



Introduction to the Special Section: Recreational mobilities in (and beyond) the compact city

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Recreational mobilities in (and beyond) the compact city

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ABSTRACT

What happens if one takes recreational mobilities as a point of departure for making sense of the compact city? This special issue offers interdisciplinary explorations of how one might approach studies of cities and metropolitan regions in new ways, using recreational mobilities as both lens and focal point. In so doing, the contributions aim to advance recreational mobilities as a critical theme for scholarship and practice. We specifically hope to demonstrate how such an approach is fruitful for grappling with the legacies of rationalism and modernism in spatial planning, with a focus on the contemporary ideal of the ‘compact city’ as both phenomenon and normative impulse that has come to dominate discourses of urban design and urban planning in recent decades.¹

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If home-to-work commuting patterns and active transportation are high on policy agendas, leisure travel in general and recreational mobilities in specific can be described as the ‘poor cousins’ receiving much less attention. Overlooking recreational mobilities can be seen as problematic for three reasons. First, everyday leisure trips represent a great deal of the travel done at various scales—perhaps three of every four trips—and they are largely dependent on car traffic in most OECD countries, compounding concerns about the impacts of mobility, leisure, and tourism in terms of climate change (Gössling 2005; Holden 2016). This suggests a need to integrate opportunities for recreation in the everyday ‘milieu de vie’ where people reside and/or to provide, resilient, and justly sustainable (collective) transport options for travel to and from leisure destinations. Second, given the widely-acknowledged need for a shift away from sedentary lifestyles as part of efforts toward just, resilient sustainabilities—exemplified in recent work on public health (e.g. Forsyth 2018; Koohsari et al. 2015; McCormack et al. 2021; Nordh et al. 2017; Voulgaris, Smart, and Taylor 2019)—individuals should be presented with a wide range of affordances for physical exercise integrated into the spaces of everyday life. Finally, there is growing evidence that the benefits of local ‘walk-supportiveness’ and other ways of enabling leisure mobilities as social practice are disproportionately enjoyed by higher-income households, raising questions of mobility justice (Knight, Weaver, and Jones 2018; Manaugh and El-Geneidy 2011; Sheller 2018). Thus, recreational mobilities need to be integrated into urban design and urban planning—an integration that may entail refocusing current concepts of just and resilient sustainabilities.

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Within mobilities research, recreation is of course far from a novel theme. Various studies have made empirical as well as conceptual forays into how mobilities and moorings quietly undergird recreation, leisure, and tourism (e.g. Ceron and Dubois 2005; Galleguillos-Torres et al. 2022; Haldrup 2011; Næss 2006; Östh et al. 2023). Another example is found in studies of non-directional and/or circular movement—as contrasted with deliberate patterns of movement from A to B, perhaps with some trip-chaining, which represent the bread-and-butter of transport studies—which Bissell (2013) invites us to consider *pointless* (e.g. Cidell 2014; Cook, Shaw, and Simpson 2016). Borrowing from studies into tourism mobilities (e.g. McCabe et al. 2014; Urry and Larsen 2011; Sheller and Urry 2004), one might see the purpose (or meaning) as the *act* of moving, as Cook, Shaw, and Simpson (2016) suggest. This aspect seems common in studies of purposeful travel (see e.g. Holden 2016; Mehmetoğlu 2019), which do not necessarily attend to the experiential qualities of the mobility itself. A third example is the special issue of this journal on ‘Slow mobilities’ (volume 12, issue 1) which embodies our own preoccupation with how some mobilities attract more attention than others. Yet, in the current literature focus is usually set on specific activities (such as hiking, running, cycling, or horseback riding, etc.) which could explain why the conceptual discussion on recreational mobilities as a general phenomenon remains elusive and relatively marginal even within this field.² More to the point, examinations of recreational mobilities rarely engage with the compact city, nor with planning and design, and it is perhaps in this particular context that the concept as such is especially useful as a reminder of a marginalised dimension of urban life.

We crafted the call for this special issue because we were struck by the marginal position of recreational mobilities in urban and planning studies, which in turn reflects and perpetuates a subordinate status in planning practice, where leisure-related activities are not part of the conceptualisation of the compact city—instead literally pushed out of denser city contexts to the rural-urban fringe (Alon-Mozes 2020; Engström and Qviström 2022; Qviström, Bengtsson, and Vicenzotti 2016). We argue that the practical work of planning, policy, and design needs new support from mobility studies. Spatial practices warrant fuller examination to deepen appreciation for (sub)urban mobilities as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the ‘compact city’—especially in terms of its affordances and constraints *vis-à-vis* leisure activities, and what Holmes (2018) and Lynch (1981) have respectively called ‘mismatch’ and ‘fit’. How should one study attempts to accommodate, to facilitate, and to encourage recreational mobilities within human settlements? This is a question of design as well as policy and programming. Efforts are also needed to counteract what Angelo and Wachsmuth (2015) call ‘methodological cityism’ with its limited (and limiting) ideas of the future of urban(ising) space. By this, we mean the tendency for normative discourses to present the compact city (with its mineralised streets and squares, its Hausmann-inspired boulevards, and its ‘hard’ forms of densification) as inherently and universally good—and perhaps the ‘only’ way to organise human settlements.³ Finally, on a conceptual level, debates need to consider what happens with aspirational understandings of a just, resilient, and sustainable city when recreational mobilities and their materialities are taken into consideration.

We argue for studies of recreational mobilities to enrich our understanding of urban life, and the usefulness of the concept as a critical lens on urban planning in general and the planning for the compact city in specific. However, as the strength lies in enriching our understanding of the city, it would not make sense to define and delimit the study of ‘recreational mobilities’ as only a matter of certain kinds of recreation or a specific set up of mobilities. Importantly, a clear-cut distinction cannot be drawn between ‘recreational’ and ‘utilitarian’ mobilities, if nothing else since there is a need for consideration of recreational aspects of any kind of mobility. Also, we do not argue for a definite distinction between recreational mobilities and tourism, other than to remind readers that the latter is *usually* defined with purposeful contrast to everyday (mobility) routines. As dozens of scholars have since also done, John Jakle suggested in his classic monograph that tourists seek deliberate encounters with new places, on trips measured in weeks (not hours or days) and undertaken in a specific state of mind (Jakle 1985). Indeed, research on mobilities—much of which is

found in this journal—often strives to combine and juxtapose work on tourism, migration, and everyday mobilities with work in mainstream transport planning through interdisciplinary crossovers with communication and media studies (e.g. Cohen and Gössling 2015; Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006; Sheller 2014). In sum, we suggest an open and explorative definition, to encourage future studies that challenge ideas of when and how recreational mobilities occur.

If our definition is open, the recreational mobilities explored in this special issue can nevertheless be qualified and nestled within a longer arc in mobilities studies. First, the recreational mobilities studied are affective and emotional; they affect the participant's state of mind and/or how the activity is sensed.⁴ This is not unlike other forms of mobility, but we argue that recreational mobilities especially involve what Sheller et al. (2013, 49) described as 'active corporal engagements of human bodies with the sensed world'.⁵ These recreational mobilities go considerably beyond ocular-centrism and towards dimensions of movement that are tactile, aural (sometimes noisy), and aromatic (sometimes downright smelly). These ideas are explored in the papers by Luka, Leposa & Qviström, and Spierings in this special issue.

Secondly, the recreational mobilities explored in this special issue are 'occasioned' activities that are voluntary (or at least discretionary, to use a more clinical term). We contend that studies of recreational mobilities not only reveal aspects of the practices that warrant attention as (empirical) phenomena but which, on an epistemological level, also effectively mirror dominant notions of what mobilities research can and should be—especially within what Sheller and Urry (2006) referred to as the dominant (old) mobilities paradigm. As Cresswell (2021) noted, debates have shifted with/in 'new mobilities' research, especially as practices of (re)valuation were bolstered through the pandemic.⁶ The importance of this shift was further demonstrated in Salazar's (2021) dissection of existential *versus* essential mobilities. Yet, as previously stated, we do not suggest drawing a dichotomous distinction between recreational and utilitarian mobilities. Rather, the contributions to this special issue take recreational mobilities as a point of departure. By doing so, we reveal how what is conventionally regarded as recreational and utilitarian mobilities are conflated, even co-dependent, but it also directs some of our studies beyond the geographical confines of the compact city. While an exclusive focus on existential mobilities could have led outside the city too, a more generous definition also opens up for capturing a more diverse set of places that are entangled in the compact city.

A third observation is that recreational mobilities are impossible to examine without discussing the materialities of their occurrence—both in terms of what enables them (i.e. affordances), and in terms of the consequences they can have for the landscapes in which they take place. In other words, recreational mobilities highlight a 'complex relationality of places and persons' linked through the performativities that they express (Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006, 13; see also Büscher 2006; Sheller and Urry 2006; and with particular reference to tourism, Edensor 2000). This is not a groundbreaking observation relative to other forms of mobility, but through an emphasis on material entailments, we aim to foreground the importance of constructed artefacts and their entanglements with mutable mobilities and places, including seasonality (as stressed by Leposa and Qviström), more-than-human encounters (as explored by Normark), and socio-technical hybridity (as explored by Spierings). The reader will observe many conceptual convergences in terms of practice, negotiation, performativity, appropriation, contestation, doing-being-ordinary *versus* doing-being-different, and affordances (Aradi, Halvorsen Thorén, and Fjørtoft 2016; Kyttä 2008; Maier, Fadel, and Battisto 2009)—what Lynch (1981) called 'fit' and Lawton (1977, 1985) and Lawton, Brody, and Turner-Massey (1978) called 'press'.⁷ We see hope in how everyday recreational mobilities also render clear the 'orderly disorder' of 'negotiation in motion' (Jensen 2010), engendering systems and temporalities that are neither ordered nor anarchic (cf. Lister 2018; Sheller and Urry 2006; Urry 2003). An explicit emphasis on recreational patterns of movement allows for a nuanced appreciation of (temporary) configurations and appropriations-through-reconfigurations of spaces and places. That being said, few previous studies of recreational mobilities really grapple with (sub)urban space as much more than an

untouchable backdrop. We therefore suggest that recreational mobilities can be a lens for scrutinising or questioning contemporary planning ideals, which remain steadfastly *urban* in their normative stances, by normalising dense, city-like configurations that were most common in the 19th- and early 20th-century phases of human settlement, especially in European and Anglo-American contexts (Angelo and Wachsmuth 2015; Dehaene 2018; Millington 2016; Quastel, Moos, and Lynch 2012).

Exploring recreational mobilities in the compact city

While the papers have been mentioned in passing above, this section centres their contribution to enriching current debates on the compact urban form. In our first paper, Martin Emanuel returns to the nineteenth-century city—the beloved template for the ‘compact city’ and an idealised image of Euro-American urbanism. Emanuel reveals the multitude of challenges that were staged within the bourgeois promenade as a practice of recreational mobility, reminding us of the gender inequalities and social classes that were staged as part of leisure practices in the city. He highlights the importance of the materiality of the streets and sidewalks, explaining how a prominent sensescape of that time—the bourgeois display of seeing and being seen—was first and foremost dependent on the smooth surfaces allowing the eyes to move ‘off the ground’.

In our second paper, Bas Spierings provides a contemporary equivalent in leisure shopping, studying sensescapes in Utrecht. Focusing on two forms of recreational mobility, walking-in-the-shopping-core, and cycling-by-the-shopping-core, his detailed descriptions of the affordances and the materialities remind us of how design interventions support mobile leisure consumption—a reoccurring theme in policy-led efforts to boost urban economies. Spierings also shows how both types of recreational mobility are relational, influencing each other continuously. Of particular note is how practices of cycling and walking are interchangeable for those performing them.

Neva Leposa and Mattias Qviström reveal how recreational practices are continuously (re-)transformed to fit into the weather world. They offer a detailed account of the mutual performativity of landscape features and recreational practices, which in effect mould each other. Here materiality plays an important role—not as static backdrop, but rather as elements that change with day-to-day weather patterns and seasonal shifts. For example, the feet sense texture, with friction and smoothness engendering a love-hate relationship with asphalt. Hence, the ideal place for running alternates with seasonal changes—while forests are appealing in the summer, the busy street becomes a viable option at darker times. The article also highlights the negotiations performed by runners in relation to landscape features.

A similar emphasis on negotiation in recreational mobilities defines the article by Normark. The study shows how pedestrians must navigate and barter for space on a busy street, where those that engage in recreational mobilities are marginal. The members of these ad-hoc communities of recreational practice, such as dog-walking or jogging, are identifiable by observing specific devices or markers of membership, according to Normark. Similar to Spierings, Normark notes that recreational mobilities are influenced by those co-present, such as pedestrians, commuters, and cyclists. For example, many joggers abstained from running while using the busy street while other runners ran close to the parked cars, on the cycleway, at early hours, or resorted to zigzagging through the crowd to weave their activity into the mix. Taken together, this work also produces a perception of being different—doing-alterity.

The intersections of the State with the engagements of everyday and professional practitioners are foregrounded in the final two papers. Using the COVID pandemic as a critical case, Franck Cochoy investigates the de-facto rules of running in the compact city (as social practice) when these norms were suddenly in flux. Conversations in an online forum during the ‘lockdown’ period are dissected to reveal how the participants negotiated the rules of running—how pandemic-specific regulations should be interpreted, how runners might rationalise a discretionary

practice under extraordinary circumstances, and how this community of practice might accept or question new members. Cochoy's study provides valuable insights into the collaborative efforts of interpreting, rationalising, or subverting rules imposed by the State in everyday social practice. It also illustrates one of the conflicts between compactness and outdoor recreation: even without calls for social/physical distancing (for whatever reason), there is limited space for such marginalised activities in densely-built neighbourhoods.

Finally, Nik Luka's contribution brings planning and design to the forefront, exploring roles for the interventionist (the planner, politician, activist, designer, citizen, architect, or researcher) who wants to improve everyday settings vis-à-vis recreational mobilities. By reviewing the literature on walking as a matter of fact and walkability as a matter of concern, Luka highlights both the prospective ambitions of the research community on walkability but also its limitations. How have normative intentions toward walkability (e.g. reducing energy consumption and car dependency) failed to translate into thoughtful work on where, why, and how people engage in walking practices, especially in terms of recreational mobility? In what ways are celebrations of compact urban form leading to urban bias in planning and design? Luka's article presents directions for new work, both for where further studies of recreational mobilities could take us but also how our knowledge of recreational mobilities can be put to use.

Rethinking the compact city with recreational mobilities

Almost two decades of work in this journal have revealed how detailed explorations of micro-mobilities can offer a critical lens for examining overarching challenges in contemporary societies, including notable meta-themes explored in the special issue on 'Anthropocene mobilities' (volume 14, issue 3, edited by Baldwin, Fröhlich, and Rothe 2019). If the climate emergency, the COVID-19 pandemic, and concerns over increased social polarisation in recent decades now converge in questions of sustainable, resilient, and just mobilities as major challenges in contemporary planning (Fainstein 2010; Agyeman 2013), we suggest that recreational mobilities should not be overlooked. The articles in this special issue demonstrate methodologies for exploring and indeed problematising the compact city through recreational mobilities. We close our introduction by noting three substantive themes that seem salient.

First, recreational mobilities can help to reveal *critical absences*. A familiar methodological problem in empirical studies is that they tend to hone in on certain activities that are visibly taking place and to focus on the practitioners that have the wherewithal to attract the attention of policymakers and scholars. Yet, empirical studies could also centre the absence. With specific reference to the compact city, the contributions to this special issue also suggest recreational mobilities are often absent, or at best forced into 'fugitive' roles. Two important questions arise in consequence: what kinds of activities and mobilities are *not seen* in the compact city? What kinds of absences have been normalised, as if such activities do not 'belong' in (or to) the city? Even as planning models are now dominated by discussions of 'sustainable' mobilities (at least for commuting), a focus on recreational mobilities can offer a critical lens on this. The paper by Lepoša, Peinert and Qviström illustrates this, for the issue is not the wholesale exclusion of certain activities; their study of urban running shows how certain *kinds* of running are made difficult at certain *times*, yet running 'as such' is always possible. Yet, the places and affordances missing in the compact city could result in a hostile environment for novices or less-experienced participants, relegating running (in this example) to a fugitive status—on the lam, as it were. Moreover, among the notable absences in current discussions of recreational mobilities are attempts to link empirical findings in substantive ways with conceptual (synthetic) collective and critical attempts to advance debates on matters of concern.

A second compelling theme arises in many of the contributions, deepening our invocation of how recreational mobilities seem *marginalised, dejected, ignored, and squeezed out*. As socio-spatial

practices, they nevertheless tend to persist. We even see evidence of recreational mobilities as quietly defiant, i.e. as somewhat transgressive social practices of place-claiming. It is striking to consider from the empirical studies in this special issue how individuals eschew social acceptability (or at least ‘push the envelope’) but also have the situational awareness necessary to think about their actions, and thereby sometimes recognise the consequences of defying predefined (if unwritten) norms. This is vividly seen in Cochoy’s piece, where protagonists voluntarily engage in some sort of deliberation on social responsibility under changing regimes. Defiance, however, is often gentle, as seen in how negotiation is integral to the running behaviour documented by Lepoša, Peinert and Qviström—surreptitiously subduing and subverting contexts where recreational mobilities are not really invited. We see this as a promising theme for future research, not the least in order to mediate between matters of fact and matters of concern. Questions also arise vis-à-vis the compact city as a series of deliberate, curated juxtapositions of programme, people, and activities—sometimes described as ‘compression’ in design-oriented work (e.g. Gehl 2010; Hajer and Reijndorp 2001; Hajer et al. 2020). As milieu or as norm, compactness engenders (even requires) stratification and contestation, despite claims made by some advocates that compactness will bring diverse publics together as if by magic.⁸ The contributions made by Emanuel, Spierings, and Cochoy are especially notable in this respect.

Finally, there is a need to rethink conceptualisations of, and models and design proposals for, the compact city, and we argue that recreational mobilities offer a useful lens for doing so. As this special issue has shown, other *places*, *matters*, and *mobilities* deserve to be brought into the understanding of the compact city, especially if this model should be used as a template for sustainable urban development. Yet, to suggest new models lies perhaps beyond the comfort zone of mobility scholars. Most of the papers in this issue are marked by a healthy reluctance to discuss consequences or instrumental conclusions ‘for professional practice.’ Thus, while recreational mobilities offer fertile ground for exploring new ways of understanding the compact city, close collaborations between mobility scholars and planning practitioners might be necessary to counter conventional planning with another set of models. Even so, there are obvious implications that could support a reconceptualization of the compact city. For instance, all of the contributions—even those empirically anchored in what is conventionally regarded as the compact city (notably Emanuel, Normark, and Spierings)—force us to disrupt or at the very least complicate simplistic notions of the ‘traditional’ city and post-war automobility-oriented urban landscapes (as sometimes used in studies of transport and urban form, e.g. Fishman 2011; Newman and Kenworthy 1996).

These three critical themes are worthy of further examination as part of the work for sustainable, healthy, and livable cities. Further studies tackling absences, marginalisation, and the role of compact-city models would equip us with bolder, more meaningful, or usefully humble ways to rethink and to inform urban design and planning.

Notes

1. See e.g. Breheny (1996), Fishman (2011), Forsyth (2018), Neuman (2005), and Westerink et al. (2013).
2. See review papers by Engström and Qviström (2022) and Salazar (2021).
3. See notably Fishman (2011), Luka (2021), Neuman (2005), Talen and Ellis (2002), and Touati-Morel (2015).
4. See notably Brown (2017), Cass and Faulconbridge (2017), Cook, Shaw, and Simpson (2016), Kaaristo et al. (2020), Sheller (2004), Thwaites and Simkins (2007), Waskul and Waskul (2010), and Wunderlich (2008).
5. See also Ingold (2011), Macnaghten and Urry (2000), McCabe et al. (2014), Urry and Larsen (2011), and the collection edited by Sheller and Urry (2004).
6. See for instance Dussauge, Helgesson, and Lee (2015) and Salazar (2021).
7. The concept of ‘press’ literally describes the resistance afforded by a given context, both in terms of the physical attributes (hardness or softness, for instance) and social norms. Lawton (1977, 1985) and Lawton, Brody, and Turner-Massey (1978) usefully offered it to help explain how the incapacitation and decline associated with ageing processes can perversely be accelerated for individuals who are not presented with enough of a challenge in their everyday routines to engender a sense of agency and accomplishment in small

acts—in effect, too much environmental press leads to learned helplessness, but too little may also lead to the same sense of futility.

8. For compelling accounts of how social cohesion through enforced encounter is the exception rather than the norm in the compact city, see Van Praagh (2009, 2012).

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