

August 2002

Dense, Denser, Denser Still

Perceptions can mislead when it comes to units per acre.

By Ruth Eckdish Knack, AICP

It's hard to believe what the land-use contrarians have been telling us for years: that Los Angeles is one of the densest places in the U.S. But that's what *USA Today* reported last February after ranking the Census Bureau's metropolitan statistical areas according to the percentage of population living at densities of over 1,000 per square mile. L.A. came out on top, denser than New York, Chicago, or San Francisco.

Not what we'd expect, but little is clear-cut when it comes to density. "Density is an emotional thing masquerading as a scientific ratio," says California architect Alex Seidel. "In one environment, 10 units an acre might be perceived as really dense. Yet in another 50, or even 80 units, might be acceptable." Preconceived notions about what density looks like account for the difference, he suggests.

To convince people that density is not the bugaboo they thought it was, groups like California's Local Government Commission are taking an educational approach. The nonprofit group, formed in the late '70s to deal with the problems that beset local governments, has developed a presentation to show its members and others how more compact, higher density development could help revitalize their communities.

According to LGC land-use and transportation director Paul Zykofsky, AICP, the need for such basic education became clear in the early '90s, following the release of a set of guidelines for sustainable communities called the Ahwahnee Principles. The guideline that raised hackles was the call for compact development.

"We started to hear back from our local government members," he says. "They feared that the idea would simply not sell in their communities." With a grant from the regional Environmental Protection Agency office, the commission began searching for ways to explain the benefits of higher density development. (LGC won an APA public education award in 1997.)

LGC uses a visual preference survey to stimulate discussion. "We pair images to show different types of housing at different densities," says Zykofsky. "People start seeing solutions to problems like parking." More solutions are offered in a series of case studies of higher density housing. "A lot of examples are from the West Coast," Zykofsky says, "but my sense is that housing is pretty much the same all over."

Talk about it

"You'd be surprised what happens when you get people to come out and talk," says Jamie Greene, AICP, a principal of the Columbus, Ohio, consulting firm ACP-Visioning & Planning.

Generally, says Greene, citizens don't use the word density. "They talk about the quality of the environment and about feeling safe." That came out in a project ACP is doing for the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission, which wanted to find out how people felt about transit-oriented development.

"We brought a group of randomly selected people and showed them images of different development patterns, including some higher density examples. Some said, 'I think those lots are too close,' but others said they liked the idea of being part of a neighborhood," Greene says.

In Upper Arlington, an affluent but landlocked old suburb of Columbus, ACP was asked to prepare a plan for a town center with public and private uses, a project that would require higher density. "We always start with a blank slate," says Greene. "We try to discover what the community's values are before making a proposal. In this case, what they wanted was a civic gathering place." After 17 public meetings, a redevelopment plan for 38 acres of office, retail, and civic development was approved by residents and adopted by the city council.

In June, the council adopted a unified development ordinance that raises the intensity of the site from 24 to 76. "I attribute our success to the very deliberate public involvement process," says Greene. "We talked about basic values and about design, not about density." A major developer already has an option on the commercial part of the site, and a funding initiative for a town center is scheduled to appear on the fall ballot.

Visualize

In architect Alex Seidel's view, "too dense" is not just a question of how much density per acre. "Too dense relates to how a project is designed," he says. "It's a question of creating an environment of value, a place where you want to be."

His San Francisco firm, Seidel/Holzman, has had notable success in getting California communities to accept higher density (up to 85 units per acre in one development). The trick? "It really has a lot to do with showing people lots of examples — photos, drawings, plans. You can't talk in abstractions. You have to say, here's what this thing can look like, here's how it can work."

Ten years ago, even that approach didn't necessarily work, Seidel says. A massive shortage of moderately priced housing has caused a major shift in attitudes, he says. So have two-hour commutes, changes in family structure, and a state law requiring every community to assess its capacity for additional housing. All that has brought innovations in housing design and in zoning.

Seidel offers as an example his firm's Fruitdale Station project in San Jose, which is sponsored by the city's redevelopment agency. It's a reuse of a 13-acre K-Mart site, most of it a parking lot. "We're designing 445 mostly market-rate rental units on four levels, along with 15,000 square feet of retail and 250,000 square feet of office space, all surrounding a one-acre park. We're intensifying a really low-intensity site and creating greater quality at the same time," he says.

In this case, the higher density is driven by the extension of a light rail line and a planned new station. The project required a general plan amendment and new zoning. "It was a lengthy process but a fairly smooth one," says Seidel, because it is city policy in San Jose to increase density near transit stops.

Still, he says, "there's a lot of complexity to designing projects like this," particularly when it comes to parking. In this case, parking will be below grade, and it will be shared, allowing the city to reduce the number of spaces required by 15 percent.

A combination of education and inventive design can make higher density acceptable, says Seidel. But not everyone is comfortable with the idea. Seidel recently was asked by a county redevelopment agency to talk about new ideas in housing, including density. He was stunned, he says, when his contact at the agency said, "There's only one thing. Don't use the word."

Try a little green

Rob Inerfeld, AICP, believes that making communities more appealing is the way to sell density. Inerfeld is the director of Community Greens, an 18-month-old nonprofit initiative based in Washington, D.C., that promotes the idea of transforming the center of residential blocks into shared open space.

Its founder is William Drayton, a former management consultant who was inspired by his own Manhattan block and its common backyards.

"Our premise," says Inerfeld, "is that many people flee to the suburbs for the greenery. If we can create green spaces in cities, that's a way to keep them." A case in point: Montgomery Park, a block of five-story rowhouses, dating from the 1860s, in Boston's South End. In recent years, cars have been banned from the alley and landscaping installed. Residents "traded in a parking lot for a park," says Inerfeld. The result: Real estate agents say buyers pay a five percent premium to live on the block.

Inerfeld is currently working with public officials and community groups in Oakland, Pasadena, Hartford, Chicago, and other cities to stimulate more community green projects.

Going by the numbers

"People who scream that something is too dense have to define their terms," says Stuart Meck, FAICP, the principal investigator for APA's Growing Smart project. "There's net density, which includes only the privately owned part of the site, and gross density, which includes publicly owned streets and so on.

"Sometimes," he adds, "comprehensive plans aren't clear about which term they mean." In Meck's view, "net density is a more accurate way of characterizing development." It's also the standard recommended for a land-use element in the *Growing Smart Legislative Guidebook*. "That's to keep the plan consistent with the zoning ordinance, which regulates both private and public land," he says.

As to the larger question of how much density is just right, Meck says, "Growing Smart is neutral on this point. It is one of those things for which there is no right answer, although the guidebook gives you plenty of tools — including density bonuses, urban growth areas, and transfer of development rights — that allow you to have compact

development if that's what you want."

The guidebook does, however, explain how to measure density. That's in the section on calculating the amount of land that goes into urban growth areas. "Urban growth areas establish a minimum density that must be achieved over time," says Meck. "That means that all new development has to be above such and such a figure. Or you can say that, on average, development has to be of this density."

Meck suggests that most of the hysterical reactions to density are caused by simple ignorance of the meaning of the term. "I think people have no idea of what is high, medium, and low density," he says. "They hear four units an acre, and they say that's high density. And I say baloney. That's a density at which you find single-family homes."

The answer, he says, is to establish a common vocabulary. "In my opinion, which is based on my practice in Ohio and Tennessee, I would say low density is one to seven dwelling units per acre, medium density is seven to 14 per acre, and high density is 14 and over. These numbers may seem arbitrary to some, but they generally correspond with what Kevin Lynch said in his classic book, *Site Planning*, in which he analyzes different types of development."

Talk up the benefits

Other strategists also advise that planners rethink their approach. "Get away from the technical definitions of density and talk about the benefits," says Peter Smirniotopoulos, whose Alexandria, Virginia, firm does strategic planning for private- and public-sector clients. Smirniotopoulos is a former redevelopment official for the city.

"We always hear from people that they want a cafe, a bakery, and a bookstore. But all these businesses depend on a certain amount of street traffic. They're a function of density. We try to get people to understand that you need a certain amount of density at a certain household income within a certain radius to support a grocery store.

"Get away from X units per acre," he says, "and get to a definition that will resonate with people: 'At this level we can support this ... or that.'"

He loves New York

In a new book called *Cities in Full*, published earlier this year by APA's Planners Press, Steve Belmont defends higher density as a way of shaping urban neighborhoods.

Belmont is an unabashed city lover. Cities, he writes, "have such innate land wealth that they could control their own future. Instead, they're locked into their low densities, and growth is increasingly forced into suburbs."

One city has largely escaped this consequence, and that's New York, where Belmont, an architect, lives part of the year. "My neighborhood at the eastern tip of Midtown Manhattan is as dense as a neighborhood can be. Yet it's similar in many ways to Henning, Minnesota, the small town I grew up in — or at least the way it used to be. We can walk to everything, without depending on a car. There's so much vitality." In contrast, Minneapolis, where he practices, "insists on maintaining obsolete, low-density zoning."

To restore cities, we need to exploit their great potential, Belmont writes. His book outlines the essential elements for revitalization, including recentralizing commerce, housing, and transportation infrastructure.

He classifies urban neighborhoods into three types. "Gray zones," he writes, are too low in density to sustain two essential elements of urban life: neighborhood retailing and good transit. "Green zones" are also low density, but they offer parks and other natural features and thus can compete with the suburbs. "Gold zones" are moderate- or high-density neighborhoods that offer superior amenities and fine housing. Manhattan's Upper East Side is an example.

Manhattan densities, especially those of the Upper East Side, are extreme by American standards, Belmont writes. But they share some characteristics of other densely populated places. They promote transit use and pedestrian activity. They foster safety and a sense of security, day and night. They generate and sustain a rich diversity of commercial and cultural amenities. And they do not generate high volumes of vehicular traffic. In Belmont's view, these neighborhoods have a lot to teach us.

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