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Oriol Marquet, Isabelle Anguelovski, Samuel Nello-Deakin & Jordi Honey-Rosés

**To cite this article:** Oriol Marquet, Isabelle Anguelovski, Samuel Nello-Deakin & Jordi Honey-Rosés (05 Jun 2024): Decoding the 15-Minute City Debate: Conspiracies, Backlash, and Dissent in Planning for Proximity, Journal of the American Planning Association, DOI: [10.1080/01944363.2024.2346596](https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2024.2346596)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2024.2346596>



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Published online: 05 Jun 2024.



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# Viewpoint

## Decoding the 15-Minute City Debate: Conspiracies, Backlash, and Dissent in Planning for Proximity

Oriol Marquet  [Isabelle Anguelovski](#) [Samuel Nello-Deakin](#) [Jordi Honey-Rosés](#)

### ABSTRACT

Science skeptics have spent years attacking climate science, but it has only been recently that post-COVID-19 conspiracy theorists have directed their attention to local city planning, with misinformation campaigns throwing vitriol at the idea of the *15-minute city* and denouncing planning best practices as a global form of social engineering with hidden agendas to restrict private freedoms. In this context, urban planners and practitioners need to understand the nature of conspiracy claims and distinguish legitimate concerns about the 15-minute city model. As science skeptics and conspiracy theories gain ground in all sectors of our societies, researchers and city planners need to communicate evidence-based decision making and address science-driven concerns.

**Keywords:** 15-minute city, conspiracy theories, policy acceptability, transformative urbanism, urban planning

In early 2023, cities around the world witnessed an outbreak of civic demonstrations against urban planning strategies such as the 15-minute city (15MC). Protestors in British, Canadian, and Spanish cities showed their disapproval toward low traffic neighborhoods and 15MC programs (Anderssen, 2023; Grant, 2023) with accusations that such a plan might allow government to lock residents down in “*Hunger Games*–style districts” (Wainwright, 2003).

Though urban planning has always faced controversy (Norton, 2014), the post-COVID-19 era has brought a new wave of global and coordinated conspiracies, particularly against transformative urbanism initiatives. Critics, including prominent right-wing politicians, conspiracy theorists, and public figures, have denounced the 15MC as a “global socialist ideology” that threatens personal liberties and raise concerns about potential “climate change lockdowns” (Daoiz, 2023).

The 15MC model, the focal point of these protests, aims to enable residents to reach essential destinations within a 15-min walk, fostering human-centric and climate-responsive urban spaces (Allam et al., 2022; Ferrer-Ortiz et al., 2022). This chrono-urbanistic approach, with its emphasis on individual needs (Moreno, 2020) and its easily communicable nature, builds on historical urban philosophies of localized, self-sufficient communities aligning with concepts like Clarence Perry’s neighborhood unit and new urbanism

by emphasizing accessibility-by-proximity (Silva et al., 2023). The broad variability in its definition and implementation initiatives highlights that the 15MC concept is less about rigid policy prescriptions and more about a principle of urban containment and accessibility. However, and despite global scientific support for this vision (Allam et al., 2022), the recent backlash raises questions about how urban planners and cities should respond and how to frame future efforts to address climate change (Marquet et al., 2024).

We distill the main arguments behind this wave of attacks and conspiracies about urban planning and structure the article as follows. First, we briefly summarize recent insights gained by planners in dealing with challenges posed by post-truth narratives. Then, we propose a four-tier categorization for the critiques of the 15MC, ranging from least data-driven and science-based (conspiracy theories) to most substantiated (risks of social exclusion and gentrification), as illustrated in Figure 1. Last, we suggest some strategies on how to address the more extreme conspiracy theories while acknowledging valid concerns about fairness and procedural integrity in planning practices.

### Planning in the Post-Truth Era

Conflicts in urban planning arise from across the political spectrum, involving both left- and right-wing

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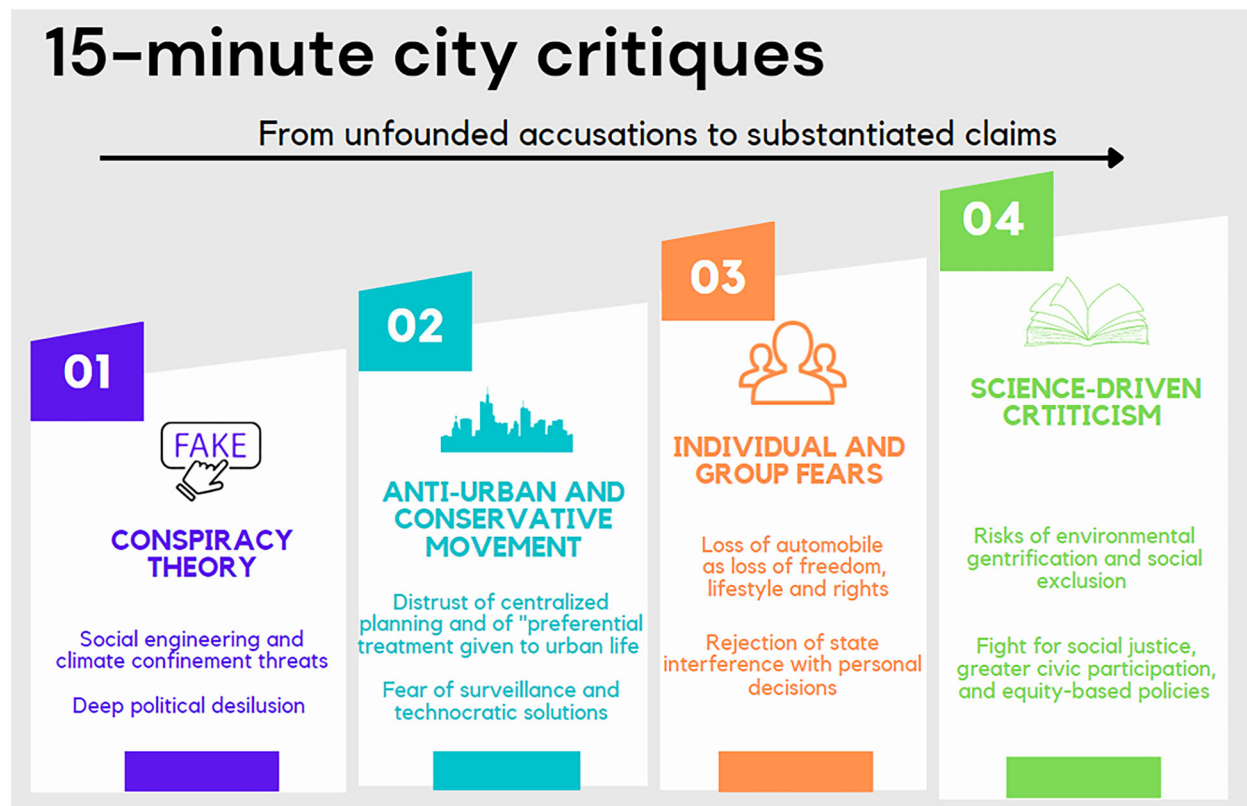


Figure 1. The 15-minute city critiques in four tiers.

community participants and planners, with neither side having exclusive rights over the use of misinformation, false claims, or conspiracy theories (Sager, 2020). Historical analyses of right-wing tactics against progressive planning initiatives put emphasis on Tea Party rhetoric in the United States (Trapenberg Frick, 2016) and several contestation movements in Germany (Dannemann, 2023) and the United Kingdom (Griggs & Howarth, 2008). Norton (2014) and Klein (2023) both found that such conflicts typically escalate rhetorically, accusing sustainability-linked urban plans of social engineering or ecofascism to stir engagement through fear about the societal impacts of those plans and to justify unusual alliances across political lines. Fighting against a grand scheme such as an infrastructure project or a climate bill permits groups with disparate views to unite against what they perceive as a common, overreaching *enemy agenda*, leading to coalitions that might otherwise seem unlikely (Trapenberg Frick, 2018).

In recent months, however, the popularization of post-truth tactics and the COVID-19 experience have triggered significant changes in planning debates and contests. The COVID-19 experience, marked in most countries by the politicization and uneven management of lockdown strategies, has significantly eroded institutional trust while amplifying the rate at which conspiracies spread (Clarke, 2023). Fainstein and Novy (2023)

argued that current post-COVID-19 right-wing conspiracies are marked by their linkage of local planning issues to broader national or global narratives and by a populist rejection of scientific expertise. To this definition Klein et al. (2022) added an underlying commitment to preserving a status quo rooted in automobile dependency. Frontal opposition has been fueled both by rhetorical escalation needed to engage and motivate protesters and by a slippery slope argument (Norton, 2014). Researchers have also found that post-COVID-19 conspiracy theories have introduced a post-truth repertoire of tactics that include a much more frequent use of misinformation and fabrication. Notable examples include the unfounded claim that new light rail construction in Germany would impose an age limit on car drivers or the false assertion that Oxford's (UK) 15MC plan would restrict travel between neighborhoods.

The rise of conspiracy theories against the 15MC model can also be partly attributed to the model marketing success and its adoption by left-wing governments in many cities across the Global North. Conspiracists view the simultaneous adoption of the 15MC model and related measures to reduce vehicle emissions as indicative of a covert global policy agenda: to deprive individuals of their cars. Conspiracists also observe a troubling uniformity in policies that seems to denote a global agenda (Trapenberg Frick et al., 2015).

The effect of these conspiracy theories on planning processes can be substantial. Conspiracy theories have fostered intergroup hostility and promoted feelings of anger (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2018). Given the importance of individual and collective fairness perceptions (Maestre-Andrés et al., 2019) and distribution effects (Semple & Fountas, 2022), as well as partisanship dynamics (Douenne & Fabre, 2020) in policy acceptability, this increase in intergroup hostility has made it harder for people to engage in dialogue, empathize, and assume personal costs in favor of others (Marquet et al., 2024). Beyond the 15MC model itself, the acceptability of urban climate-related policies has depended not only on the perceived efficacy of the policy (Sun et al., 2016) or on policy-specific beliefs (Eriksson et al., 2008) but also on factors such as institutional trust (Lim & Moon, 2022) and procedural legitimacy (Oltra et al., 2021). By exacerbating intergroup differentiation and building on an eroding political trust, conspiracy theories have made it difficult for urban planners to integrate these dissenting groups into the participatory planning process.

However, planners should also recognize that these conspiracy theories often emerge from valid concerns like distrust in elites and feelings of alienation. Recognizing that all conspiracies have ideas and theories behind them (Clarke, 2023) can help planners understand that although conspiracy theorists may misrepresent facts, their emotional grasp often rings true and can sometimes encourage productive reflection by politicians and the wider society.

### Disentangling Conspiracy Theories From Critique

In the following analysis we explore the range of criticisms directed at the 15MC from more unfounded accusations to substantiated claims (Figure 1).

#### *The Scare of Social Engineering and Climate Confinement*

The 15MC concept has recently become intertwined with a broad array of conspiracy theories centering on the theory of a *Great Reset*, which would entail strict home confinement measures imposed by climate-focused authoritarian regimes (Roth, 2021). From this perspective, the 15MC forms part of a greater climate lockdown conspiracy in which governments might bar people from using their cars, eating meat, or traveling outside their assigned districts. This view has been amplified by a loose coalition of anti-lockdown activists, anti-vaxxers, climate deniers, and members of the far right.

The COVID-19 pandemic has left a strong belief among some groups (anti-vaxxers, anti-lockdown

activists) about the existence of hidden nefarious agendas, ranging from vaccines and viruses to climate change plans and population control methods (Pummerer et al., 2022). As demonstrated by Liekefett et al. (2023), confinement was the governmental decision that allowed both left and right to unite in a common position that included links with vaccines and a global cabal. These overarching narratives may appear easy to discredit; however, individuals confronted with evidence that challenges their ideology or interests often experience cognitive dissonance and are also inclined to reject this information to alleviate discomfort (Nwokora, 2024).

#### *Distrust of Centralized Planning and (Re)Evaluation of Urban Life(Styles)*

The ideological opposition to the concept of the 15MC is also in part a reflection of a deeper, long-standing skepticism toward centralized planning and urban life that has been a mainstay in conservative thought. Conservative critics of the 15MC tend to view it through a lens of traditional suspicion toward government-led initiatives and a general distrust of public authorities. Such critical voices often come from a blend of libertarian values, skepticism of technocratic solutions, and fears over increased surveillance (Whittemore & BenDor, 2021). Permeated by a distrust of expert-driven, top-down approaches, these critiques perceive the 15MC as an undue overreach by authorities, infringing on individual freedoms in the name of often uncertain collective goals.

In some parts of the world, fears of centralized urban planning are exacerbated when combined with a cultural tradition of anti-urbanism (Meyer & Graybill, 2016). In this respect, resistance to 15MC plans echoes broader criticisms of urban life that have persisted throughout the 20th century (Conn, 2014). The 15MC concept embodies an urban ideal centered on diversity, community interaction, and an intensified public realm (Moreno et al., 2021) that contrasts with years of urban segregation, suburbanization, and decentralization (Massey & Tannen, 2018). This critique of the 15MC is also rooted in a sense of discontent among certain demographics who feel marginalized by the urban-centric focus of transformative urbanism. Such feelings of distributional unfairness can extend to certain social groups that view the emphasis on creating more feminist and care-driven cities as neglecting more traditional labor- and productivity-driven priorities (Kussy et al., 2023).

#### *The Loss of the Automobile as a Loss of Freedom and Privileges*

Third, opposition to the 15MC comes from not only ideological differences but also from established

automobile-dependent travel and consumption habits (Klein et al., 2022). The prevalence of autocentric planning has led to substantial segments of the population to rely on affordable car ownership, unfettered access to urban areas, and car-related ideas of urban modernity (Mattioli et al., 2020). As a result, transformative urbanism policies that aim to reduce car dominance in cities have often been met with resistance. This reaction has been particularly strong among suburban residents, who tend to overestimate the impact these proposed changes might have on their personal mobility and consumption habits (Bélanger-Gravel et al., 2015). In this context, various cognitive biases, such as hyperbolic discounting, loss aversion, and status quo bias, can significantly influence individual perceptions and decision making.

The prevailing ethos of car use epitomizes a deep-seated culture of individualism in travel behavior. Rooted in liberalism, this approach prioritizes maximizing one's own travel utility, often at the expense of the collective good. When this deeply ingrained individualism clashes with an emerging attitude of communal urbanism represented by the 15MC model, palpable tensions arise. From this perspective, all policies entailing a reduction of space for motorized traffic are seen as negating one's freedom, limiting the ability to choose where and when to go, and confining individuals to unsatisfying modes of transport like public transit. When combined with political conservatism, these views tend to be expressed through a denunciation of political authorities trying to interfere with freedom of personal choices and lifestyles. According to Norton (2014), this resistance is rooted in claims that a car-dependent way of life is based on unassailable rights of private property and freedom. These beliefs have led people to reject the idea that collective decisions can impinge or restrict these perceived inherent rights (Wild et al., 2018).

### ***Risks of Environmental Gentrification and Social Exclusion***

Finally, it is critical to acknowledge criticisms of the 15MC that have been raised concerning its inclusiveness and distributional benefits over time (Figure 1, right panel). For one, critics have argued that neighborhood-based planning styles can contribute to segregation by compartmentalizing the distribution of facilities and impeding open and integrated relationships between neighborhoods (Mehaffy et al., 2015). Likewise, criticisms have emerged regarding the risks of excluding essential workers and working-class residents. With increasing urban housing inequalities, lower-income residents also have much less capacity to choose where and how to

live and work. Mobility justice is a key component of successful and equitable 15MC projects (Anguelovski et al., 2023).

Associated criticisms rooted in environmental gentrification research have pointed to the displacement and exclusion from new environmental amenities suffered by residents who are unable to stay in more livable neighborhoods (Anguelovski et al., 2022). Several procedural criticisms have also been voiced of these new types of transformative urbanism initiatives: namely, that they all share a strong determination by governments to impose a top-down supervisory role on the funding and implementation of policies promoting active travel, which can feel forced (Dudley et al., 2022).

Such concerns often arise from left-leaning political views and are more concerned with issues of equity and the risk of deepening social divides (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017). However, some researchers have found these topics to be the point of encounter where both left- and right-leaning critics can converge and bridge political views against planning efforts. Fainstein and Novy (2023) reported how both left and right were likely to oppose top-down planning by experts when the plans were contrary to their beliefs. Meanwhile, Liekefett et al. (2023) found that COVID-19-related protests united left and right conspiracists and those who were worried by the impacts of preventive measures. Were these unusual alliances to apply in the case of 15MC, they would illustrate what some are calling *diagonalist* reactions, with both left- and right-leaning individuals converging under a common banner of anti-elite, anti-politics, and a persistent defense of individual liberties (Kristensen et al., 2023).

Another diagonalist element that often unites both left and right in a common front is the issue of participation. Critiques from the left often highlight the recent trend in urban planning toward limited, unrepresentative participative approaches. Historical shifts reveal a systemic movement away from open, confrontational forums toward more curated—and controlled—forms of top-down engagement. These methods may inadvertently diminish the potential for genuine participatory democracy by precluding the formation of cohesive opposition or of co-produced planning decisions. Thus, the right criticizes what it perceives as a staged process to facilitate predetermined outcomes oriented toward sustainability goals (Trapenberg Frick et al., 2015). Under this view, the planning process is not perceived as emphasizing participation, consensus-building, and collaboration but rather as mere pretexts to co-opt stakeholders into accepting predetermined policy outcomes.

## Lessons for Urban Planning: Strategies for Confronting and Countering the Conspiracy Narrative

Implementing ideas like the 15MC means rebalancing which urban users or residents planners put at the ideological center of our cities, how equitable our urban environments can be, or how we value the activities that take place within the urban fabric (Marchigiani & Bonfantini, 2022). Though dissenting ideas, protest, and public debates are an inherent part of the urban planning process, the recent uptick of

conspiracy thinking about policies such as the 15MC introduces additional challenges to contemporary urban planning discussions. Table 1 includes a summary of the main criticisms popularly raised against 15MC policies, along with some potential response tactics.

The problem posed by conspiracy theorists monopolizing the debate is that it impedes seeking consensus positions on core goals of the “good city” (Healey, 2015), disrupts the normal functioning of city planning debate, and undermines the healthy back-and-forth between

**Table 1. Breakdown of criticisms, main concerns, and potential response tactics.**

Section	Type of criticism	Political orientation	Main concerns	Response tactics	Evidence basis
Globalism and conspiracy theories	Agenda 2030/globalism conspiracies	Varied, often right-wing	Worry over a loss of sovereignty to a global agenda, with fears of local autonomy being usurped by hidden control measures	Public education, myth debunking	Low, speculative
	Fear of over-regulation and surveillance	Libertarian, privacy advocates	Perceived overregulation and intrusive surveillance that may accompany 15MCs	Policy clarification, safeguards assurance	Moderate, concern-based
Urban planning and conservatism	Distrust in centralized planning	Conservative, libertarian	Centralized planning perceived as a governmental overstep into individual freedoms and local governance	Community engagement, transparency	Moderate, ideological
	Loss of automobile freedom	Suburban, car-dependent	15MC will restrict car usage; seen as an attack on personal mobility and a lifestyle change	Highlight alternative transport benefits	Mixed, projection-based
	Resistance to urban life	Anti-urban, rural	Resistance to urban values that are seen as threatening to local traditions and identities	Address rural concerns, broader dialogue	Varied, cultural
	Technocratic skepticism	Varied	Wariness of decisions made by experts without community input, fearing exclusion of nontechnical perspectives	Integrate lay knowledge, democratize planning	Moderate, participatory concerns
	Populism and anti-elitism	Right-wing, populist	Resentment toward the elites and experts driving planning initiatives, viewed as out of touch with the “common people”	Direct engagement, address economic fears	Low to moderate, populist
Social equity	Environmental gentrification and exclusion	Left-leaning, equity advocates	Fears that urban redesign could lead to displacement of low-income residents and worsen social inequalities	Equity and gentrification assessments and prevention tools, inclusive planning	High, research-based
	Participation and autonomy	Across spectrum	Rejection of top-down approaches that may ignore community needs	Participatory methods, local adaptation	High, empirically grounded

political views over the shape and functions of the city. Discourse coalitions formed against municipal projects often find common ground in opposition but rarely on proactive solutions, leading to tactical coalitions based on reactive and conservative stances that favor vocal denunciations and a maintenance of the status quo (Trapenberg Frick, 2021).

Amplified by the dynamics of social media, these debates further fragment political and civic discourse, reinforcing a polarized environment that hinders dialogue and collaborative problem solving (Kristensen et al., 2023). In the current 15MC debate, the dichotomy appears to end up being not between two contrasting visions of urban development but a clash between a faction advocating for change and another defending the status quo. Amid a housing crisis and the challenges of a neoliberal environment, fears of deteriorating conditions rather than improving ones may drive socioeconomic concerns and a longing for stability in the face of rapid transformation. In any case, this erosion of multiparty, multi-stakeholder communication channels make it difficult to implement any form of communicative planning between parts or any non-Habermasian planning approach other than the rational top-down model.

### ***To Engage Directly With Opposing Views Through Counterarguments and Data***

However, as planning researchers and practitioners, we should avoid the temptation of dismissing opposing views, and we should seek to distinguish and communicate how to disentangle conspiracy theories from legitimate concerns. Though planners might not have the ability to dictate the trajectory of public debates once they enter the realm of social media, they can focus on creating the appropriate counternarratives. These include diversifying the message so that it does not appeal only to specific sectors of society and strengthening the links between planning action such as walkability and accessibility and broader societal goals, such as public health. Prior research on engaging groups resistant to planning has highlighted the importance of identifying factors—like land values and travel times—that can encourage active participation in the planning process (Trapenberg Frick, 2013). Alternatively, applying Fisher and Ury's (1981) principled negotiation to debates on the 15MC offers a path toward dialogue by identifying common interests between critics' and supporters' positions. Yet, this strategy presumes a common ground that may not always be present.

Urban density, land use mix, and proximity continue to be crucial for reducing carbon emissions (Gascon et al., 2019); allowing conspiracies to discredit these urban principles could undermine their

operationalization (and defense as planning objectives). Abandoning terms such as the *15-minute city* or *super-blocks* due to criticism can lead us to a point where we lack the language to properly articulate our planning visions (Anguelovski et al., 2023). Planners and policy-makers need to retain the ability to discern when an issue represents a necessary action for the greater good and when the defense of the status quo extends an existing injustice.

### ***To Translate Planning Models Into Context-Driven and Co-Produced Adaptations***

Planners must be wary of an overly technoscientific approach that fails to incorporate local and resident-driven considerations. Historical analyses of international best planning practices serve as a cautionary tale, highlighting the risks associated with exporting concepts like the 15MC globally without adaptation (Blake et al., 2021). When organizations like C40 Cities emphasize plans like the 15MC over articulated goals such as reducing traffic and emissions for urban residents, this model can appear to critics as an imposition of a one-size-fits-all grand solution. It is thus important to maintain a balance between advocating for model strategies applied elsewhere and allowing flexibility for local, context-driven adaptations.

We advocate for a blend of empirical science-based insights and locally grounded, engaged planning and design methods to accurately identify pressing issues and to assess the outcomes of a genuinely participatory and co-produced planning process. Attention to local needs is important also in terms of politics of knowledge to avoid people feeling that urban planners—with their data and models—are out of touch with the day-to-day realities and concerns of residents.

### ***To Highlight Human Needs, Wellbeing, and Health Benefits***

More broadly, though planners will need to keep working on how to best deal with conspiracy thinking, those advocating for new city models must continue putting human needs, wellbeing, and health at the center, treating the city as an urban common rather than a privatized space. Recent research on transportation planning has shown how positive messaging and education can improve policy acceptability even beyond partisan dynamics (Klein et al., 2022). We should keep working on changing the framing of the issue from that of loss (mobility restrictions for car travel) to one centered on tangible gains that can focus on how changes target the wellbeing of particular groups (schoolchildren affected by air pollution, older people prevented from safely navigating streets). Potential benefits are not only

social group driven; they are public goods and benefits harnessed by the broader population.

As environmental, economic, and inequality issues escalate, mistrust in political processes and social unrest are also likely to grow. Facing these challenges, planners need to equip themselves with the proper analytical and discursive tools. As Table 1 summarizes, planners need to devise specific response tactics for specific concerns and derive them from a variety of evidence. These are likely to include better public engagement frameworks for inclusive and respectful dialogue, enabling a diverse range of voices to be heard. In parallel, planning processes would benefit from a more flexible and adaptable design capable of accommodating a spectrum of views and adjusting to changing circumstances. Finally, developing equity and social impact assessment tools might help ensure that the benefits and burdens of these decisions are distributed equitably among all community members. Because property rights and real estate issues are likely to be long-standing issues in the future, developing specific gentrification impact assessments and land use plans is also recommended (Trapenberg Frick, 2021). Though the incendiary nature of conspiracy theories may elude urban planners' control, planners can at least aim to address legitimate critiques, thereby reducing the fertile ground for such theories to thrive.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**ORIOI MARQUET** ([oriol.marquet@uab.cat](mailto:oriol.marquet@uab.cat)) is a Ramon y Cajal Researcher in the Geography Department and a senior researcher at the Institute of Environmental Science and Technology (ICTA), Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain. **ISABELLE ANGUELOVSKI** ([isabelle.anguelovski@uab.cat](mailto:isabelle.anguelovski@uab.cat)) is an ICREA research professor at ICTA, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain. **SAMUEL NELLO-DEAKIN** ([samuel.nello@uab.cat](mailto:samuel.nello@uab.cat)) is a postdoctoral researcher at the Geography Department, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain. **JORDI HONEY-ROSÉS** ([jordi.honey@uab.cat](mailto:jordi.honey@uab.cat)) is a senior researcher at the ICTA, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain.

#### ORCID

Oriol Marquet  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7346-5664>

#### RESEARCH SUPPORT

This research was co-funded by the European Union (ERC, ATRAPA, 101117700) and the Social Observatory of the La Caixa Foundation as part of the project STEPP (SR22-00147). This work also contributes to the ICTA-UAB María de Maeztu Programme for Units of Excellence of the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (CEX2019-000940-M). J.H.R. and O.M. were supported by the Ramon y Cajal Fellowship (Ministerio de Ciencia y Universidades RYC-2019-027279-I and RYC2020-029441-I, respectively).

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