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Compact City Reset: Toward alternatives to market-driven density

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Introduction

State and local governments around Australia and the world now routinely promote the idea that dense, interconnected nodes of transit-rich, mixed-use places are indispensable for sustainable and resilient urban futures. From 20-minute neighbourhoods and 15-minute cities to compact activity centres and transit-oriented developments, the drive for urban density is now a ubiquitous feature of planning policies and is considered the antidote to the range of problems that plague our cities.

To deliver on these compact city visions, urban planners have long appealed to the market with calls for ever more flexible zoning and building codes (Steele, 2009). However, with compact city policies now into their third decade, both the implementation and efficacy of market-driven density remain in doubt.

This special issue of *Urban Policy and Research* contributes a range of new research that explores both the problems and prospects of market-driven density. By doing so, it suggests new approaches and lines of inquiry that can reset the compact city vision and policy.

Compact city promise and realities

The purported benefits of reshaping urban form to be more compact are considerable; from slowing global warming and habitat loss, to improvements in health, lifestyle, and economic opportunity (OECD, 2012). Moreover, there is mounting evidence that people increasingly seek to live in more compact cities. Recent surveys find that a growing number of people prefer denser living environments over a detached house and yard (Newton *et al.*, 2017) and that most baby boomers want to live in a dense and walkable neighbourhood (Kamruzzaman *et al.*, 2016). Advocates argue that new density proposals respond to this latent market demand while producing more sustainable urban environments.

However, as predicted by initial sceptics, policies aimed at fundamentally altering the urban form come up against the realities of urban political economies and are dependent upon attracting speculative investment tied to real estate market cycles (Bunker, 2012; Dodson, 2010; Newton & Glackin, 2014). Consequently, compact city policy has tended to overly rely on market mechanisms. While inner city locations with high market demand undergo extensive regeneration, outer suburban areas fail to attract the required development and remain locked into unsustainable sprawling development patterns. Further, market-driven density is accompanied by housing stress, increased demands on strained urban infrastructure, residential and industrial displacement, and place-based homogenization and segregation (Allen, 2018; Morris, 2017; Randolph, 2017; Thompson, 2018).

Given the inherent conflicts around market-driven compact city planning and its institutionalisation in narratives of sustainable urban development, new approaches are needed. Urban planning and policy research must not only critique status quo compact city programs, but simultaneously identify alternatives geared toward more equitable place-sensitive outcomes. New research is needed to evaluate plans and outcomes in different

contexts to better understand the progress of both traditional market-driven approaches to urban development, and its alternatives. The infill development necessary to revitalise existing urban areas continues to present key challenges in terms of the price, type and nature of delivered housing options, requiring further investigation of successful pathways for the development of middle and outer suburbs. Exploring and benchmarking the possibilities presented by alternative development is necessary to reveal new options beyond speculative market-driven approaches.

Toward alternatives to market-driven density: Overview of the special issue

This special issue critically engages with the durability, mobility, and conflict-ridden state of the compact city. The assembled articles address key lines of inquiry into the existing nature of, and prospects for, market-driven density. They go beyond documenting planning failures to also identify alternative strategies and visions within both existing compact city frameworks and new scenarios. To what extent are activity centre policies reshaping the urban experience, meeting their intended outcomes, and what is influencing their development? Can suburban redevelopment move beyond the pattern of piecemeal subdivision and what is needed to deliver more comprehensive and coordinated forms of attached housing? How can future residents have more influence over housing design when the market continues to deliver generic products that fail to meet community needs? By addressing these questions, this special edition outlines the current state of market driven urbanism and its alternatives in city planning.

In the first article, Limb, Grodach, Mayere, and Donehue (2020) evaluate the implementation of activity centre policies in greater Brisbane over a 20-year period. They demonstrate how changes to the regulatory land use system towards a network of dense, sustainable and self-contained centres had little impact on centre development, which was instead most strongly related to property market conditions. The results are eerily similar to the situation described by (Forster, 2006), where planning intent exists in a “parallel universe” to implementable reality.

Yet simply aligning plans to markets is unlikely to deliver desired sustainability objectives, especially in outer suburban areas that lack the commercial conditions necessary for market-led development. Instead, the authors conclude that plans need to better reflect the economic and demographic realities associated with implementation and identify and harness potential resources. With the benefits of the realisation of the compact city “...still more in the realm of beliefs than in theoretical arguments confirmed by practice”, these efforts must be informed by further empirical research that connects planning promise to outcome (Oliveira & Pinho, 2010, p. 357).

The second article expands this conceptual scope to consider the effects of two economic epochs on plan implementation. Using Toronto, Canada as a case study, Filion, Leauge, and Harun (2020) analyse 50 years of planned residential intensification under Fordist and neoliberal economic models. Their article further illustrates the challenges of utilising market-led mechanisms to deliver holistic sustainability objectives, with neither approach resulting in an appropriate range of housing options.

The authors concisely illustrate the inexorable link between planning and market forces, and how ideological conceptions of the role of markets in urban development also impact plan implementation. This is an important contribution that highlights the role of “the market” as a

changing and dynamic force exerting correspondingly different influences on the interpretation and implementation of plans. By considering markets and the distribution of capital as ideological social constructs (Piketty, 2020), the article suggests a pathway for planning to expand potential implementation mechanisms and thus deliver on a broader range of sustainability objectives.

Next, Pinnegar, Randolph and Troy (2020) explore alternatives to growth dependent planning by analysing the feasibility of recent corridor-based plans in greater Sydney. They discover an approach typified by the management of growth above all other factors. This results in a plan that unrealistically transfers concepts of development in high value markets to an area for which such an approach is distinctly unsuitable and unfeasible. The result is a planning regime that is forced to pursue ever increasing density as a way to implement its objectives via private sector development. This is a hopeless task as the first article in this issue shows.

The article argues that the plan is typical of neoliberalised “hypertrophic” urbanism which imposes a financialisation of the urban environment and housing. This in turn limits the capability of communities and smaller developers to effect change and proceeds irrespective of established development patterns of Australian urban forms or the desires of an area’s inhabitants. Considering that a generation of planners’ professional practice now consists exclusively in the realm of compact urban development (Gleeson, 2012), the article raises a timely and salient reminder of the issues associated with a planning system dependent on growth and density instead of more fundamental objectives that can realistically serve human needs and desires while responding to pressing urban sustainability challenges. To these ends, the authors discuss opportunities to establish a post-growth dependent planning system in terms of incremental urbanism, land readjustment, and inverse growth regimes.

In the final article of the edition, Newton, Glackin, Witheridge and Garner (2020) take a more applied look at how to best deliver infill housing in Australia’s cities. They argue that there is considerable capacity to provide for the compact city by delivering more modest medium density development in middle-ring suburbs. They note that the future development of more efficient housing types in these locations is currently inhibited by the existing predominant development form of “knock-down-rebuild” resulting in a fragmentation of suitable development sites. More compact housing is also frequently subjected to community opposition due to perceptions of poor design and liveability impacts.

The authors argue that comprehensive precinct scale redevelopment using the principals of regenerative urbanism offers a practical way to address these concerns while delivering greater housing capacities. Using a specialised tool to identify suitable sites with the requisite market and spatial qualities required for private development at medium densities, the article describes the process applying this approach to a pilot project in Melbourne, including incorporation of community feedback. By doing so, the authors demonstrate the practicality of a new approach to delivering additional housing in middle ring suburbs.

Conclusion

Despite the widespread acceptance and adoption of compact city principles in urban policy, leaving implementation to the whims of planning constrained market forces has thus far resulted in unequal and piecemeal outcomes. Market-led approaches are not delivering the promised sustainability benefits that justified this approach. This special edition demonstrates

the limitations of the land use regulatory system in delivering the compact city, whether that due to misalignment between plan intent and market viability (Limb et al 2020, Pinnegar et al 2020) or the imperfect vagaries of different ideological economic epochs (Filion et al 2020).

The articles highlight that new approaches to both planning and development (Newton et al 2020) are required, necessitating a range of further research to provide an empirical basis for alternative directions in planning. First, there is little research that links conformance with compact city policies to sustainability outcomes beyond broad scale conceptions of the benefits of density. After several decades of compact city implementation, the evidence of its efficacy ought to now be apparent in urban environments. Developing a finer grained understanding of the impacts and changes to denser neighbourhoods, qualified across the diversity of urban contexts to which compactness policies have been applied, is critical to identify the most worthwhile components of compact city policy.

Second, research that examines alternative delivery modes is necessary to ensure planning interventions can be implemented in a way that respects the needs of those who must directly live with this change, while also providing community and environmental benefits. Research involving fundamental reconsiderations of who can best instigate, control, and benefit from development of private property would be of particular use.

Finally, there would be value in further understanding how planning itself can break its dependency on a doctrine based on decades of market-led growth management (Bunker, 2012; Bunker & Searle, 2009; Gleeson, 2012) and instead adapt to new paradigms. Such research would be well served by focusing on planners, the institutions they operate within, and the groups and regimes that influence both.

Based on current research, the compact city continues to prompt critical reflection on not only the concept itself, but also the underlying aspects of political economy that lock its development into a system defined primarily by propertarianism. Investigating the implementation of the compact city has helped to identify a range of new critical lines of inquiry which promise to advance both planning scholarship and practice.

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