

Urban Density and Transformation of Spaces

Thesis 2 – PROPOSITION: Liveability through Density
by Dr. Jan Silberberger, Drees & Sommer SE

The ultimate idea of a city has always been – and hopefully continues to be – to bring people together: people with diverse backgrounds, diverse plans, diverse life goals, diverse likings, diverse aversions. Hence, the making and re-making of cities has always followed the guiding principle of proximity. At their heart, cities have always been characterized by an absence of open spaces, by closeness, by density.

Besides its importance for knowledge production, urban density has proven to be one of the most effective measures for reducing carbon emissions (because densely populated environments require only little amounts of driving). Moreover, and probably most importantly, most of us have come to enjoy urban density. Many of us desire the closeness and proximity that traditional European cities provide.

In fact, as recent scholarship has shown, very high built densities often go hand in hand with high quality of life (as well as high costs of living). The explanation for this finding is rather straightforward: Firstly, dense, mixed-use neighbourhoods enable their users to access all everyday products and services within a convenient 15-minute walk (as the people, who live and work there constitute a large enough customer base to support these businesses). Secondly, the presence of all these amenities means that a significant share of ground-floor spaces are used in such a manner that they radiate into the public realm contributing to the emergence of spaces that make strolling a pleasure.

We all know the pleasures of walking down an exciting street. And we all know the important role of commercially used ground-floor spaces. We constantly repeat that we want lively, mixed-use neighbourhoods and streets or sidewalks respectively to be spaces of interaction. What we seem to forget though is the fact that many of these desired qualities are directly related to density.

That is to say that in Europe, we have stopped building densely roughly one hundred years ago. In terms of density – and hence, liveliness and hence, liveability – the city structures that we built in Europe during the last 60 years do not even come close to the quarters that had been constructed during the years of vast city expansion at the end of the 19th and early 20th century.

The decisive question is: What prevents us from reconsidering? What prevents us from restarting to build street-scapes that provoke the emergence of an exciting, delightful street life? What prevents us from planning for the required densely populated neighbourhoods?

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Thesis 1 – The need for a narrative
by Erik Wolff, COO, ICT AG

About 10 years ago, I was devastated when I heard the Silicon Valley investor Albert Wenger discuss the death of retail. Was he really predicting the end of the inner city as we know it?

Retail is as old as humanity itself, so it's hardly encouraging news. But we have to come to terms with three key trends.

1. Consumer buying power has shifted from the inner city to the internet. Looking for a specialized piece of equipment? You can find it easily online. Need a jacket in a particular size or colour? It's available right here in our online shop, and we can ship it to you immediately. The options are endless. Shops can no longer justify the additional overhead required to maintain retail spaces.
2. Covid emptied offices and moved meetings onto Zoom and Teams. The last several years have ushered in a new model of work and the result is a paradox. Although we still want and need to meet in person, both employers and workers like working from home. Not necessarily every day, but with increasing frequency. Lower travel costs, higher productivity and reduced commuting are just a few of the benefits.
3. Companies are hesitant to sign long-term leases. Global warming is becoming a factor in corporate decision-making. Build a new office building? No way. It's not sustainable under the latest SDG guidelines. With all the uncertainty ahead, maybe a three-year lease instead?

All of that makes a simple but obvious difference: less companies downtown, less people going into the city on a daily or weekly basis, if at all.

Ask people why they no longer go to the city, and often the answer is „why should I?“

In this session, we'll discuss a potential solution to this problem.

The narrative of the city has to give us a reason to go there. Aside from practical purposes such as public services, health care, work or shopping, these reasons should explicitly include culture, learning, sports, lifestyle and leisure among others. But those reasons may still not be motivation enough. That's why the concept of community has to be central to the city's narrative. Ideally, that concept should be expressed in a single slogan or statement. But it should also make a bold claim: that the city is unique, which is why visitors, residents, families and companies still need it more than ever.

This urgently necessary transformation of the city must start with a transformation in how we think and communicate about the city. If property owners, asset managers and cities join together to craft a narrative about the city, that will become a call to action to other stakeholders to join the fight.

What do you think?

We look forward to your mind-blowing answer.