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## Walk the Talk - Mapping the 15-Minute City Towards Actionable Policy in Malta

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This work addresses the following topic(s) from the Call for Contributions:  
(Please check at least one box)

- Placemaking to integrate urban spaces and mobility**
- Promoting sustainable mobility choices in metropolitan regions
- Governing responsible mobility innovations
- Shaping the transition towards mobility justice
- System analysis, design, and evaluation
- other: \_\_\_\_\_

### Extended Abstract

#### Problem statement

A defining characteristic of the contemporary urban environment is its social and spatial complexity, arising from the multitude of customs and behaviours that the city embodies. In the face of the increasing internationalisation of cities, creating liveable environments has the potential multiplier effect of enhancing the place-based identity of the city, through the interventions required to increase the urban attractiveness of a place (Sepe, 2009). Jacobs' (1962) well-articulated works on urban vitality and Lynch's (1964) notion of the sense of place set the foundation for later urbanists such as Gehl and Gemzøe (2004) to further define the essential elements of such environments. Actionable policy related to liveability and active mobility remains however a goal yet to be attained in Malta, despite policy-making efforts in transport planning over the past years.

#### Research objectives

The authors' ongoing research on the concept of the 15-Minute City, developed by Moreno et. al. (2021), has already assessed access to services in Paola, a locality in Malta, during which GIS was used to deconstruct the urban environment into its constituent characteristics. This paper will now delve into the more qualitative aspects of the 15-Minute City, with the primary objective of understanding people's socio-spatial relationship with the locality's town centre, and the secondary objective of defining key policy action areas for environments that support active mobility. The research shall be guided by the question: What factors contribute to people's choice to use active modes of transport in dense urban environments? To reflect the secondary objective, another research question is posed: How can an understanding of active users' perceptions of the environment lead to actionable spatial planning policy?

#### Methodological approach

Two interrelated components of the Timed City concept, proximity, that is access to basic services, and walkability, that is the quality of walking conditions, shall be delved into. Such aspects are now recognised as

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being integral to the achievement of equitable and sustainable communities, in line with Sustainable Development Goal 11, since they are crucial to the creation of liveable environments. In this regard, pedestrian planning has an essential policy-making role to play, especially in ensuring that the human scale is represented in urban design initiatives (Hutabarat Lo, 2009). This is particularly true for Malta, a Mediterranean archipelago with the highest population density in Europe, and specifically for the Islands' town centres and designated Business Hubs. Paola has been chosen as the site for the research on people's perception of proximity and walkability since it forms part of a dense conurbation and supports a thriving town centre, of importance at a district scale.

Perceptibility is indeed considered an essential characteristic to map since it is a measure of people's feelings of comfort and safety while walking (Su et al., 2019; Canas, Attard and Haklay, 2020). It is felt that mapping perceptibility requires a participatory methodology and that this is well suited to the research questions posed. Participatory GIS is eminently suited to this task since it can be used to gather, analyse and visualise volunteered geographical information gathered directly from the field of study. Since the technology is simple to use, the results of the research can be published on the mapping platform, so as to form a basis for discussion amongst the participants, and indeed the wider community. This increases the opportunity for building social capital amongst street users, enabling them to make their voices heard in a meaningful manner and for their requirements to eventually be translated into spatial planning policy (Haklay and Francis, 2018).

A three-month-long participatory mapping exercise has been carried out in Paola from June to August 2023, the data from which shall inform this research. 'Mapping for Change' has been used to gather the perception data, this participatory mapping platform having been developed by a social enterprise under the aegis of the University College London. A series of ten questions related to proximity and walkability were asked, in addition to questions related to the participant's consent and demographic data. This will allow the authors to correlate the qualitative data with the previous quantitative research, while simultaneously undertaking content analysis of relevant national policy documents currently in force.

### **(Expected) results**

Preliminary results from the volunteered geographic data indicate that Paola, being a mixed-use town centre, attracts a wide range of street users of all ages. Though most participants arrive on foot, a significant percentage arrive in their private car or by public transport, though this correlates to the number of people who are from the locality or otherwise, showing that residents generally walk to the town centre. Shopping is by far the most popular activity, with service provision, work and leisure being other attractors to the place. When considering the length of time people are prepared to walk to their destination, a sharp drop in numbers was recorded at the 10-minute mark, and another decline at the 15-minute mark.

Nevertheless, the participants seem to be predominantly satisfied with their walking experience, a result that offers much scope for critique when correlated to the authors' research on the spatial characteristics of Paola. Those who reported an unsatisfactory walking environment did mention high levels of vehicular traffic, lack of sidewalks and crossings, and lack of hygiene. These are all factors that can dissuade people from choosing to walk, and which can in fact be resolved by carrying out infrastructural and policy-based interventions to achieve more walkable and liveable environments. To this end, the paper will conclude with a set of policy recommendations and an agenda for future research in relation to active users' perceptions of dense urban environments and the potential applicability of the 15-Minute City in Malta.

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