income, ethnicity or social class. If incoming residents are perceived as ‘intruders’ this can result in indifference and avoidance from existing residents, often turning into classism, racism and conflict (Lipman, 2012). While, at first, intolerance towards difference is expressed by what Davidson (2012: 239) calls ‘social distance’, other forms of behavioural responses can emerge later, such as cultural isolation, racism or more generally, interethnic tensions pertaining to the right to the city (Amin, 2002; Harvey, 2008). Considering this evidence, it would be risky to assume that the city of proximities could work in every urban space and context. Ultimately, the urban utopia underpinning the idealised and cohesive community only

works if societies are constituted by ‘average, anonymous and exchangeable individuals’ (Blanc, 2010: 269), living in average and standard spaces, and in which mixing to create a perfect balance would not be necessary in the first place as everyone is the same! As Blanc (2010) argues, this ideal does not represent the heterogeneous or unequal, nature of society – itself stemming from the divided and conflictual urban system – where people become attached to their own places and networks and where the right to choose where and with whom to live remains the privilege of the wealthy. Forms of ‘soft exclusion’ (Hyra, 2015: 785) – income or ethnicity divisions – are encountered in mixed communities in the context of public places or institutions, where groups who are supposed to interact, simply do not mix. Furthermore, calls for different uses of neighbourhood space, as well as different ‘social network geographies’ (Davidson, 2012: 233), are registered to determine the difficulty of social cohesion and the intensity of community spirit over the long run. If social mixing interventions initially foster investments into the targeted area providing new opportunities and socio-cultural exchange, it is only in the long-term that their impact begins to be visible. Paternalistic and revanchist attempts to deconcentrate urban disadvantage are seen to either reinforce territorial stigma or produce further segregation (of the wealthy), resulting in community disruption and displacement.

Conclusion: A case for longitudinal research and an alternative policy approach

If social mixing policies have not been an enabler of community cohesion, what then *is* the remedy to the inequalities across the urban landscape? We suggest that by targeting the geographical expressions of

structural inequities – through what Marcuse (2009: 5) called ‘gilding the ghetto’ – rather than their underlying causes, the ‘urban problem’ has been (at best) hidden by a process originally motivated by a paternalist desire of controlling and educating the masses (Cheshire, 2007; Uitermark, 2014). In short, while concentrated poverty is a clear spatial expression of inequality, mixing communities may only reduce the visibility of extremes of poverty in targeted neighbourhoods: policy may appear ‘successful’ without doing anything to improve the circumstances of disadvantaged individuals and even promoting their physical displacement/replacement. These outcomes of interventions are not always immediately perceptible. Community displacement as a consequence of gentrification is a slow and violent process ‘that entails both periods of intense activity and prolonged waiting’ (Tyner, 2020: 80). Additionally, further clusters of isolated groups, ‘diversity segregation’ (Hyra, 2015), or what is described as ‘social tectonics’ (Butler and Robson, 2001) can emerge in targeted neighbourhoods over time. As renewed interest in urban utopianism and social mixing ideals gains traction (Wainwright, 2023), we have provided a longer run perspective on interventions in this tradition. By revisiting the mixing ideal in light of oft-observed outcomes and by applying a ‘right to the city’ approach in terms of race and class-based problematisation, we have highlighted the segregation and social inequality risks of social mix, which we suggest is reworked within the 15-minute city. Given the persistence of concentrated disadvantage, we contend that urban scholars hold an ‘ethical responsibility’ (Rogers and Power, 2020: 177) to position themselves at the centre of debates around the shape and reshaping of urban neighbourhoods and use their expertise to ensure that future policy interventions seeking to desegregate poverty and socially mix urban

neighbourhoods are assessed within a longitudinal framework that attends to not only compositional and residential changes but also the underlying processes yielding homogeneity and further segregation.

To be clear, the transition from ‘poor’ to ‘mixed’ and eventually ‘gentrified’ and ‘affluent’ communities is a gradual process that can take decades to unfold (Pain, 2019). However, the literature often truncates this process through a series of ‘snap shots’ that focus on specific moments in time, usually before and after a transformation has occurred, rather than considering the continuum of change. Policy evaluations are rarely carried out over long periods of time and, even more infrequently, years after the end of the local interventions (DCLG, 2010; Hohmann, 2013). Although the necessity of such analyses may be clear, it is often difficult to obtain funding or to embed analysis, when it occurs, into the short-term cycles of policymaking. Evaluating impact over time (not just when the intervention occurs, but also five, 10, 15 and more years later) is fundamental to ensure that policy plans keep pace with socio-economic and demographic changes in a neighbourhood. It can also illuminate issues that may not be immediately apparent and involve interpersonal dynamics, such as potential divisions within a community (forms of micro-segregation) or conflicts related to the ‘right to the neighbourhood’. To achieve this, we stress the need to prioritise both comparative and longitudinal research, following exemplars of both qualitative and quantitative longitudinal research, which are particularly dominant in the US mixed communities’ context (Chetty et al., 2016; Deluca and Rosenblatt, 2010; Fraser et al., 2013; Mendenhall et al., 2006; Popkin et al., 2009) and more recently evident within analyses of regeneration in the UK (Jupp, 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). By comparing different places, potentially in different countries and contexts, and by

following interventions decades after their completion, researchers can gain insight into whether and how social mixing strategies produce different outcomes in different circumstances, leading to a learning process of identifying best practices and avoidable risks in policies perpetuating social disparities. This integrated perspective on policy aims and the impacts of implementation over the long-term (at both the neighbourhood and city level) can inform and shape future policymaking.

For individual neighbourhoods, the ideal of a perfectly balanced and uniformly equal community may be unachievable. Moreover, striving for such a goal may be undesirable as it is the diverse and varied nature of urban communities that makes them unique and vibrant. Nevertheless, the growing disparity between privileged and underprivileged groups and areas, particularly in European and US cities, highlights the need for measures to promote equivalent access to urban resources at a meso and macro scale. Merely promoting social mixing in the way we have outlined is insufficient for fostering inclusion and securing progress for deprived communities. Therefore, instead of implementing short-term, top-down measures, urban policy should prioritise addressing community needs and structural inequalities related to opportunity and access to both public and private services. Providing sustained support to local institutions and third sector organisations over time, rather than relying on time-limited public or private investments, is critical in meeting these needs and combatting uneven urban development. Echoing Marcuse's (2009) words on the limitations of interventions addressing only the spatial (place-based) and primarily local dimension of urban injustice (rather than the city or national more systemic aspects), we offer the following provocations to stimulate further dialogue among urban scholars and

practitioners. Firstly, instead of applying top-down ideals of urban planning, the development of deprived urban areas should be realised from a ground-up approach that focuses on residents' participation in the decision-making process, by involving existing grassroots movements not 'tokenistic organisations' (MacLeavy, 2009: 849; see also: Blanc, 2010; Monno and Khakee, 2012). Participatory actions should not only be a constant element of urban regeneration but should also consider neighbourhood residents not as an homogenic community, but as a plurality of *communities*, both rooted and transient in urban space, coming from a diversity of backgrounds and having different needs and perceptions (Alcock, 2004).

Secondly, to avoid (or at a minimum ameliorate) racial and class-based problematisations and tackle structural inequities, we argue that disadvantaged neighbourhoods must also be supported with a range and combination of place-based *and* people-based investments (see also van Gent et al., 2009). Although spatial differences within the city must be acknowledged, long-term structural transformations can only occur when individuals in stigmatised and marginalised areas are granted the same opportunities for educational, housing, healthcare, employment and access to services as their counterparts in other areas of the city. Resonating with what Jupp (2021) suggests in her study on austerity localism, we argue that, instead of one-time projects, this requires more systematic and continuous welfare initiatives to be directed to marginalised communities to tackle inequality of opportunity and access in the spatially divided city.

Finally, there should be more interest in addressing urban polarisation using a more holistic approach that considers the 'right to the *whole* city'. Retrenchment into spatially and temporally confined zones is unlikely to

provide a just or inclusive city. With regards to housing, for instance, ‘profits from housing and speculation in land’ (Marcuse, 2009: 5), as well as gated communities, should be regulated across the urban landscape (through rent controls, for instance) and social housing provision should be increased and not limited to already concentrated areas. This might, in the long-term, allow a multitude of social classes to fully exert their right to the city while fostering interconnection and access, instead of further perpetuating the segregation of both poverty and wealth. An inclusive city need not necessarily be a 15-minute city, based on diversity and ‘measurable’ proximity to essential services at the neighbourhood scale, but it is a city where spatial as well as social injustice is tackled everywhere, with a focus on its causes rather than just its ‘symptoms’ (Cheshire, 2007: 34).


Declaration of conflicting interests


The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.


Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This paper has benefitted from funding from Provincia Autonoma di Bolzano-Bozen. Additionally, the peer review process generated considerable and useful feedback for which the authors are most grateful.

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