

Issue Brief

Density and Livability

Why Dense Communities Can Be More Livable

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Issue

As a popular quip in the livable communities debate goes, people hate two things: sprawl and density. Although local and national public-opinion polls consistently show high concern about sprawling land-use patterns and their attendant ills—traffic congestion, less open space, reduced sense of community—high-density projects often encounter vociferous objections at public hearings. Many people interpret “density” to mean more traffic, crowded schools, and unattractive new buildings shoehorned together. Yet, when presented with illustrations of dense communities that feature beautiful architecture and protected open space, where people can walk along shady sidewalks and feel safe letting their kids play in the front yard, opposition often evaporates.

Details

Certainly, the United States is in no danger of building over all its open space, so many critics contend that inefficient land use is not a major problem. The market responds to what buyers want, they say: a single-family home with a large yard for less money. But the market rewards density as well: well-designed, dense housing sells as well as, and sometimes better than, widely spaced homes. The top consumers of compact, auto-independent housing—empty nesters, childless couples, and singles—will make up the majority of American households for the foreseeable future.

Compact developments offer higher tax revenues with lower per-unit infrastructure costs and fit more easily into infill parcels, increasing housing stock without reducing green space. Dense developments feel more like the “traditional” neighborhoods many people admire, with a clear identity, amenities such as shops and recreational facilities within easy reach, and a sense of community. Children and the elderly can be more independent in a community where they can walk to visit their friends or to a community center, rather than having to wait for a ride.

As research begins to illuminate the ways in which the built environment can affect public health, personal well-being becomes a persuasive argument for dense development. Using land as efficiently as possible preserves open space for recreation within easy reach of city dwellers, while protecting the environment. Compact, attractively designed neighborhoods that offer a variety of amenities encourage people to walk, bike, or take public transit rather than drive.

AIA Action

Architects can, of course, design dense developments to be more appealing and to feel less crowded. Perhaps as important, however, they can overcome community resistance by illustrating various options to make a dense development attractive. People who react negatively to the word “density,” envisioning the worst sort of cramped, chaotic, urban environment, often change their minds when they see a rendering of a compact development that arranges the structures in response to their concerns, to maximize privacy, green space, or communal areas.

Architects can use their position in the community to lobby for design standards, zoning, and incentives, such as density bonuses, that encourage and enable developers to build compactly yet profitably. They can help engage other advocates to promote compact communities, including experts in public health, the environment, economic development, law enforcement, and other areas. Architects should also encourage the private and public entities with which they work to be sensitive to community concerns and to involve the public throughout the process of siting, designing, and building dense developments.

Quick Facts

- People often believe that spread-out, suburban areas are safer than urban neighborhoods, but, in fact, compact communities generally have fewer traffic fatalities and faster police, fire, and ambulance response times.
- In a 2003 public-opinion poll, nearly half of the respondents favored designing communities to be more walkable, even if it means they are denser.
- The annual “Emerging Trends in Real Estate” analysis consistently finds dense, 24-hour neighborhoods to be among the top recommended real-estate investments.

Resources

- *Density: Myth & Reality* conference, Sept. 12-14, 2003, Boston:
www.architects.org/density
- Lincoln Land Institute research on density:
www.lincolninst.edu/pubs/workingpapers.asp
- ULI/NMHC/AIA Forum on Housing Density,

