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Density without Disruption

Roberta Brandes Gratz

For years the control of density has been one of the most powerful rallying cries of neighborhood activists across the U.S. Yet, ever since the onset of urban-renewal, highway-building era following World War II, the lowering of residential densities in American cities and towns has been one of the most significant causes for the declining quality of life they offer. Few public officials and citizens recognize this. Fewer still realize how their well-meaning efforts have often created insurmountable obstacles to the very community reinvigoration they profess to support.

Density is the most crucial, misunderstood and ignored ingredient of a successful community. If real estate's mantra is "location, location, location," urbanism's should be "density, density, density." Someone once said: "it doesn't matter how dense you make it, it is how you make it dense." That is only half right. It matters both how dense you make it and how you make it dense.

Density Wrongly Blamed

As a bugaboo of planners and housing theorists since the middle of the twentieth century, density has at one time or another been blamed for nearly every urban difficulty and social problem. Yet if you look at the cities people find fun to visit — New York, San Francisco, Boston, Seattle, Savannah, Portland — they all have something in common, lots of people living close together. A dense residential population is their anchor — a magnet for new businesses, cultural and entertainment activity, and overall vitality.

Invariably, popular residential neighborhoods in these cities were once connected to commercial areas by street-car and planned and designed for the convenience of the transit-traveling pedestrian, not the urban motorist. These popular neighborhoods also exhibited residential densities higher than any we are building today. And they were composed of an assortment of housing types: multiple- and single-unit buildings, owner-occupied and rental units, high-rise and low-rise.

Of course, density in and of itself is not an automatic plus. A series of sterile high-rise towers may provide density but be unaccommodating to the diverse activities that provide the basis for real community life. The key is in the design.

Perhaps Jane Jacobs said it best forty-odd years ago when she wrote in her now-classic book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, "One reason why low city densities conventionally have a good name, unjustified by the facts, and why high city densities have a bad name, equally unjustified, is that high densities of dwellings and overcrowding of dwellings are often confused. . . . The census definition of overcrowding is 1.5 persons per room or

more. It has nothing to do with the number of dwellings on the land, just as in real life high densities have nothing to do with overcrowding."

Many more dense neighborhoods have self-regenerated against the accepted wisdom of housing and planning experts since Jacobs wrote her first book in 1961. Georgetown, Back Bay, Park Slope, the Mission District, Pioneer Square, the Pearl District, and historic rowhouse neighborhoods around the country stand witness to this trend. Such neighborhoods have been revived despite retaining their pre-war densities and they still do not seem overcrowded. Similarly, many old manufacturing, warehouse, and office districts in dense urban cores are being transformed into popular new neighborhoods.

Overcrowding and Density Are Not the Same

In 1961 Jacobs also pointed out, "Today we are much more apt to find overcrowding at low densities than at high densities. Nor does slum clearance as practiced in our cities usually have anything to do with solving the problem of overcrowding. Instead, slum clearance and renewal typically add to that problem [by lowering the density]."

Today federal housing policies continue to buy into this myth that lowered densities will solve the underlying problem of overcrowding. With or without Section 8 vouchers, the poor rarely find accommodations anywhere but in the next marginal neighborhood.

Federally funded Hope VI projects purposely exhibit lesser densities than the mistakes they are replacing. Some may be architecturally appealing and of mixed incomes — a laudable combination. But in any architectural format, they are the antithesis of community building. If the essentials of community were truly understood, these places would add density, reuse existing nearby commercial streets or provide new ones, allow for mixed uses (whether a corner store or light manufacturing), and leave open the possibility that unanticipated uses might emerge.

Local policies have made present federal policies an even worse mess. A demolition derby seems to be underway in cities like Philadelphia, Detroit, and New Haven, where the notion is that deteriorated housing should be torn down and the land beneath it left vacant pending the arrival of some private developer on a white horse. Such demolition inevitably leads only to further decay and an accelerated cycle of clearance. The hidden agenda is no better than the days of slum clearance during which Jacobs was writing.

Of course, it is impossible to generalize about density. But as Jacobs pointed out: "Proper city dwelling densities are a matter of performance." By contrast, all over the

country today, we are building suburban projects in urban settings — with the garage door more important than the front door (a trend damaging in either an urban or suburban setting). Such suburban models are being rationalized as “what people want,” when in fact they are simply what is most expedient to produce.

The truth is that what people want is a decent place to live, not just a suburban version of a decent place to live. Neighborhood shopping and efficient transportation — something all cities once had and could have again — these things don’t stand a chance in the world we are creating.

Solutions Emerge

It was within this context that the jury selected the Accessory Dwelling Unit prototype of CCS Architecture for a planning award. Such work stands as a provocation to cities everywhere that they can do a better job of community building.

In any existing residential district, the most acceptable strategy for adding density will usually be infill design that does not require neighborhood disruption. In this regard, most neighborhoods with some measure of single- or two-family housing could increase the number and diversity of residents by allowing an additional, self-contained housing unit that is secondary to the main residence. In many neighborhoods, existing garages can be converted. But even where no accessory structure already exists, the CCS design shows how a “good-neighbor” ADU is a worthy (and attainable) challenge that allows a reweaving of more community-friendly patterns.

The CCS prototype shows other things as well. As a design strategy, it illustrates how to accommodate a variety of recycled and renewable materials and encourage green-building techniques. And it shows how increased density can be achieved with only low-rise building, another overlooked or misunderstood reality. In fact, low-rise structures dominate many of the most in-demand dense neighborhoods today. Interesting combinations of two-, three-, and four-family housing, built close together and mixed with slightly higher but still small apartment houses, can produce considerable density without seeming overcrowded. Throw in streets of mixed-use buildings and converted white elephants that combine affordable and market-rate apartments, and one has the basis for true urbanism.

The CCS prototype is further interesting because it is particularly (but not exclusively) suitable for an alley location, a traditional feature of many single- and two-family home districts prior to World War II. Such a unit can easily serve as a live-work space, a “granny” or “in-law”

unit, an apartment for a student or young single person, or space for seasonal visitors. These are often just the kind of people an established community will want to house if it also wants to maintain a nearby walkable shopping district. And as a public-policy response, an ADU program tied to published prototypes is easier for existing residents to accept than the abstract mechanism of a zoning change, which increases potential density without providing any real sense for what the results may look like.

The jury deliberated over whether the CCS prototype, and by extension the entire City of Santa Cruz ADU program, could be applied elsewhere in the country. In Santa Cruz it is true that home values have accelerated beyond average incomes for a number of local reasons — growth pressures from increasing enrollment at the University of California Santa Cruz, the city’s proximity to Silicon Valley, and its status as a summer beach town, to name a few. But the fundamental wisdom of the city’s commitment to a program of infill housing, as a way to provide new affordable rental units producing additional income for sometimes marginal homeowners, carried the day.

True, Santa Cruz may have more single-family housing than other cities, and there may be a built-in market for ADU-type housing. But conditions always vary from district to district, city to city. With a little imagination, the CCS approach was deemed eminently adaptable to urban districts elsewhere, particularly ones with underappreciated and underused alleys.