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Living environments and leisure mobility: challenging the compact city

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Should we advocate for the compact city? Geographer Sébastien Munafò defends the indispensability of this model, particularly for its environmental qualities and the urbanity it fosters. Marc Pearce of the Mobile Lives Forum, on the other hand, feels it is crucial to consider, instead, many lifestyles in presence in city areas such as Geneva or Zurich and the diversity of living environments they require.

Introduction, by Vincent Kaufmann

Urban sprawl is often criticized because of the important energy and resource expenditure associated with it, as well as the pollution produced during the long daily commutes of peri-urban inhabitants. However, the virtuous nature of dense, compact cities (from a mobility standpoint) is also challenged by the idea that such density fosters in residents the need to escape for weekends or during vacations, by plane or car, thereby creating externalities identical to those associated with the daily commute practices observed in peri-urban areas.

J.-P. Orfeuil and D. Soleyret’s hypothesis of compensatory travel – also known as the “barbecue effect” – refers to the fact that, on weekends, peri-urban residents are able to have barbecues in their gardens, while many urban dwellers seek to escape their living environment, traveling long distances by plane, train or car to get closer to nature.

In his doctoral thesis, S. Munafò analyzed leisure mobility in Switzerland, cross-comparing contextual, quantitative and qualitative analyses. His work shows that the travel habits of inner city dwellers and those of peri-urban residents do not greatly differ
when we consider travel over an entire year (i.e. including weekends and holidays), and not just daily mobility. He also noted that truly compensatory leisure mobility was rare: though inner city residents do travel farther and more frequently for leisure purposes, this travel is not necessarily driven by the desire to escape from their dense urban environment. Weekends spent visiting other cities are an example of this.

Sébastien Munafò concluded from these observations that families choose a living environment that suits their lifestyles and therefore do not feel the need to escape from them. He also concluded that specific characteristics of living environments give rise to certain lifestyles rather than others. This also applies to public transport: the better the quality of the service, the less likely people are to use their cars or nearby airports, which incites longer-distance leisure travel.

However, if there is no clear relationship between dense living environments and occasional leisure mobility – considering that dense cities do not generate less travel on an annual basis – the soundness of the compact city is therefore put into question. This question is crucial insofar as energy overconsumption and pollution are two of the principle arguments against urban sprawl. This is a key issue for regional development.

In the following debate, Sébastien Munafò will defend the idea that the compact city remains an indispensable model, especially in terms of the wealth of amenities it offers; whereas Marc Pearce of the Mobile Lives Forum will defend the argument that it is imperative to consider the many lifestyles in presence in city areas such as Geneva or Zurich and the diversity of living environments they require.

To go further


Sébastien Munafò  
Geographer

After a Bachelor in Social Sciences at the Neuchâtel University in 2006, he worked at Berlin at the Institut für Mobilitätsforschung of the BMW group and then at the applied geography department of the Freie Universität. Sébastien joined the Observatoire Universitaire de la Mobilité of the Genève University in 2008 before entering Prof. Vincent Kaufmann's team at the LaSUR in 2011.

The results of the research I undertook in Switzerland, notably in the greater Zurich and Geneva (Munafò, 2015), have led me to reject the "barbecue effect" hypothesis. Formulated as it has been, the hypothesis over-interprets the high rates of occasional mobility observed among inner city dwellers. Moreover, it leads to potentially harmful operational recommendations as it tends, in part, to reject the compact city as a virtuous urban form with regard to mobility.

**Urban dwellers’ occasional mobility is indeed important and challenges the compact city = short distances equation**

While our data clearly highlights the known link between moderate daily mobility and high density areas, the opposite relationship is true for occasional mobility (day trips and overnight trips). For the latter, the denser the area of residence is, the more kilometers people travel. In the densest parts of the country, i.e. in inner cities, this mobility can translate into greater distances than those traveled daily. This trend proves stable when socio-demographic criteria such as income or education are fixed. These results thus invite us to fundamentally question the compact city = short distances equation which, while valid for daily mobility, either diminishes or reverses when we consider total individual mobility on an annual basis.

*Figure n°1 : Average distances travelled yearly per person in the context of daily mobility and occasional mobility, according to the class of density of human activity (jobs + residents) per built surface area (class of equal magnitude).*
Important large-scale research studies on the topic tend to focus on the high rates of occasional mobility among city dwellers. Orfeuil and Soleyret (2002) highlight this with regard to the relationship between short and long-distance mobility for “long-distance sur-mobility in Ile-de-France” (ibid., p. 202). It was also the focus of Norwegian researchers Holden and Norland’s findings (2005, p. 2159), which posit the existence of a trend opposite to that of Newman and Kenworthy (1988) when observing the plane travel habits of city dwellers, 6/LaTTS’s research (2011) in Ile-de-France and in Rome, and Hélène Nessi (2012) in her doctoral thesis.

In reality, while this may seem surprising at first glance, the mechanisms at work – compensation mobility due to a lack of rest and leisure in central urban areas – have not been verified.

**Occasional mobility is not solely leisure mobility**

We often (mistakenly) consider occasional mobility as being solely for leisure purposes whereas, in reality, business travel, giving someone a ride and shopping trips account for a large portion of these trips which, moreover, increase with density. The denser an area
is, the more its inhabitants tend to have jobs that require travel (near or far) and the more they tend to use long-distance modes (especially planes and trains). This finding is clearly linked to the economic structures of predominantly urban areas, which have service and information-oriented economies and are highly connected at the international scale (Ascher, 1995; Sassen, 1991).

Leisure mobilities are not solely occasional; most of them are part of daily routines and, hence, contribute to residential choices

Conversely, we often face the assumption that leisure mobility is purely occasional. However, free time and leisure mobility are an important part of our daily/weekly routines. Most activities done on weekends do not stand out from city dwellers’ specific routines and habits during the week. Because of leisure activities’ importance in daily life, urban residents’ preferences and aspirations in this domain are also an integral part of their residential strategies. People also choose to live in a city center because barbecues are not necessarily their favorite pastime, or at least are not one they want to make part of their daily routine. Conversely, the choice of a green living environment is associated with the desire to take advantage of what such a setting has to offer on a daily basis.

Leisure activities do not boil down to a search for fresh air and a natural setting

Another stereotype that often permeates studies on the topic is that, among leisure activities, not all specifically involve the search for nature, tranquility or the great outdoors. Much leisure mobility aims to maintain social ties (visits to family, going to bars, restaurants or cultural events); in other words, activities not linked to the outdoors per say. These activities - which I call compactophile - give city centers the same advantage in terms of proximity as other location-specific activities, such as shopping and work. The compactophile logic is contradictory to the naturophile logic, which is underpinned by the compensation hypothesis and gives inhabitants of less dense areas a comparative advantage in terms of location.

The compensation logic has not been confirmed for daily or occasional mobility

The results of my research clearly show that the compensation logic or motive, which posits that inner-city dwellers are more avid consumers of naturophile mobility, is not substantiated. When it comes to daily mobility rooted in routine, our results specifically show the importance of proximity. As they play a pivotal role in urban inhabitants’
residential choices, the types of leisure activities they choose naturally punctuate their lifestyles and are done in settings largely chosen for this reason. Our data suggests that living in the city center is associated with more compactophile leisure activities (dining at local restaurants), while living in the outskirts is more associated with nature-oriented activities and the outdoors (the famous barbecue, or a walk in a nearby forest).

Regarding occasional mobility, we found that the relationship with density was not proven either. The qualitative surveys done in Geneva and Zurich showed that inner city residents’ desire to travel far and wide during their free time - even to get closer to nature (naturophile rationale) - does not stem from the need to compensate for or escape from a dense urban setting for more peaceful environments. Surprisingly, they also showed peri-urban residents’ strong liking for long trips to peaceful, natural settings, which one would assume they would take greater advantage of close to home; in other words, their living environment does not seem to make them more sedentary than urban dwellers.

As mentioned above, city dwellers also choose their residential location based on their preferred leisure activities. To live in the city center is to appreciate urban intensity, just as living near the countryside is to love the attributes of this type of setting. These tastes translate into specific leisure activities and trips. Both types of urbanites travel long distances to enjoy the amenities they value on a daily basis in their local residential environment, regardless of whether or not they have a garden, live in a busy, compact neighborhood or in a quiet neighborhood with row houses. The real differences here are actually between inhabitants of cities (all geotypes) and residents of rural areas and outskirts who are far less mobile devices for these reasons. Thus, if we are to see an effect in the rising trend in occasional mobility based on the density of the residential context, it is first and foremost an effect of the urbanity of lifestyles, and not a "barbecue effect".

Some naturophile leisure mobility do depend on of the setting offered by living environments. However, this ultimately represents a very small portion of the environmental impact of urban dwellers

While some peri-urban residents can actually enjoy a barbecue at home with friends – whereas urbanites must travel at least as far as the closest park to do so – the difference in mobility ultimately involves relatively short distances, travelled rather infrequently, compared to the volume and frequency of travels performed by peri-urban residents to reach the city for work or leisure activities. Moreover, even if one has a beautiful garden, it is rare for peri-urban residents to spend all their vacations there. It is precisely this type of occasional mobility that weighs heaviest in terms of energy consumption. Not only are these mobilities motivated independently from the environment in which one lives (as highlighted above), but they are also less energy intensive among residents of inner cities,
mainly due to their use of less energy-intensive transportation modes (train and plane vs. the car for peri-urbanites). At the Swiss scale, the relationship between total energy consumption for mobility and density was not reversed and still showed a clearly negative relationship in terms of energy consumption: the biggest consumers are residents of peri-urban and rural areas.

**Different interpretations that lead to conflicting recommendations in terms of urban design**

The discussion between an interpretation of the mechanisms underlying the intensive occasional mobility of urbanites based on the compensation hypothesis or the urbanity of lifestyles that I propose would raise an interpretive theoretical debate of little interest, were not that it leads to conflicting conclusions and practical recommendations in which the stakes are themselves critical.

Thus today, the "barbecue effect" hypothesis - though cautiously put forth by its authors and despite its weaknesses - offers a seductive argument against urban density and is therefore frequently cited by those advocating for the nature-city or even for peri-urban/sprawling urban forms (hitherto universally criticized). Maintaining the compensation hypothesis thus goes hand in hand with the idea of promoting lower density. However, our findings lead us away from such viewpoints and the potentially harmful recommendations to which they lead to, and they reassert the virtues of the compact city. The advantages in terms of proximity and accessibility this urban form offers for a great many (compactophile) leisure activities can be added to those it offers for more functional activities (e.g. work, amenities, shops and services). Given this, the comparative advantages of less dense living environments, while real for some naturophile daily leisure activities, do not make peri-urban inhabitants more sedentary when it comes to occasional leisure. The benefits in terms of mobility are therefore negligible at best.

**Local mobility issues must not be overlooked**

We must also remind ourselves that the sustainability of our mobility cannot be limited to energy expenditure alone, as the "barbecue effect" posits. Although sustainability well reflects the major challenges of nonrenewable energy consumption and global warming at the worldwide scale, it does not consider the more local issues associated with quality of life and which are equally crucial. While the goal here is to categorize different types of citizens’ mobility as more or less sustainable, we must also consider the air and noise pollution, accidents and traffic their mobility generates. Furthermore, with the increased
use of soft modes and public transport by inner cities residents for routine and occasional mobility, whether it is chosen or endured, for work or for leisure activities, their mobility appear much less harmful than that of residents of less dense areas, which is more oriented towards car use (even if they occasionally take a plane to vacation by the sea or check out an exhibition in Berlin). For example, the findings we obtained on particulate matter emissions, which is particularly hazardous, leave no doubt regarding the virtues of compactness. Merely considering this indicator and its relationship to density is enough to debunk arguments for sprawling and/or “rurban” forms.

... like all the other virtues of the compact city.

Furthermore, even though our research was not designed to consider them, let us not forget the other advantages attributed to the compact city: more efficient land use, optimization of infrastructure and public facility use, lower development costs, stimulation of serendipity, informal contacts, innovation and wealth generation. More than a spatial form, it is also a societal form in which ecological, economic and social advantages are many. In this respect, we need not completely call the compact city into question under the pretext that mobility, exchanges and diversity are constituent elements (urbanity) and that it is more difficult to have a barbeque with friends there than elsewhere.

To consider the entire range of aspirations in terms of living environments, but to be aware that some forms generate more negative externalities than others

Our findings support arguments for continuing to promote urban compactness, whose virtues in terms of mobility have been proven. Supporting this does not, of course, mean designing land use policy to force people to live in inner cities or densely-built areas. The whole range of aspirations in terms of living environments must be taken into account. The city center is a specific geotype that is not sought by many households, who prefer more spacious apartments, quieter, greener environments and/or sociability based more on mutual acquaintance. Suburban and peri-urban forms, with their inherent qualities, can respond to these aspirations. The lifestyle urban design, whose philosophy is to create the right environment for each lifestyle, should not be discarded. My research, however, points to the fact that less dense forms generate more negative externalities in terms of mobility than others. A key challenge for planners is therefore being able to meet the wide variety of demands in terms of living environments while reducing some of the disadvantages they may generate. This may take place, for example, through a policy designed to reduce car dependency in less populated areas and promote a certain degree of compactness that is compatible with peri-urban lifestyles.
Trying to design the city to make citizens more sedentary is useless because it does not fundamentally correspond to their plans.

Finally and more generally, my research findings are an invitation to move away from policy designed to make urbanites more sedentary. It is ultimately this kind of philosophy that underlies arguments for making "nature-city" the solution to the mobility challenges of the future. In fact, mobility is inherent to the city and urbanity: one does not come without the other! We must simply accept that much of city dwellers’ occasional leisure travel is done based on their deepest aspirations to maintain social links and break with routine by temporarily changing locations, rhythms, sociabilities and even norms. Trying to make them sedentary by offering them a garden seems futile because it is not consistent with their aspirations. However, to admit this does not mean being passive with regard to the many global and local challenges associated with mobility. It simply means being completely aware of the ingredients that compose the urban setting and, rather than attempting to eradicate them, reducing their negative impact to the best of our ability.

Bibliography


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Notes

1 For/Among a sample of more than 30 cities around the world, the two Australian researchers showed that the greater the density, the lower the rate of fuel consumption per inhabitant. Contrarily, the more spread out the city, the greater the fuel consumption.

2 Defined as based on the density and variety of social interactions (Lévy in Levy & Lussault, 2003).

Marc Pearce (Mobile Lives Forum)

Marc Pearce graduated from the master’s program in urban planning and development at the Urbanism Institute of Paris (IUP) and the National School of Architecture, Paris-Malaquais (ENSAPM). He is responsible for managing research projects in social sciences and organizing seminars and events.

The model of the Compact City advocated by Sébastien Munafò in his dissertation is based on the presumed virtuous behavior of city dwellers, both in terms of their travel and commute practices and the desirability of their lifestyles. I challenge this recommendation by revisiting the author’s interpretation of the data, the legitimacy of generalizing the results based solely on Swiss cases and the conceptual framework in which the research was conducted and wherein the city as a whole is dissociated from its central and peri-urban components. Throughout this article, I will attempt to highlight the political component of urban planning, given that the Compact City model alone cannot respond neither to the complex dynamics at work in cities nor to the wide range of expectations expressed by inhabitants.

One living environment is not more virtuous than another

Two definitions of compensation

In his dissertation, Sébastien Munafò draws on the idea of compensation in two different ways.
On one hand, he uses it to describe inner city dwellers’ desire to occasionally escape the city for the countryside. The question then is whether they travel occasionally to compensate for an urban lifestyle they consider exhausting.

To answer this question Sébastien Munafò looks at the motivations behind for occasional travel (especially weekend and holiday travel) and then distinguishes between what he calls “naturophile” motives (hiking in the forest, vacations at the beach, a house in the countryside, etc.) and “compactophile” motives (urban tourism, museums, café terraces, etc.). In this way he shows that, while in Zurich most such trips are “naturophile” in nature, this was not the case for Geneva residents who prefer cafes and museums.

Through this comparison Sébastien Munafò successfully shows that occasional travel is not a mechanical reaction to the density of the living environment; rather, it corresponds to a wide range of social expectations and aspirations in terms of leisure activities and vacations. There is therefore no compensation rationale behind the occasional travel of city dwellers.

However, Sébastien Munafò also calls on the idea of compensation in order to compare the greenhouse gases emitted annually from travel by peri-urban and downtown inhabitants.

There is a discrepancy between the highly-polluting daily travel of peri-urban residents (usually by car) and the sobriety of city dwellers’ daily travel (by foot, bike or public transportation). However, when one considers all travel performed yearly – weekdays as well as weekends and vacations – does the discrepancy remain?

It is no longer a question of what motivates travel but of the quantity of greenhouse gasses (GHG) emitted annually during trips. Nor is it a question of comparing lifestyles specific to downtown Zurich and Geneva; rather it is a question of comparing the lifestyles specific to each living environment (downtown, suburban and peri-urban) in each of the cities. Rather than questioning compensation logics or rationales, the issue here is whether or not the different environments even out in terms of CO2 emissions.

**The greenhouse gasses (GHG) emitted annually are comparable across living environments**

While comparable in terms of size and density, important differences distinguish the two cities, both in terms of travel behaviors and GHG emissions. Only in Zurich’s case were travel-related CO2 emissions significantly higher in peri-urban areas than in other living
environments. In Geneva, emissions were comparable for all contexts. As the chart below shows, annual travel-related emissions of downtown Zurich residents were 7/10th of those of peri-urban residents, while this figure was 9/10th for Geneva.

In Geneva, the CO2 emitted as a result of city dwellers’ numerous occasional travel indeed “compensates” for their frugal daily travel. In other words, the CO2 emitted by downtown Geneva residents, on an annual basis, catches up with the CO2 emitted by peri-urban inhabitants. This finding is important because it shows that ultimately, no one type of living environment is, in itself, more virtuous than another in terms of CO2 emissions. A living environment’s density alone does not allow us to deduce that one pattern of travel is more sustainable than another on an annual basis, just as it does not allow us to anticipate the reasons which motivate occasional trips.

**GHG emissions are problematic, regardless of the living environment**

This finding implies that we must be more specific about our objectives in terms of sustainability, because while downtown Zurich is less polluting than its urban ring in terms of travel, it is still as polluting as peri-urban Geneva.
If we consider, like Sébastien Munafò does, that life in downtown Zurich is sufficiently virtuous, then why castigate life in peri-urban Geneva? Conversely, must we rethink Zurich’s urban life and the way inhabitants’ activities spread over a wider territory? In a broader perspective of the fight against global warming and reducing GHGs, travel is equally problematic in all contexts on an annual basis. Downtown Zurich, for instance, is more than one and a half times more polluting than peri-urban Ile-de-France (which has been widely questioned environmentally) and two and a half times more than peri-urban Rome.

Moreover, if one ranks the living environments Sébastien Munafò studied from least polluting to most polluting, we are faced with a classification that is independent of density and centrality:
Ultimately, only suburban Geneva and peri-urban Zurich stand out from other living environments. For the other environments, their residents’ mobility emits roughly the equivalent of 2,500 kg of CO2 per year.

**One living environment is not more desirable than another**

**Living environments chosen for desired lifestyles**

Sébastien Munafò’s dissertation not only compares mobility practices and their carbon footprint, but also examines Geneva and Zurich residents’ life trajectories and residential choices.

Sébastien Munafò shows that in cities like Zurich and Geneva, travel behaviors in downtown and peri-urban areas are the result of a combination of people’s aspirations and the functional characteristics of their living environments. In other words, travel behaviors result from both a demand in terms of lifestyle and a supply in terms of living environment.

It is in the interviews Sébastien Munafò conducted that we best discern the link between lifestyles and living environments. The respondents surveyed asked themselves whether their living environment for the next year would meet their expectations in terms of work, sociability, proximity to family and friends, daily travel and, of course, leisure activities and vacations. “I came to Geneva to study. In fact, I’ve always lived in downtown Geneva. First I lived in Carouge with the students, in the Acacias and in Rondeau… These choices were pretty clear; we didn’t have a car. The idea was to stay in the center for the amenities.”

– Katia, 40, Geneva center, Les Pâquis
“I like the city. I’ve lived downtown in several very big cities. But at the same time, I like the countryside and nature. Finding a compromise isn’t easy. For me, this is almost ideal because you cross a bridge and you’re in the countryside. It’s pretty urban. A 20-minute bus ride and you’re downtown.”

– Yves, 50, Geneva suburbs, Vernier

“We go to the forest a lot. Even along the Rhone there’s a forest. What’s practical is that you can go take a quick bike ride in the country. So that’s nice too. Really, the woods are quite soothing. Wilderness areas.”

– Laurent, 34, peri-urban Geneva, Aire-la-Ville

Overall, the living environments seemed to meet residents’ expectations. Consequently, it is difficult to conclude as Sébastien Munafò does that the environment the city center offers can replace all others.

**The choice of a living environment: a matter of life cycle**

Moreover, the qualitative interviews Sébastien Munafò conducted show the importance of a diversity of living environments to meet residents’ needs over the course of their lives. Using the concept of life cycle, he reveals the way lifestyles harmonize over time with all that a territory has to offer. While people’s expectations and aspirations give way to lifestyles and the choice of living environments that corresponds to them, these can indeed change over time.

“I was amazed by the amount of money we’d spent up until then on rent [in Geneva center]. A fortune and nothing to show for it. So as soon as we had the chance, we started to do work here and, in 1979, came to live here. It was great for the kids. There’s Allondon valley with lots of beautiful places to play. They were a little shy about going outside in Lancy, but here it was different.”

– Rose, 68, peri-urban Geneva, Russin

“In Plainpalais we had everything – infrastructures, stores, public transportation, doctors, schools, activities… I finally left, mostly because of the family situation and the arrival of children. We needed something bigger because we’d always lived in apartments.”

– Vanessa, 45, Geneva suburbs, Vernier
“I’d like to go back to the family home in Valais, but to Geneva as well. Not be there all the
time. Come back for my grandkids. Have a little pied-a-terre near the city.”

– Françoise, 62, Geneva suburbs, Grand-Saconnex

It is difficult in such circumstances to imagine that downtown Geneva or Zurich could do
without its peri-urban perimeter, given that city dwellers themselves would not.

The quality of life in city centers put into question

When Sébastien Munafò defends the Compact City on the grounds that the quality of life
in city centers is automatically better, he ignores the fact that some interviewees express
the opposite view. This was notably the case for certain respondents living in the city
center.

“I've never really liked Paris. It's an unpleasant city, even though I've got friends there. It's
hard to get around, the sidewalks are tiny and the density makes it impracticable. The only
time I enjoy it is by car at night. In restaurants, the tables are tiny, the chairs are tiny and
the toilets are unbearable. You feel the spatial constraints all the time.”

– Sylvain, 41, Geneva center, Délices-Grottes

“I think what bothers me most is the noise. But we knew that it wasn’t necessarily a quiet
neighborhood when we moved here.”

– Alain, 67, Geneva center, Délices-Grottes

One wonders then what criteria the author uses to define this quality of urban life? What to
make of all those looking to improve their living environment by moving to the outskirts,
somewhere closer to nature?

The size of Swiss cities: an important limitation in the case studies

When Sébastien Munafò asserts his results beyond his two Swiss case studies, the
question of the quality of life becomes an issue of particular significance.

Zurich and Geneva are indeed comparable to a medium-sized French city (like Nantes) in
terms of both size and density. However, the "barbecue effect" hypothesis supposes that
inhabitants express dissatisfaction due to the poor quality of life in crowded city centers.
Thus, the relevancy of this hypothesis seems weaker in the cities studied, which, in
comparison, are not densely populated and very green. But what about megacities like
Paris, Cairo and Bombay, where the population density can be six times higher than that of Zurich?

From this point of view, Sébastien Munafò’s fields of study do not allow us to completely challenge the barbecue effect hypothesis because neither of them are sufficiently problematic in regards to the effects density may have on the quality of life of inner city residents.

But what exactly are we talking about when we advocate for the Compact City or the dense city? Cities differ in size, population, social composition, activities, transportation, and even in terms of their inhabitants’ aspirations. And as Sébastien Munafò’s dissertation findings show, all of these elements must be factored in in order to understand a city’s mobility practices.

**The Compact City does not allow us to for the city as a whole**

The categorization of living environments (city center, suburban and peri-urban) Sébastien Munafò uses to describe the Compact City (i.e. downtown areas) on one hand and the diffuse city (i.e. peri-urban areas) on the other is based on two key characteristics: population density and the relationship to the city center. There are therefore denser areas downtown and less dense areas on the periphery. But what about the suburbs, that in-between that nonetheless seems more virtuous in terms of its residents’ travel practices? If we go back to Sébastien Munafò’s comparison of GHG emissions, the suburbs are indeed the least polluting living environment, even when we consider each city independently of the other.

But if we follow the author’s reasoning and try to extract a city model from what seems to be the most virtuous living environment, we must ask ourselves: what would the Half-compact-half-diffuse City look like?

If we base our reasoning on population density, this would mean making a city like Los Angeles (whose average population density it comparable to suburban Zurich) a reference.
Prescribing a given urban model across the board raises problems in itself, especially when the favored model is based on a limited number of features, however structural they may be. But, though widespread application of a suburban living environment seems improbable, it is worth pondering on for several reasons.

Firstly, because this generalization is comparable to that proposed by the theory of the Compact City as Sébastien Munafò presents it, as it also reduces the city as a whole to the formal characteristics of only one of its parts.

Secondly, because the idea of a “donut city” – however absurd it may seem – raises the question of the relationship between areas with different densities and centralities.

Suburban areas devoid of downtown and peri-urban areas seem unthinkable and unrealistic. But can city centers like that of Geneva or Zurich exist without its adjoining
externalities, outlying residential areas and more generally without a territorial context capable of providing for the diversity of needs and aspirations expressed by the population?

By advocating for the dissemination of a certain type of living environment to the exclusion of others, we forfeit a more systemic understanding of urban development and of how human activities are spatially distributed beyond the immediate living environment of a single portion of the population. We also forget that the extraordinary development of big cities went hand in hand with that of peri-urban areas and that the emergence of large, dense cities has resulted in the functional specialization of territories which participates in the same problems that the Compact City tries to answer.

**The Compact City produces its own justification**

*Urban mobility is above all a question of access, not density*

On closer inspection, Sébastien Munafò’s recommendation raises a problem of internal logic implicit in his definition of the Compact City. By focusing on population density, the author underestimates the importance of the proximity to the center in the equation, which notably reflects problems of access to both amenities and transportation infrastructures.

Sébastien Munafò shows that the significant increase in occasional travel is indeed largely related to the access to such infrastructures. Those with the best access are those who travel farthest on vacation and can get to work by bike or subway every day. From this standpoint, population density has little to do with mobility: the frugality of daily travel practices depend primarily on the distance between daily activities and the transportation infrastructure that links them. In the case of Compact Cities, frugality essentially depends on the relationship to the city center. Even though density makes it possible to concentrate more activity in a given space, this concentration still has limits, especially when organized around a single point of convergence: its center.

As a center by definition supposes a periphery, even if we were to amass dense neighborhoods over vast areas (e.g. the earlier example of Los Angeles), we still would not resolve the issue of access and of the trips required to reach all our daily activities. Going even further, we could say that the more dense spaces there are, the more centrality becomes an issue.

In this respect, saying that the Compact City is virtuous because of the accessibility it affords is, from a logical viewpoint, a tautology: when a city’s activities are organized
around its center, then living in the city center naturally offers the best access.

**The monocentric city: a model to forego**

Yet, many alternative models to the Compact City exist, and in each case the issue of access is met differently, depending on the epoch, the country and the theoretical standpoint. And even among proponents of the Compact City a debate exists between the monocentric and polycentric city.

A city like Copenhagen, known for the virtuous travel practices of its inhabitants, is a good example of an alternative. Based on a planning model that distributes the city’s activities and dense population areas along transportation infrastructures (the “finger plan”), Copenhagen was designed so that inhabitants would have access to the amenities typically associated with the city, to work areas and to green spaces, regardless of the density of the population and distance from the city center. The hand-shaped layout of the city favors both accessibility and the interspersing of natural and urban spaces.
Compactness – or rather centrality – should not be a goal in itself. What should be, however, is understanding what opportunities it does and does not afford, namely in terms of social inequalities of access.
The Compact City does not resolve the issue of social inequalities

Rather than advocating for more Compact Cities, it is a right to the city in Henri Lefebvre's sense of the term that we could defend. Rather than arguing for a specific urban design or planning model, the right to the city offered a critical interpretation of the way the city is produced and the way it concentrates power in the city centers and reproduces social inequalities through urban planning itself. Reading Henri Lefebvre today reminds us that to propose a city model is to propose a political model – an economic and social way of organizing power.

Sébastien Munafò’s conclusions can be criticized for their lack of such an interpretation. Indeed the issue of the reasons or motivations for occasional travel, however important it may be, only partially explains differences in travel practices between city dwellers and peri-urban residents. Social inequalities of access to city centers – absent from the discussion here – are nonetheless important. While people in cities like Paris, the densest city in Europe, may want to ride their bikes to work, they must still find the means to live in the city center. The pressure that the density of activity a city like Paris exerts on the real estate market is significant and structurally deprives a large portion of the population of more central living environments.

The concept of serendipity: an erroneous representation of the social mechanisms at play in the city

The author mentions "other" virtues of the Compact City and urbanity, but what are they? And more importantly, how does the present research help us understand them?

When we talk about urbanity, we are often referring to the strength and quality of social ties that allow for the Compact City. The main argument for this idea is the concept of "serendipity," which is defined as a place's ability to produce accidental encounters and to fortuitously establish social ties between people who are considered a priori as different.

Through the idea of "serendipity," we assume that the diversity of people present in a given area allows for the transmission, by simple contact, of values and social conditions of its inhabitants, as though the presence of people from different social classes in the same space automatically made for greater "social mobility." However, even during the industrial era – the golden age of the city – the mechanisms of social differentiation had overcome this kind of mobility. Already at that time, the desire to distinguish oneself in a socially heterogeneous environment translated into an array of practices and devices meant to identify and remain in company of people from the same background: from first
class subway cars to social practices and codified fashion trends.

Even today, Sébastien Munafò’s investigation shows that the question of social ties in the most densely populated areas, openness to others and social diversity do not always come naturally. On the contrary even...

“We don’t have much contact. On the ground floor there are offices, and then there’s a bit of everything. They aren’t people we really know. I wouldn’t leave them my keys when I go away on vacation. There’s also a lot of change, and people move a lot.” – Jacques, 45, Geneva center, St Gervais-Chantepoulet.

“I’m not really involved in neighborhood life. I haven’t taken the time, I travel a lot. I don’t really have close ties with the people here. I don’t have any close friends.” – Yves, 50, Geneva suburbs, Vernier

Moreover, self-segregation can be a reality in densely populated cities...

“I’d really have a hard time living in another neighborhood, a cleaner or more beautiful neighborhood. We have a relationship with the people here that isn’t the same as in another neighborhood. To make fun of ourselves [we say] it’s a bit of a bobo [“bourgeois-bohème”] neighborhood; we’re all together, we’re all the same, all a bit cultured, with no money. It’s like little Berlin. We kind of stick together.” – Sylvain, 41, Geneva center,
The story of the Compact City is also the story of social segregation

The history of Paris – Compact City par excellence – is a history of social segregation in the urban environment. Since the urban renovation of Baron Haussmann in the mid-19th century, the removal of productive functions from the city center and the concentrating of the highest social classes inside the city, Paris and its periphery have known very strong social segregation. The fortuitous nature of encounters in the city center was largely contained. Through financial speculation most notably, Haussmann succeeded in transforming the French capital and strengthening its position as the supreme center of the country’s political and economic activity while dividing the city in two, with working-class neighborhoods in the east and well-to-do neighborhoods reserved for aristocratic and bourgeois self-segregation in the west. This geographic distinction persists today, and self-segregation strategies are numerous and actively employed by inhabitants and institutional actors alike.

Given the numerous works on the subject, it is difficult today to assume that there is a mechanical correspondence between compactness and social mobility. Even when people from different social backgrounds find themselves in the same neighborhood, it is often a sign of advanced gentrification and that those of modest origin have already begun their exodus from the city, far from the functional diversity, centrality and accessibility that make it worthwhile.

Without a strong political decision that will allow fragile populations to stay in their neighborhoods, the concepts of compactness and diversity cannot guarantee equal access to the city’s amenities.

Ultimately, the Compact City is neither necessary – because, as cities like Copenhagen shows us, we can provide accessibility by other means than density – nor sufficient, as it alone cannot make up society.

Mobility and living environment: a political issue!

Sébastien Munafò shows that while a compensation rationale does not transpire in cities like Zurich and Geneva, the mobility of people living in city centers year round can be as great as those living in peri-urban areas.

Despite this fundamental contribution to the discussion on the future of living environments, Sébastien Munafò’s conclusions regarding the Compact City are difficult to
accept. It would have sufficed to challenge the scope of the barbecue effect, as he also does. However, he goes so far as to propose a counter model and thus makes the same mistake as those who would advocate for a city model based on peri-urban areas (such as what the author calls the “diffuse city” model).

The model of the Compact City thus opposes two parts (center and periphery) of a whole (the city). However, GHG emissions is not only a peri-urban issue; the problem is systemic and concerns the city in general as well as all the different lifestyles it accommodates.

And therein lies the originality and interest of Sébastien Munafò’s dissertation. By approaching the question through people’s lifestyles, his findings show that energy frugality with regard to mobility does not only depend on density or even planning models or urban design. The sustainability of our mobility depends at least as much on individuals’ aspirations. It is only by matching these manifold aspirations with an organization of our activities over space and time that we will succeed in expressing a societal choice that can respond to the climate challenges we are facing.

Ultimately, it is a fundamentally political matter. As such, the issue is not so much knowing which planning model to promote but rather how to make the question of living environments a subject of public debate so that we can plan for cities that respond both to inhabitants’ aspirations and environmental issues at every scale.

Notes


6 See Tim Cresswell, Michael Lamarchand and Géralding Lay, Ne pas dépasser la ligne,
2015, p. 192, on the differentiation of political and social identities through travel practices – valid today more than ever – in transit areas where human density is particularly high, be it in the heart of a dense megacity like Paris (Gare du Nord) or in the middle of rural Netherlands (Schiphol Airport).


Keywords: Effet barbecue, cadre de vie, Peri-urban, ville compacte, compacité, Lifestyles
Disciplines: Humanities, Social sciences
Transport mode(s): All modes of transport

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**Questioning the barbecue effect**

Video by Sébastien Munafò
Marc Pearce (Forum Vies Mobiles)
Chargé de projet au Forum Vies Mobiles


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