

The Role and Value of Theory in Urban Design: Can They Truly Shape the City?

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the role and value of planning theory in urban design, using the evolution of the Neighbourhood Unit and its reinterpretation within the 15-minute city model as an analytical lens. It first situates theory within two key debates: urban design as a temporal process of spatial-social change and as a form of activism. The study then explores how the Neighbourhood Unit operates within interdisciplinary frameworks, assessing its theoretical contributions and limitations in the face of socio-spatial complexity and postmodern fragmentation. Ultimately, the paper argues that theory both constructs and contests the order of urban design, marking a shift from static, prescriptive models toward dynamic, adaptive frameworks that reshape how cities are imagined, negotiated, and transformed.

Keywords: urban design, planning theory, neighbourhood unit, proximity-based models, 15-minute city

1 Introduction

The urban fabric and the forms of urban life are being profoundly reshaped by global crises and transformative events. These shifts have triggered new policies and strategies that address social, cultural, and other aspects across multiple dimensions (Longo et al., 2022). In particular, the challenges posed by accelerating urban sprawl and climate change as global issues, together with regulatory failures that have been exacerbated by neoliberal planning environments, have prompted renewed attention to alternative urban models. In response, urban planners, scholars, and policymakers are engaging in renewed discussions on alternative approaches aimed at delivering more sustainable, liveable, and healthy cities (Logan et al., 2022; Walters, 2021). As a result, the way in which urbanisation is conceived has shifted rapidly and significantly over the past few decades, reshuffling the imagination of urban space and transforming the way everyday urban life is experienced. For example, super-blocks, low-traffic neighbourhood plans, doughnut models, and hybrids of these have emerged. Among these, the x-minute city model (15-minute city, with its variations) has gained increasing momentum (Di Marino et al., 2023; Moreno et al., 2021; Nieuwenhuijsen, 2021).

This paper adopts Alberti and Radicchi's (2023) study, *From the Neighbourhood Unit to the 15-Minute City: Past and Recent Urban Models for Post-COVID Cities*, as its primary analytical lens. It examines how the theoretical lineage of the Neighbourhood Unit (NU) continues to inform proximity-based urban models, situating the x-minute city within a broader historical and conceptual continuity. Through this case, the paper critically investigates the role and value of theory in shaping contemporary urban design discourse and practice.

1.1 The Re-emergence of the Neighbourhood Unit

Although the x-minute city is often regarded as a new paradigm, its conceptual foundation rests on well-established precedents (Pozoukidou and Angelidou, 2022). Central to this lineage is the NU, a planning concept introduced by Clarence Perry in 1923, which defined the neighbourhood as the fundamental unit of urban organisation (Mumford, 1954). Despite ongoing critiques and debates surrounding its socio-spatial implications, the NU continues to exert influence in urban planning practice, often in implicit or adapted forms.

In recent decades, the New Urbanism movement has reinterpreted the NU through a contemporary lens, incorporating its core principles of walkability, accessibility, and spatial decentralisation into modern proximity-based planning frameworks, such as the x-minute city (Duany, 2021; Kissfazekas, 2022; Moreno et al., 2021). Consequently, both the NU and the broader notion of the proximity city have re-emerged as focal points in planning theory and urban design practice.

1.2 Case Selection and Analytical Approach

While the 15-minute city and related proximity-based models have been extensively examined in recent academic literature and urban policy discourse, relatively limited attention has been devoted to re-examining the theoretical foundations from which these models originate, particularly the NU. This gap presents a timely opportunity to assess how enduring urban theories are being recontextualised within contemporary planning frameworks.

Within this context, the NU, as the conceptual foundation of the x-minute city, is employed as a lens through which to interpret the underlying principles and intentions of urban design. To address this, the paper draws on Alberti and Radicchi's (2023) study as a case for critical analysis. Their research traces the historical and conceptual evolution of the NU, demonstrating how its spatial logic continues to inform proximity-oriented and decentralised urban models. Furthermore, the study explores how interdisciplinary interpretations of the 15-minute city may provide a framework for addressing the socio-ecological challenges of urban transformation in the post-COVID era. Through this case, the paper interrogates how urban design theory is mobilised, reinterpreted, and contested in shaping future-oriented planning imaginaries.

2 Theoretical Debates in Urban Design

2.1 First Tier: Urban Design as a Temporal Process of Spatial-Social Change

The notion of urban design as a temporal process of spatial-social change responds to the so-called 'spatial turn' (Evans, 2010) and incorporates a temporal dimension into the spatial-social processes that unfold through dynamic interactions (Lefebvre, 2010; Madanipour, 2006). This perspective positions urban design as an ongoing, never-complete process shaped by two interrelated forces: top-down strategies and everyday spontaneous practices (Gańko, 2019). More specifically, it emphasises the role of time in urban design by framing it within the temporalities of "the pace of life and space" and "the historical processes of place" (Carmona, 2014).

Building on this theoretical framework, Alberti and Radicchi (2023) propose that the NU functions as a socio-spatial model and employ it as a historical anchor to illustrate how the concept of urban proximity has evolved across various theoretical paradigms. Their analysis demonstrates an ongoing dialogue in neighbourhood-scale urban design, reflecting a shift from physical spatial forms (isolated units) to social dynamics (interconnected spaces). That is to say, the role of the NU has shifted over time, profoundly influencing the gradual transformation of the concept of neighbourhood in urban design, from a physical space to a carrier of social meaning and identity. This transformation reflects theory as a framework for structuring and organising urban design, sustained through the continuity and repetition of theory within urban processes. Accordingly, theory provides a set of principles that enable urban design to adapt, transform, and reconfigure itself in response to socio-spatial-temporal evolution, thereby contributing to the pursuit of ideal urban visions and supporting the generation of diverse discursive dimensions within urban design.

2.2 Second Tier: Urban Design as a Form of Activism

Urban design as a temporal process of spatial-social change offers a broad conceptual framework that enables challenges to existing urban fabric and social relations. Building on this foundation, urban design as a form of activism reimagines urban space as a site of debate, positioning activism as a key driver in urban transformation (Usabillaga, 2022).

In the recent wave of activism, often undertaken at the neighbourhood or community level, urban activism is increasingly recognised as the seed of transformative change within neoliberal urban contexts (Monno, 2016). Alberti and Radicchi (2023) offer a critical perspective on how the NU theory implicitly contests conventional planning paradigms by re-evaluating urban proximity as a foundational dimension of sustainable cities. Beyond its theoretical role, the NU has contributed to substantial shifts in community lifestyles. By promoting social cohesion, inclusivity, environmental sustainability, and public health, the NU supports a broader transition toward the eco-social urban model.

Most importantly, NU theory has stimulated what has been described as a shift from conventional urban planning to a more integrated form of urban life planning (Allam et al., 2023a; Staricco, 2022). This transition foregrounds the notion of the “right to the city” as a foundational component in the production of spatial, neighbourhood, and social life. In this context, theory functions as a mechanism for structuring urban design by shaping the built environment and envisioning new modes of urban living. It is not only intrinsic, intangible, and embedded in practice, but also operates as a connective framework that aligns physical space, social interaction, and environmental experience. Through this integrative role, theory contributes to the realisation of high-quality urban life.

2.3 Revisiting the Neighbourhood Unit

The evolution of the NU has long been a subject of scholarly debate. Inspired by Ebenezer Howard's (1898) Garden City approach, Perry (1923) introduced the NU as a unit-based spatial method of urban planning (Lawhon, 2014). Notably, this approach was also intended to intervene in existing communities, and is therefore recognised as a tool for urban regeneration (Marchigiani and Bonfantini, 2022). However, the NU has faced severe criticism, particularly for its failure to account for the organic spatial and functional structures embedded within established neighbourhoods (Bauer, 1945; Isaacs, 1948; Pozoukidou and Chatziyiannaki, 2021). Jane Jacobs (1961) critiqued its approach for disregarding the complexity of urban environments and the social fabric embedded within them (Allam et al., 2023b). Similarly, Kevin Lynch (1960) emphasised the need for urban elements to be arranged in a lively and integrated manner that enables people to connect with their localities, rather than be separated by space.

Despite these critiques, modernist planning paradigms have frequently led to spatial fragmentation, reinforcing the need to reconsider neighbourhood planning. In response, Alexander (1962) sought to restore the meaning of the NU as a composition of multiple physical and social units coexisting within the broader urban context. Since then, the neighbourhood principle has continued to be reinterpreted, culminating in the emergence of the x-minute city, which is regarded as the most recent evolution of the NU.

Nevertheless, the NU theory is more than a purely rhetorical statement. A review of its critical reception reveals that the initial controversies stemmed from its perceived role in promoting spatial and social segregation and hindering organic urban regeneration. In response to these criticisms, the x-minute city model seeks to rebuild the connection between spatial form and social function by returning to the fundamental principles of the NU and reaffirming the concept of proximity (Marchigiani and Bonfantini, 2022). This return has resulted in urban design being compressed into a singular and highly localised spatial framework.

In this context, proximity is understood as both a physical and socially relational manifestation of urban space that supports the adaptation and reinforcement of NU theory in contemporary applications. In this way, while the relationship between proximity and neighbourhood planning is ambiguous, the NU theory has become a partial disguise for the complex grammatical characteristics of urban space (D'Onofrio and Trusiani, 2022; Gil Solá and Vilhelmson, 2019; Marchigiani and Bonfantini, 2022). It is tacitly accepted as a representation of urban design's potential to activate new forms of social practice and everyday life (Sennett, 2018). At the same time, an expanding vocabulary of buzzwords related to proximity and community has produced a set of ambiguous terms that are often mechanically repeated in urban discourse. As a result, the NU increasingly appears as a branded concept, detached from its original theoretical foundations.

3 Reinterpreting the Neighbourhood Unit in Postmodern Urban Paradigms

In the late twentieth century, urban planners increasingly shifted their attention to the neighbourhood scale and localised communities, largely in response to the functional-spatial separation and widening socio-spatial divide resulting from modernist planning. Within the context of postmodernism, the NU concept has informed several contemporary urban planning movements (Pozoukidou and Chatziyiannaki, 2021), including Transit-Oriented Development (TOD), New Urbanism, and Smart Growth (Furuseth, 1997). It has also contributed to a range of compact city models aimed at facilitating sustainable urban transformation, such as the compact city, the urban village or transit village, and the x-minute city (Lobner et al., 2021). Postmodern urbanists continue to adopt key principles of NU, including mixed-use, housing and work proximity, human scale, adequate green space, walkability, and

compactness (Wheeler, 2013), and expect this to lead to high-density, walkable, mixed-use, and diverse neighbourhoods, which in turn will promote social interaction and sustainable development (Talen, 2005).

However, physical interventions based on these principles are insufficient to address complex urban challenges such as socio-spatial segregation (Kafkalas et al., 2015). Urban models inspired by the NU often lack the replicability to be adapted to operate effectively across diverse urban environments (Khavarian-Garmsir et al., 2023), particularly in the postmodern era of increased social mobility and pluralistic lifestyles (Al-Khanbashi, 2020). Furthermore, while postmodern models critique and partially move beyond the NU framework, they are frequently criticised for lacking genuine innovation. For instance, New Urbanism is often viewed as an extension of earlier paradigms rather than a truly novel theoretical contribution; it is considered a practice rooted in methodological repetition rather than conceptual advancement (Cuthbert, 2007). Consequently, the persistent ambiguity surrounding the conceptualisation, interpretation, and evolution of the NU theory has contributed to confusion in its application, rendering urban design increasingly contested and theoretically ambiguous.

4 Theoretical Frameworks of the 15-Minute City: A Critical Evaluation

4.1 Framework Composition

Alberti and Radicchi (2023) conceptualise the 15-minute city as a proximity-based framework integrating multiple theoretical strands (see Figure 1). At its core is the NU, complemented by Central Place Theory (service hierarchy and accessibility), Proxemics (human-scale spatial relations), TOD (connectivity through transit), and compact city principles (density and sustainability). This synthesis allows for a multidimensional understanding of urban proximity, bridging spatial, social, and environmental considerations. In the theory of urban planning and design, the NU emphasises the concepts of community-centred facilities and their walkability, which form the basis of urban proximity. The proximity extends its related theories in urban design through interdisciplinary approaches to the Central Place Theory (CPT) and the Proxemics Theory (PT) from geography and anthropology. The CPT develops a hierarchy and mobility of services and facilities to provide the NU with accessibility of facilities in a broader spatial scope. On the other hand, the PT promotes the philosophy of human-scale relationships with distance and space to enhance the interaction between humans and urban spaces for the NU. The TOD, which follows the principles of New Urbanism, further develops proximity by extending the walkability range of the NU to public transport. Additionally, urban proximity is given the concepts of sustainable cities in the Compact City and the Ecocity models. The concepts incorporate the consideration of urban density, mixed-use urban networking, and green areas contributing to the accessibility of urban sustainability to the NU prototype.

The integration of these theories and concepts as a theoretical framework for this research provides the concept of urban proximity and the evolution of the NU's theories to be more comprehensive and adaptable to a wider context. Although the research does not present new theories or unique arguments of its own, through a holistic and critical review and discussion of these existing theories, it makes recommendations for the 15-Minute City within this theoretical framework under urban design and planning research and practice.

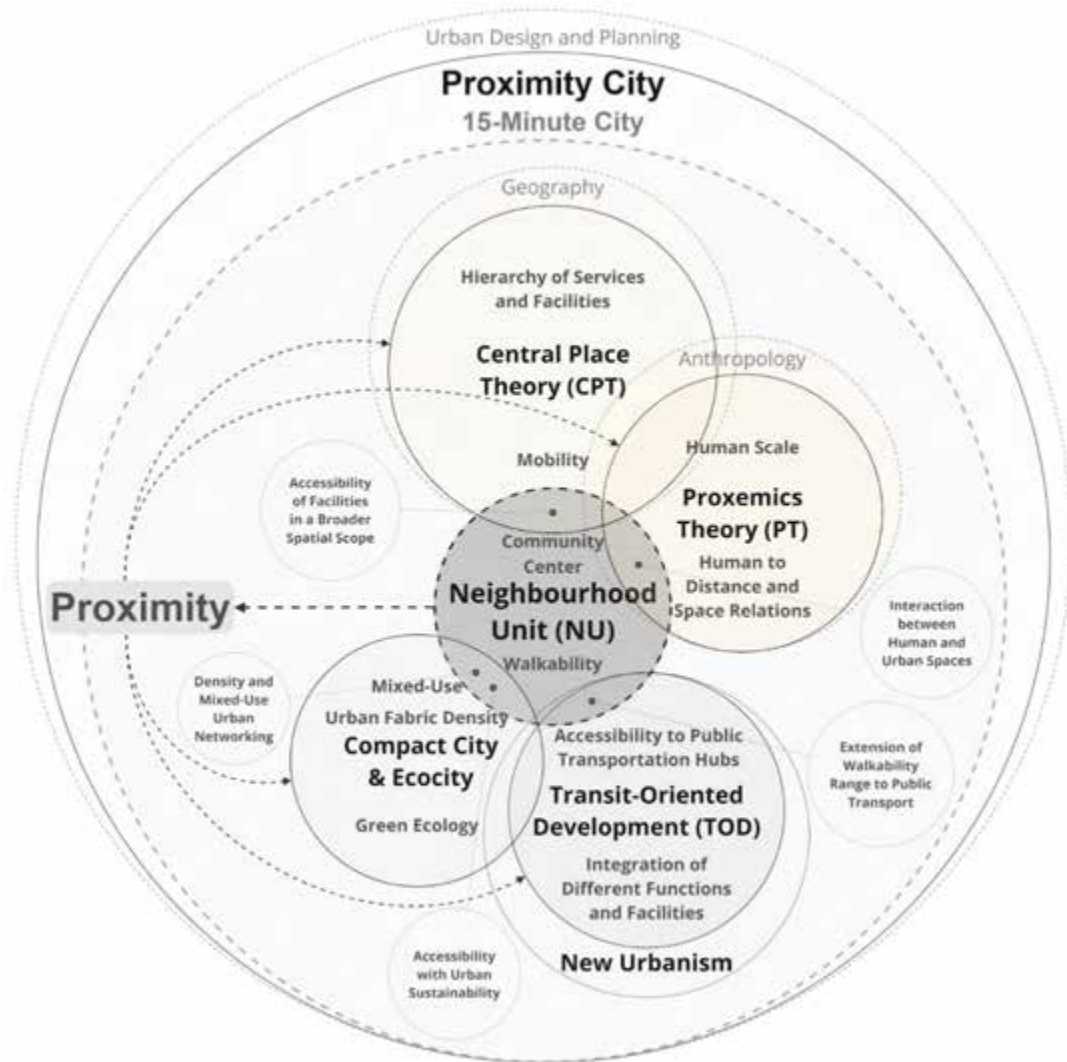


Figure 1: Theories and concepts in the 15-Minute City theoretical framework (made by author)

4.2 Benefits and Limitations

The theoretical framework facilitates the evolution and continuity of urban design in the concept of spatial social change and allows cities to respond to the unpredictability of global challenges, which also significantly addresses the aims of the research project. These benefits derive from the humane accessibility of urban spaces and distances through the comprehensive perspective of proximity across time, as well as the promotion of spontaneous social cohesion and inclusiveness from the neighbourhood order, and the combination of sustainable relevance.

The NU and proximity-centred framework also tend to bring limitations, mainly due to a lack of consideration of social diversity and the challenges of operationalising it in reality. Specifically, the theoretical framework does not adequately consider the social segregation and urban inequalities that may result from the heterogeneity between different socio-economic groups. In addition, its practical implementation in situations where the urban fabric is already relatively fixed will encounter considerable problems in community participation and policy support.

4.3 Integrating and Comparing Alternative Theoretical Frameworks

Among existing theoretical frameworks, the Social-Ecological Model for Physical Activity offers a valuable multi-level structure that emphasises how individual behaviours are shaped by interactions across multiple contextual layers. This model holds considerable potential for integration into the theoretical underpinnings of the 15-minute city.

As illustrated in Figure 2, a comparative analysis of the hierarchical structure of the 15-minute city and the Social-Ecological Model enables the construction of a layered theoretical hierarchy. This hierarchy ranges from the human scale, through neighbourhoods and urban networks, to mixed-use sustainable communities and ultimately the proximity city. Such a structure supports a systematic organisation of urban proximity, beginning with walkability and accessibility at the individual and neighbourhood levels, extending to social interaction and cohesion at the community level, and culminating in spatial deployment and service provision at the urban policy level.

This multilevel approach provides a useful framework for designing urban strategies that simultaneously address the needs of individuals, communities, and governance structures. It facilitates the development of interventions that are both context-specific and scalable. However, the incorporation of multiple layers may introduce analytical complexity and operational challenges in the planning process. Further research is required to understand the interdependencies and dynamics across these levels to ensure effective implementation.

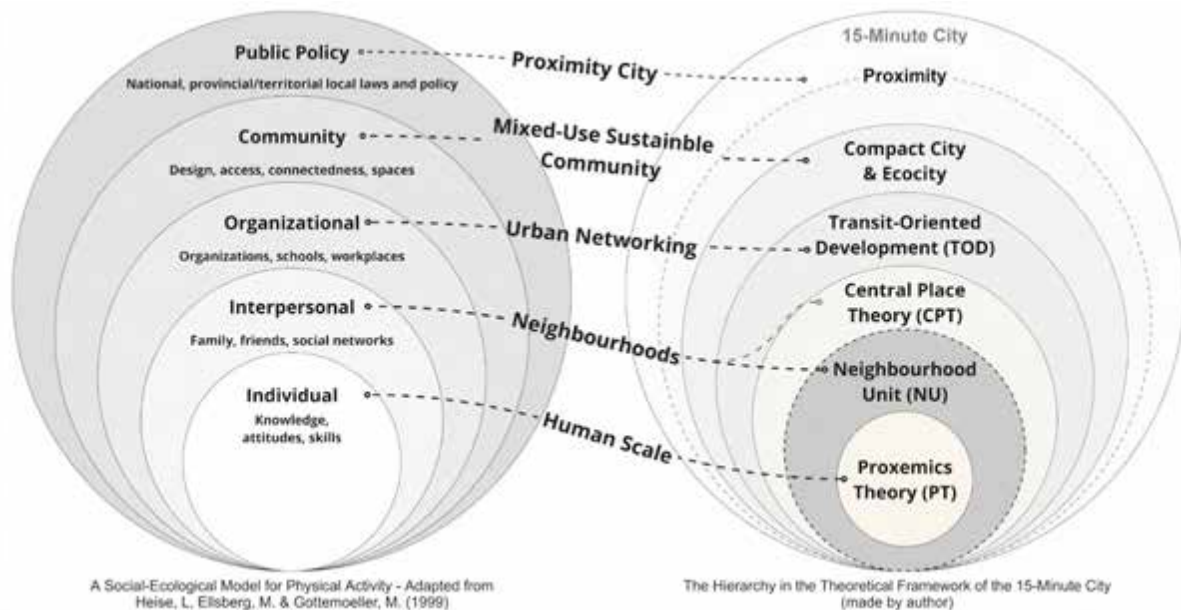


Figure 2: Comparison and adaptation from a Social-Ecological Model theoretical framework to the 15-Minute City theoretical framework (made by author)

5 Conclusion

This study adopted the NU as a dynamic analytical lens to investigate whether theory can truly shape the city. By exploring the evolutionary nature of NU Theory and its progression toward the 15-Minute City, the research reveals the two-fold role and value of theory in urban design. First, theory serves as the order of urban design. Theory, as both a tangible and intangible construct, shapes and reforms the inner principles of urban design, enabling it to adapt to ongoing urban transformation and to stimulate innovation. Second, theory creates an order for urban design that connects the space of place and everyday life. This order is metaphorical and progressive, encouraging urban design to take action in order to reconfigure urban space and enhance the overall quality of urban life.

Although the validity of major urban planning and design theories has been questioned in recent years, largely due to their tendency to oversimplify the complexity of urban design while repeatedly reiterating concepts that have emerged in the past but remain unresolved, this ambiguity has nonetheless stimulated wider critical thinking and urban imagination. Thus, rather than merely serving as a rhetorical gesture, theory acts as and creates the order of urban design. It views the urban as a process and asserts that urban design precipitates and embeds its distinctive historical and practical dimensions into urban space and everyday life.

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