

The Business of Densification: Institutions, Actors, and Outcomes in the Transformation of Urban Settlements

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Rationale

Many states and cities worldwide have introduced densification policies over the past twenty years (Dembski et al., 2020, e.g., UK, Germany, Switzerland, U.S. cities). Densification – initially an ecological concept and policy that has been normatively positioned as response to global environmental debates of the 1960s and 70s (Kahn, 2000; Holden, 2004; Angelo & Wachmuth, 2020) – aims to transform urban settlements with the aim to increase environmental sustainability (e.g., limiting land uptake, reducing need to travel by car). Indeed, the dense city (in the US also termed “new urbanism” or “smart growth”, “Stadt der kurzen Wege” in Germany) is a concept that evolved in the UK during the 1960s as parts of wider efforts to combat resource depletion. The authors of relevant studies argued that compactness of the built environment – generally defined as “an increase in density of units in a given area” (Bokyo & Cooper, 2011: 47) – would slow down urban sprawl in order to limit settlement expansion and to ensure sustainable urban growth. As a consequence, many advantages of the dense city model have been highlighted in the past few decades. They include, for instance, reduced fuel, energy and air pollution (Ewing, 1997), the support of public transport, walking and cycling modes of mobility (Squires, 2002), or more efficient utility and infrastructure provision (Frey, 1999). Hence, the dense city has become a physical and political response to many urban challenges. It has emerged as a synonym for “the sustainable city” (Neuman, 2005:17).

However, in densifying cities, the implementation of densification policy objectives mostly relies on the transformation of the existing old, and therefore affordable, housing stock, through urban upgrading and the replacement and renovation of buildings (Burton, 2000; Searle & Filion, 2011; Touati-Morel, 2015). This bears the risk that sitting residents face negative social consequences in the form of eviction and displacement (Aalbers, 2017; Christophers, 2022). Vulnerable resident groups – such as older people, migrants, or households with children – may no longer be able to afford central locations, or experience unstable or insecure housing conditions (Lees & White, 2020; Kadi et al., 2022). A scenario that is highly unsustainable (Debrunner et al., 2024).

So far, studies on densification have primarily considered the process as technological, architectural, or design-based problem (e.g., Bibby et al., 2020; Broitman & Koomen, 2015; Kytä et al., 2013). However, systematic and comparative knowledge on local governance processes and their impact – regarding the integration of environmental and social sustainability goals – is still lacking. This Special Issue (SI) contributes to examining densification and urban transformations by analyzing densification from a locally sensitive actors-oriented and socio-political perspective. The point of departure is that densification per se does not necessarily lead to sustainable outcomes in terms of social inclusion, cohesion, or community stability – but instead is often practiced as a ‘business’ that is dominated by powerful, resource-rich, and technocratic actors (Debrunner, 2024). These governance arrangements tend to prioritize urban growth objectives (e.g., Logan & Molotch, 1987), and to exclude diverse and community-oriented voices (Madden & Marcuse, 2016; Scally & Tighe, 2022; Lemanski, 2022). The articles of this SI cover densification processes in diverse cities worldwide. They politicize this ‘business of densification’ by examining how the densification process is negotiated, governed, planned, and implemented by the different actors involved.

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