



Viewpoint

Deconstructing density: Strategic dilemmas confronting the post-apartheid city

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ABSTRACT

Public authorities in many countries around the world are seeking to raise urban densities. Residential densification is particularly important in South Africa because of the colonial and apartheid legacy of sprawling, fragmented, racially divided cities. This paper examines the case for densifying central Cape Town and provides a framework to help deconstruct the concept and explore some of the policy challenges faced. It focuses on the bold aim to treble the area's population within 10 years, and identifies issues where further consideration and public debate are required for how this can be achieved in a way that is desirable, affordable and fair. A key message is the need to understand both the composition of demand for central city living and the challenges involved in supplying suitable housing and amenities at higher densities. The level of social inequality in the city poses greater complications than elsewhere.

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1. Introduction

Efforts to raise urban population densities are growing in many parts of the world (Newton, 2010; Ng, 2010). This is related to widespread claims that a more compact urban form can make more efficient and intensive use of urban infrastructure and reduce the carbon impact of car travel (Howley, Scott, & Redmond, 2009; Jenks, Burton, & Williams, 1996; Newton, 2008; Urban Task Force, 1999, 2005; Willis, 2008; for more sceptical views, see Gordon, 2008; Whitehead, 2009). There are also broader arguments that higher urban densities can support more productive economies and more vibrant and inclusive communities by bringing people and firms into closer proximity, thereby improving the opportunities for social interaction and exchange of ideas (Carlino, Chatterjee, & Hunt, 2007; Parkinson et al., 2006; Storper & Venables, 2004; World Bank, 2009).

In most cities with market-oriented economies, the level of population density tends to decline with distance from the city centre (Bertaud & Malpezzi, 2003; Clark, 1951; Gordon, 2008; Muth, 1969). The standard explanation runs as follows. Transport costs limit how far people are willing to travel to work. They trade off living space against access to jobs and amenities. Housing densities rise closer to centres of activity because competition for land forces prices higher and encourages developers to economise on land. Higher-income groups live further out because they can afford more land and to commute by car, except where lifestyle preferences differ or public housing policies interfere. Over time, the population density of the city core can fall as incomes rise and household size contracts.

South African cities are unusual in two respects (Bertaud, 2002; Bertaud & Malpezzi, 2003; South African Cities Network (SACN), 2006; Tonkin, 2008). First, their average population density is low compared with cities in other countries with similar incomes. Second, the density profile is inverted so that it rises with distance from the centre. This is related partly to the legacy of colonial and apartheid rule, and to subsequent difficulties in altering established urban development patterns (Dewar, 2000; Harrison, Todes, & Watson, 2008; Pillay, Tomlinson, & du Toit, 2006; Turok & Parnell, 2009). Yet, there are recent signs of renewed interest in counteracting the sprawling built form of Cape Town. Two different plans have sought to move densification up the policy agenda, by establishing goals that appear to be very bold. One seeks to treble the central city population within 10 years (Cape Town Partnership, 2008) and the other aims to double the average housing density of the city as a whole (City of Cape Town, 2009).

This paper provides a framework for investigating the issues involved in central city densification. Drawing on related research in other countries, I raise several considerations that have been neglected locally. Densification is a complex, multi-layered notion open to ambiguity and misinterpretation. Different types of density target have contradictory requirements and outcomes. To treble the central city population implies far-reaching socio-economic changes beyond building more apartment blocks and promoting infill. I also examine the rationale for raising densities, since this affects strategic dilemmas that need to be confronted. I argue that residential densification should be seen as a broad developmental

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issue and located within a city-wide and national context, rather than essentially a matter of physical investment and neighbourhood alteration. A density strategy should provide the means to shift the growth trajectory of a city in a more efficient, equitable and/or sustainable direction. The concerns raised in the paper are of course relevant to contexts beyond South Africa, especially where density plans have not delivered the outcomes expected (e.g. Howley et al., 2009; Ng, 2010; Unsworth, 2007).

2. Urban density in South Africa

Urban housing markets in South Africa were severely disrupted by colonial and apartheid restrictions on where people could live (South African Cities Network (SACN), 2004, Pillay et al., 2006, Naude, 2008, OECD, 2008). Dramatic examples were the forced removals of tens of thousands of non-whites from high density central locations such as District Six (Cape Town) and Sophiatown (Johannesburg) to peripheral townships such as Mitchells Plain and Soweto. Strict residential controls also prevented black migrants to the cities from living close to employment centres, and buffer zones of unused land were created between racial communities to reinforce segregation.

Since the demise of Apartheid, state rules about the invasion of vacant land have generally prevented unlawful increases in inner city populations. Conflicts among the stakeholders and protracted legal disputes over land claims have delayed redevelopment of areas such as District Six (Boraine, 2010; Le Grange & Mammon, 2010). In other well-located areas of the city, land-use regulations and enshrined property rights have prevented the sub-division of large residential plots. Upper income groups in accessible inner suburbs have also resisted attempts to alter zoning schemes to build at higher densities. Most of the mass low cost housing built by the state has been on cheap land on or beyond the urban fringe (Boraine et al., 2006; Department of Housing, 2004; OECD, 2008; SACN, 2006; Van Donk, Swilling, Pieterse, & Parnell, 2008; Turok, 2001). The developers of higher income housing have continued to extend the suburbs in former 'white' parts of the city, adding to low density sprawl.

Consequently, the average population density of South African cities is low by international standards. Table 1 provides some evidence suggesting that it is less than half that of other middle and low income countries, and lower than the average of cities in high income countries. More detailed estimates of a smaller sample of 48 world cities by Bertaud and Malpezzi (2003) reinforce this finding. In fact, Cape Town has the lowest density of any city in their sample outside the United States. The legacy of sprawling, fragmented, racially divided cities also explains why promoting more equitable, efficient and sustainable cities is an important national aspiration, but complicated for a variety of reasons.

Urban integration and densification have been identified as government objectives since 1994. For example, the 1994 Housing White Paper, 1995 Development Facilitation Act, 1997 Housing Act, 1997 Urban Development Framework and 1998 Local Govern-

ment Act advocated higher densities for more efficient use of public infrastructure and socio-economic development (Tonkin, 2008). In Cape Town, the 2001 Metropolitan Spatial Development Framework suggested increasing densities along corridors and nodes to contain suburban expansion and protect natural resources. The 2005 Western Cape Spatial Framework advocated raising the existing average density of 10–13 dwellings per hectare (dph) to a target of 25 dph. This is widely believed to be the threshold for viable public transport (City of Cape Town, 2009).

In practice, there has been little political appetite to go beyond these expressions of intent to pursue densification more actively (Dewar, 2000; Harrison et al., 2008; OECD, 2008; SACN, 2006; Turok & Parnell, 2009). Such ideas have been unpopular with ratepayers and resisted by private developers and their financiers (Goven, 2010; Swilling, 2010). In the absence of countervailing pressures for more contained and integrated urban development, decision-makers have considered matters of urban form and spatial structure too complex and too sensitive. They have been relegated below the maintenance of existing systems and the delivery of more housing and related services, almost wherever the location and whatever the form. It is "so much easier just to respond to development applications rather than put in the extra energy to design positive futures" (Swilling, 2010, p. 235).

Two recent spatial plans in Cape Town indicate new interest in density, with potentially significant practical consequences. One is a draft Central City Development Strategy led by the influential Cape Town Partnership (2008) comprising major public and private stakeholders. Its main goal is to boost the central area population by 100,000 within 10 years. This means almost trebling the number of existing residents from 55,000. The central city covers a large area including the CBD, Waterfront and surrounding districts from Green Point in the West to Woodstock in the East. Local neighbourhoods vary from prosperous to run-down. The area generates 40% of business turnover in the city and is the destination for 200,000 daily commuters, two-thirds of whom travel by private car (Boraine, 2010). The likelihood of gridlock on the main highways might be averted if more commuters lived in the city core. The Central City Strategy is best regarded as a statement of vision and aspiration, rather than a concrete plan. Most of its proposals (see Fig. 1) are illustrative and designed to capture the imagination, rather than to set out a detailed programme of action.

The second document is a draft Densification Strategy produced by the Spatial Planning and Urban Design Department of the City Council (City of Cape Town, 2009). It starts by recognising that the physical extent (land area) of the city has increased by more than 200% over the last 30 years, while the population has increased by 125%. Consequently, the average population density has fallen from 52 persons per hectare to 39 (City of Cape Town, 2009). The document then explores different forms of building that deliver higher densities and outlines major considerations affecting appropriate density levels in different kinds of locations across the city. Several potential policy mechanisms are mentioned, including changes in land-use and building regulations, a tougher

Table 1
Density of world cities (population per square kilometre).

High income countries	Density	Middle and low income countries	Density	South Africa	Density
Asia	7000	India	15,000	Cape Town	3950
Japan	4200	China	7350	Ethekwini	3500
Western Europe	3150	Russia	4900	Tshwane	2750
Canada	1600	Rest of Asia	8100	Johannesburg & Ekurhuleni	2500
Australia	1450	Africa	8150	Nelson Mandela Bay	2100
United States	1100	South & Central America	6250		
Average	3100		8050		2900

Source: Demographia (2009).

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