

URBAN LAND REFORM IN AFRICA: DENSITY IS NOT THE ENEMY

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Scottsdene development, Cape Town 2018 (Calgro M3, South Africa)

BUSINESSREPORT

June 2018

Cities have been the place of opportunity for humankind since the origin of the idea. The combination of sharing infrastructure and joining forces created the critical mass needed for invention and the progress of society. Modern times with rapid population growth meant cities became the refuge for the majority of people on earth, with projections that the current 55% of people living in cities will increase to 68% by 2050 (UN report, May 2018). This will mean that over 2/3rds of all people on earth will live in cities. It might not sound so different from what we are seeing in mega cities around the world at the moment, but when you factor in the additional prediction that most of this urbanisation will take place in Africa, we need to take note.

People think density is a problem of urbanisation, but really it is the solution.

Without it, urbanisation will only mean the urban sprawl will continue and the possible advantages of living in a city becomes marginalised and miniscule.

Unfortunately, this is the current situation in South African planning, with the poor and the economically vulnerable placed at the outer edges of our cities. To get to economic opportunity, too much time and money must be spent on transit, basically ensuring that the status quo cannot change. Moving people closer to the centre of cities thus makes good sense – but this is only step one. To really experience the advantages of city living, the real key word is “density”.

Defined as the number of people per square meter in a certain area, higher densities are unfortunately often perceived as slum areas. However, this is a wrong perception, mostly due to bad planning. In cities, density should equal opportunity, not decay.

The trick is to execute density well and to be prepared for it. “Smart density” is already becoming the new standard around the world, as it should be. Even UN Habitat is propagating high density development as one of the five strategies to ensure the sustainability of neighbourhoods. The other strategies that are needed to work in conjunction with density is the absolute necessity to limit land use specialization, making sure that mixed-land use is present combined

with the accompanying and social mix and ensuring that adequate space is available for streets and lastly an efficient street network.

In other words - if you bring people to the inner city, make sure that there are work and amenities such as schools, clinics, and libraries in the same area. Design it in such a way that it is easy to reach with roads and walkways and remember that the people using these city structures are mostly pedestrians.

Pedestrians are good for cities on many levels. In planning speak they "interact with the surroundings" – meaning that they speak to each other, stop along the way to make a purchase, sit on a park bench, i.e. do what people do. And although this might sound like common sense, the reality is that unfortunately this is not always appreciated through the design of the surroundings. Pedestrians need shelter from rain and, in our sunny country, also from the sun. Pedestrians need to feel safe when crossing a street and have areas where they can access other modes of transport if needed - get on a bus, train, or taxi to go further than just walking distance.

Subsequently, Transport Orientated Design (TOD) should always form part of urban planning - making sure that pedestrians have access to other transport options within walkable distances. Placing housing within these distances from TOD's is one of the best options to ensure that everyone has access to economic opportunity.

An exercise we did in-house a couple of years ago, proved a great learning – by mapping and measuring all the (then) open spaces/under-developed space within in a three-kilometre radius of the inner city of Pretoria and calculating a relative high-density development on each one, we could fit almost 3 million people close to the inner city. Particularly interesting given that we used a density of about 250 dwelling units per hectare - still conservative for high density, with about 1125 people per hectare, whereas Sao Paulo sits at 6800/ha and Paris at 3700/ha currently). Imagine what this could mean for our capitol city in terms of available opportunities and creating real "urbanity."

Not all people are the same, therefore their housing needs and what they can afford, differ. Availability and affordability should be determined by need, and we know that South Africa

has a gap in the housing market - aptly named the Missing Middle".

"Missing Middle Housing" is a range of multi-unit or cluster housing types compatible in scale with single-family homes. Getting the funding for such housing types is a common concern in the housing sector and should receive more attention.

Ultimately, providing housing for people inside the city is good for the city because it simultaneously saves and makes money.

To quote The Smart Prosperity Institute (Yes, there is such a thing. It is a whole movement-the cost of sprawl. com): "Urban density provides economies of agglomeration - the fixed costs of infrastructure are spread over more businesses and households, which reduces each one's costs. Living and working closer together also has labour benefits. With more potential workers to choose from, businesses get better choice of employees and higher labour productivity, and employees benefit from more choices of work. Urban density also makes it easier for firms to access suppliers, customers, and specialized knowledge. And we all benefit from knowledge spillovers that happen within sectors and between sectors when businesses and people work closely together."

Sadly, this is not new information in the South African context - we all know of this. In fact, our regulations and planning documents all acknowledge this - from the National Development Plan (NDP) to the local Spatial Development Plans (SDP's) for each city - our vision for the future is about making the inner city more liveable, more connected, more resilient.

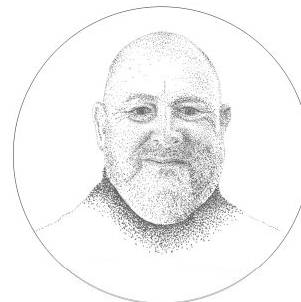
And to be fair, there are initiatives working to achieve this goal - in Gauteng the HDA, the JDA, JOSHCO and SHRA and even some private developers are really trying to make a difference. The biggest obstacle that prevent more urban living is the perceptions of people themselves.

How do we change all of this? Show them the money. Yes, by all means keep the debate going, but in our current society no ideological or political argument are up to the challenge. The argument should be mathematical, with logical costs and implications measured and shown - living in the city is better for your bank balance, and for the cities.

By all means embark on urban

land reform but ensure that what you are providing in return is in fact urban in nature. Otherwise we are just repeating the past and the whole exercise is void. Urban land reform should benefit all - especially the city itself.

Author Biography: Gary White



Gary White is a registered Architect and Urban Designer. He promotes strategies for sustainable urban environments in Southern Africa and applies the principles of New Urbanism in all the Urban Design initiatives he drives.

He was awarded for excellent work by the Charter of New Urbanism, USA in 2006 for the design of the new urban community, Cabinda, in Angola, in 2012 for the design of the new urban community, Verkykerskop, South Africa and in 2016 for a large-scale urban development called Southern Farms, south of Johannesburg, South Africa.

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Dalena Beyers is a registered architect, and Urban and Regional Planner with special interest in ethics and policy development. She has a background in philosophy and art history.

Dalena completed her studies at the University of the Free State (2004), where she was the best overall student in Architecture (SACAP: medal). She also won the prize for best dissertation for her Masters in Urban Planning in the same year.

CATEGORY:
Sustainable Design