

Density Without High-Rises?

by Edward T. McMahon

When it comes to land development, Americans seem to dislike two things: too much sprawl and too much density. Over the last 50 years, the pendulum has clearly swung in the direction of spread-out single use, drive everywhere, low density development.

Now the pendulum is swinging back. Today, high energy prices, smart growth, new urbanism, infill development, transit-oriented development, and sustainability concerns are all coalescing to foster more compact, mixed-use, walkable, higher density development.

The swing toward greater density is necessary and long overdue. The problem is many developers and urban planners have decided that density requires high-rises, the taller the better. To oppose a high-rise building is to run the risk of being labeled a NIMBY, a dumb growth advocate, an antediluvian, or worse.

Buildings 20, 40, 50, 60 even 100 stories tall are being proposed in low- and mid-rise neighborhoods and cities all over the world. All these projects are justified with the explanation that if density is good, than even more density is better, despite the overwhelmingly negative impact on community character and identity.

I'll acknowledge that the "Buck Rogers"-like skylines of cities like Shanghai and Dubai are thrilling – at a distance – but at street level they are often dreadful. The glass and steel towers may be functional, but they seldom move the soul or the traffic as well as more human scale, fine grained neighborhoods.

Yes, we need more compact, walkable, high density communities, but no, we do not need to build thousands of look-alike glass and steel skyscrapers to accomplish the goals of smart growth or sustainable development.

In truth many of America's finest and most valuable neighborhoods achieve density without high-rises. Georgetown in Washington, D.C., Park Slope in Brooklyn, the Fan in Richmond, and the French Quarter in New Orleans are all compact, walkable, charming – and low rise. Yet they're also dense: the French Quarter, for example, has a net density of 38 units per acre. Georgetown, 22 units per acre.

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Julie Campoli and Alex MacLean's new book *Visualizing Density*, vividly illustrates that we can achieve tremendous density without high-rises. They point out that before elevators were developed, two to four story "walk-ups" were common in cities and towns throughout America. Constructing a block of these types of buildings today could achieve a density of anywhere from 20 to 80 units an acre.

Mid-rise buildings ranging from 5 to 12 stories can create surprisingly high density neighborhoods in urban settings where buildings cover most of the block. Campoli and MacLean point to Seattle where mid-rise buildings achieve densities ranging from 50 to 100 units per acre, extraordinarily high by U.S. standards.

St. Petersburg, Russia; Basel, Switzerland; Edinburgh, Scotland; Bethesda, Maryland; and Washington, D.C. are just a few of the hundreds of cities around the world where developers have proposed

giant out-of-scale skyscrapers in formerly low- or mid-rise settings.

This issue of tall buildings in historic settings is not a small one. City after city has seen fights between those who want to preserve neighborhood integrity and those who want Trump Towers and "star-chitect" skyscrapers. Prince Charles, for example recently criticized the "high-rise free for all" in London which, he said, has left the city with a "pockmarked skyline and a degraded public realm."

Whatever you think about Prince Charles, he has clearly raised some important issues about the future of the built environment. These include:

1. Does density always require high-rises?
2. Are historic areas adequately protected from incompatible new construction?
3. What's more important, the ability of tall buildings to make an architectural statement or the need for buildings to fit into a walkable mixed-use neighborhood?

I love the skylines of New York, Chicago, and many other high-rise cities but I also love the skylines of Charleston, Savannah, Prague, Edinburgh, Rome, Washington, and other historic mid-rise cities. It would be a tragedy to turn all these remarkable places into tower cities.

Density does not demand high-rises. Skyscrapers are a dime a dozen in today's world. Once a low- or mid-rise city or town succumbs to high-rise mania, many more towers will follow, until the city becomes a carbon-copy of every other city in a "geography of nowhere." ♦

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