Dialogues in Human Geography

Commentary

Density and the compact city

Dialogues in Human Geography
2023, Vol. 13(1) 35–38

DOI: 10.1177/20438206221144821
journals.sagepub.com/home/dhg


Colin McFarlane
Durham University, UK

Abstract
The 'compact city' agenda has become commonplace and is often presented as an urban 'good' in mainstream urban research, policy, and practice. Haarstad et al.'s intervention aims to bring critical geographical research to this debate, and is a very welcome one. In this response, I reflect on the debates on the compact city, consider its links to research on high density urbanisms, and present some questions for taking this critical urban debate forward.

Keywords
Compact city, critical geography, density

Despite its prevalence in mainstream urban thinking, policy, and practice, the compact city agenda has received little critical attention from Geographers. Too often, versions of compact urbanism are presented as a straightforward good (Perez, 2020). In their paper, Haarstad et al. (2023) set out a welcome response, bringing together a useful set of resources through which urban geographical research might respond and perhaps begin to develop alternatives. Their focus on the commons, metabolism, and antagonism is a welcome and useful starting point of inter-related conceptual approaches for taking stock of what different versions of compact urbanism do and do not offer the city and urban life.

It is not difficult to see why compact urbanism has proven such a seductive idea. If urban sprawl is often linked to car use and geographically dispersed services, compactness offers the possibility of lower carbon and closer amenities. The idea is also closely indexed to historical debates about social cohesion, creativity, and economic dynamism, often linked in particular to Jane Jacobs's hugely influential writing and campaigning (e.g. 1962).

To take just one amongst countless possible examples, the recent UN-Habitat (2022) World Cities Report, *Envisaging the Future of Cities*, views sprawl as 'dysfunctional' and unsustainable, and argues for land use policies that promote compactness. Neighbourhoods are positioned as central here, especially mixed and green neighbourhoods with walkable access to everyday needs such as affordable food and health provisions. The influential 2016 *New Urban Agenda*, adopted at the Habitat III conference, made similar arguments. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for all that higher densities were cast as viral hazards to be avoided at all costs, there was an intensifying of calls for versions of the 15 or 20-min city, from Paris and Portland to Melbourne.

As Haarstad et al. note, it would be a mistake to ignore the potentials of compactness across

Corresponding author:
Colin McFarlane, Department of Geography, Durham University, DH13LE, Durham, UK.
Email: colin.mcfarlane@durham.ac.uk

ecological, social, and economic registers. Most urbanists can point to actual real-world historical successes in compact urbanism from Berlin to Mumbai. However, Haarstad et al. are right to argue that the contemporary discourse of compact urbanism, and many of the projects put to work in its name, are often very far from ecologically progressive or socially inclusive (Wachsmuth et al., 2016). Too often, they are greenwashed, and end up in fact excluding or displacing along lines of class, race, and ethnicity.

While organisations like UN-Habitat are typically more careful, grounded and critical when they argue for compact cities, too often proponents and proposals black-box key questions. Compact for whom, in what form, where, and with what social and ecological consequences? How will the social or ecological value of compactness be measured? Compact urban developments in central London, for instance, may occasionally contain buildings that are relatively low carbon, but the lifestyles of the residents and the building functionality may well be anything but, while the housing costs are typically prohibitive to the majority of Londoners. If you look for it, you will also find evidence that vilified sprawl can also itself be low carbon, particularly if well connected on public transit systems. Meanwhile, changes in energy generation systems and the development of smart and micro-grids, and electric vehicles, may mean that dispersed urban forms are sometimes less energy intensive (Ahmadian et al., 2019).

Haarstad et al. state that 'the question seems to be less whether cities will become more compact, but rather what form this densification will take'. I'm less convinced that cities will become more compact. The tendency in most of the urban world is towards peripheral growth and sprawl, not compactness (Angel et al., 2021; Keil, 2018; McFarlane, 2020; World Resources Institute, 2019). The centre-periphery urban model may well remain intact in many areas of the globe, especially in Africa and Europe, but the general pattern we are likely to see is one of continuing development of vast urban regions where densities are distributed across space. In addition, residents do not always want more compact cities. While class and race prejudice can drive resistance to densification, these objections to higher densities cannot always be reduced to mere NIMBYism (Robinson and Attuyer, 2021). Residents are often wary that greater density will lead to higher housing costs, or greater pressure on existing services and infrastructure (Wicki and Kaufmann, 2022).

Nonetheless, calls for more compact urbanism are here to stay. In addition to critically engaging that agenda in ways that Haarstad et al. argue for, individual proposals for compact urbanism will have to be evaluated case by case. In doing so, the lived experiences of density can teach us what works and what doesn't work about different kinds of compact urbanisms. As Haarstad et al. argue in their section on 'antagonisms', more research on how higher density living is perceived and experienced would help here. Paying attention to how compactness is lived, and to how different people relate to it, is often a better starting point for figuring out what matters about compactness than the technical projections of planners or academics.

In a project funded by the European Research Council, *DenCity*, I have been working with a small team to explore closely related questions. Our focus has been on the everyday densities of urban streets and markets, busy neighbourhoods and crowded homes, bustling city metros and informal economies, and protesting crowds. These forms of compactness —some transitory, some more enduring—are often versions of what Jay Pitter (2020) has called the 'forgotten densities' of cities, those that lack the aesthetic chic of often gentrifying dominant compact urbanisms. As Haarstad et al. indicate, there is a large literature on urban density, but it tends not to ask what density might look like when we write it from the experience and perception of residents themselves. In the project, this has included, amongst others, four encounters with lived densities.

First, in research with Hung-Ying Chen on Hong Kong which we are currently writing (Chen, 2020; Chen et al., 2020), we investigated how density in highly compact poor neighbourhoods and overcrowded homes presses in on the senses, often leaving people exhausted and depressed. We explored too how residents and activists work to ease living conditions and find respite in the densities. This includes activities of housing repair and care, forming networks of learning rooted in the lived worlds of urban densities.

Second, in work with Romit Chowdhury and Colin McFarlane in Tokyo (2021), we showed how the commuting crowd on the city metro develops multiple relations to high density compactness. This includes affective conditions of joy, laughter, calm, withdrawal, and frustration, as well as series of mundane negotiations as people move, wait, and weave, and more serious concerns around gendered or racial harassment. People are both drawn to and often frustrated by compactness. We argue that instead of *a priori* positions on what is 'good' or 'bad' about high density, planners and policy might learn from what commuters think, value, and struggle with while being on the move in compressed geographies.

Third, in Mumbai, work with Priyam Tripathy and Colin McFarlane (2022) has shown how people in some of the poorest and densest areas of the city connect density to urban atmosphere, and link density to illness, heat, rain, labour, and social life. People living and working at the Deonar garbage ground in Mumbai deal with densities of waste and woefully inadequate provisions and health care. We were surprised to see it was the air that often concerned residents most about compact urban life, and particularly toxic atmospheres generated by the garbage ground in which they work.

And fourth, in work with postgraduates at Durham (Joiner et al., 2022), we examined how people in British cities perceive urban crowds in the wake of the pandemic. We explored how fear and anxiety of crowds surface amongst residents, as well as how some people long for the buzz and bustle of the city crowd (McFarlane, 2021). These four areas examine high density living, and high density is not necessarily the same thing as compact urbanism. Nonetheless, in focussing on specific elements of compactness, including how larger urban inequalities shape the affective atmospheres of higher density living, these cases point to the potential of developing compact urban proposals based on what residents themselves value and struggle with.

What this opens up is another key theme in Haarstad et al.'s arguments: that of commoning. In particular, the question it provokes is: from where might thinking and proposals for commoning the compact city emerge? There is some intriguing discussion of this in their paper, but inevitably the authors have limited space to develop that. The lived experience of high density is one useful starting point. But given that planning has been evermore complicit in the erosion of the commons (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2022), what kinds of mechanisms might we identify for commoning the compact city? One of the elements that is sorely missing from debates on densification of different kinds, not just compact urbanism, is a better accounting of the examples where radical alternatives are actually happening. What does commoning compactness actually look like in practice? What kinds of approaches and examples might we point to? What sources of knowledge might we point to?

The term 'compact city' is both loaded and empty. Loaded because it carries with it normative assumptions of being good for climate and sociality, empty because it is so often lacking in detail and genuinely inclusive approaches. The critical agenda must focus on the different components that relate to it: building form, materials, facilities, infrastructure, services, green spaces, public spaces, housing costs, existing residents, future residents, the spatialities of production and consumption, and so on. Haarstad et al. provide a valuable framework for doing this.

Yet, the specificity of the 'compact' sometimes goes amiss in this larger debate. The critical agenda Haarstad et al. set out to respond, including metabolism, antagonism, and commoning, is a one that pertains not just to compact urbanism, but to cities and urbanization more generally. Does compactness itself imply particular forms of critical thinking and conceptualisation? Haarstad et al. begin to explore this in the paper but one question we might usefully ask here is whether there are critical concepts that are generated by compactness as an idea.

While it is often an empty signifier, the term 'compact' is clearly doing a tremendous amount of work in much mainstream urban policy and practice. Is there anything in the history of urban debate and thinking, above and beyond the critique of sprawl and suburbia and the Jacobsian celebration of mixed dense urbanisms, that animates the specific draw of the compact idea? How might the notion

of the 'compact' generate imaginaries and knowledges that itself opens out conceptual thinking? What if anything has the pandemic done to how the compact idea travels and lands today, and does that shift the conceptual work it might provoke? These are not easy questions to answer (and they are questions that Victoria Habermehl and I are currently asking ourselves in relation to research on London as part of the *DenCity* project), but they are examples of just some of the range of questions this valuable paper generates.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the H2020 European Research Council (grant number 773209).

ORCID iD

Colin McFarlane https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9209-4494

References

Ahmadian E, Byrd H, Sodagar B, et al. (2019) Energy and the form of cities: The counterintuitive impact of disruptive technologies. *Architectural Science Review* 62(2): 145–151.

Angel S, Lamson-Hall P and Blanco ZG (2021) Anatomy of density: Measurable factors that constitute urban density. *Buildings and Cities* 2(1): 264–282.

Chen HY (2020) Densities of care. *Urban Geography* 41(10): 1302–1309.

Chen HY, Chowdhury R, McFarlane C, et al. (2020) Introduction: Rethinking urban density. *Urban Geography* 41(10): 1241–1246.

Chowdhury R and McFarlane C (2021) The crowd and city-life: Materiality, negotiation, and inclusivity at Tokyo's train stations. *Urban Studies* 59(7): 1353–1371.

Haarstad H, Kjærås K and Røe PG, et al. (2023) Diversifying the compact city: A renewed agenda for geographical research. *Dialogues in Human Geography* 13(1): 5–24.

Jacobs J (1962) *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Joiner A, McFarlane C, Rella L, et al. (2022) Problematising density: COVID-19, the crowd, and urban life. *Social and Cultural Geography*. DOI: 10.1080/14649365.2022.2143879

Keil R (2018) *Suburban planet*. Cambridge: Polity.

McFarlane C (2020) De/re-densification: A relational geography of urban density. *City* 24(1-2): 314–324.

McFarlane C (2021) Repopulating density: COVID-19 and the politics of urban value. *Urban Studies*. DOI: 10.1177/00420980211014810

Perez F (2020) 'The miracle of density': The socio-material epistemics of urban densification. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 44(4): 617–635.

Pitter J (2020) Urban density: Confronting the distance between desire and disparity. *Azure*. Available at: https://www.azuremagazine.com/article/urban-density-confronting-the-distance-between-desire-and-disparity/.

Robinson J and Attuyer K (2021) Extracting value, London style: Revisiting the role of the state in urban development. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 45(2): 303–331.

Sevilla-Buitrago A (2022) *Against the Commons: A Radical History of Urban Planning*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

Tripathy P and McFarlane C (2022) Perceptions of atmosphere: Air, waste, and narratives of life and work in Mumbai. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 40(4): 664–682.

UN-Habitat (2022) *Envisaging the Future of Cities*. Nairobi: United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat).

Wachsmuth D, Cohen DA and Angelo H (2016) Expand the frontiers of urban sustainability. *Nature* 536: 391–393. 25th August. Accessible at https://www.nature.com/news/expand-the-frontiers-of-urban-sustainability-1.20459.

Wikki M and Kaufmann D (2022) Accepting and resisting densification: The importance of project-related factors and the contextualizing role of neighbourhoods. *Landscape and Urban Planning* 220, 104350. DOI: 10.1016/j.landurbplan.2021.104350.

World Resources Institute (2019) *Upward and Outward Growth: Managing Urban Expansion for More Equitable Cities in the Global South*. Washington, DC: World Resources Institute.