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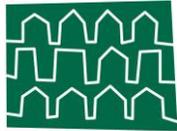
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It's Not How Dense You Make It; It's How You Make It Dense

Higher density doesn't have to mean crowded

Julie Campoli, founder of Terra Firma Urban Designs and author of *Made for Walking* and *Visualizing Density*, showed the difference between communities that have significant density and those that are simply crowded for the ULI Minnesota/Regional Council of Mayors 6th Annual Housing Summit at the Hopkins Center for the Arts, June 5.

"There's a misconception that density equals crowding," Campoli said. "Density is the number of people in a given space. Crowding is the feeling that the number is too high. But the number doesn't reveal anything about the form."

Human beings are social creatures who, for most of our history, have seen being urban as the key to a better life, she said. "One hundred years ago, even the smallest farm towns aspired to be urban. They had a wide array of goods and services within a few blocks." But in the 1950s, the idea of what constituted "a good life" changed and people in the United States began to spread out. "We reshaped the built environment into horizontal."

People had less need to cooperate, and they didn't have to live next door to people who weren't like them if they didn't want to. The car was essential, rather than an occasional pleasure. Today, she said, "Too many people live too far from where they need to be every day."

But there's evidence that the desire to have a more urban lifestyle is growing—even in a place like Houston, where a recent survey showed that the percentage of homebuyers who want a large house is falling. "More Americans want to walk to work and they want to walk to the store."

The car ownership rate is falling and younger homebuyers are less interested in buying houses in low-density suburbs. Many baby boomers who have been living outside of urban areas are looking at the convenience of transit and smaller living spaces in the context of an urban area where they can easily get to retail, entertainment and interesting places to walk.

But say the word "higher density" and current residents of many areas start to get nervous.

Campoli's goal is to show the many ways that higher density can be achieved to create neighborhoods that feel urban, but not crowded:

- Single-family homes, but on smaller lots than is now typical.
- Accessory dwelling units, or "granny flats," which can achieve 6–12 units per acre.
- Duplex housing, 6–12 units per acre.
- Multi-unit houses, 12–20 units per acre.
- Row houses or townhomes, 12–20 units per acre.
- Stacked townhouses, 24–36 units per acre.
- Low-rise multi-unit buildings, 20–60 units per acre.
- Mid-rise multi-unit buildings, 40–100 units per acre.
- High-rise multi-unit buildings, 90-plus units per acre.

A certain level of density is needed to make aspects of urban living feasible. At 6–12 units per acre, a corner store may be possible; at more than 12 units per acre, a full-service supermarket. Seven units per acre is a minimum density to support bus service; 20–60 may support light-rail transit or streetcars.

Simply increasing density doesn't make for walkable, urban communities, Campoli said. "If you want people to walk, pedestrians need a whole lot more than sidewalks." Walkable areas need to consider:

- The size of the block—the smaller the better. "When blocks are smaller, you have a lot of intersections," Campoli said. Even with larger blocks, shortcuts can be created.
- A continuous urban fabric so that "when you walk down the street, you have something to look at."
- Paying attention to parking. "Cars take up a lot of space, space that could be used for something more valuable." Cities often require more parking for retail and business than is needed, with the goal of giving what Campoli called "Doris Day parking," meaning a parking space directly in front of the store for every customer—an impossible goal. "Getting a handle on parking regulations is really crucial."
- A balanced transportation system. Cars aren't going to go away, but urban communities need to have a variety of transportation options, including transit and safe options for bicyclists and walkers.
- Access to nature. "People are much happier, healthier, calmer—even smarter—when they have contact with nature." Greenspace and parks are important.
- Places where people interact. "In a walkable city, there are a whole lot of places where people are in contact with other people."

To "sample" density, Campoli recommends tactical urbanism, which means temporary, inexpensive projects that can allow experimenting with ideas for creating an urban feel in a community. For example: Instead of redesigning a street and going through a long process to narrow it, tactical urbanism might mean using planters, chairs and tables, and low picket fencing to see just what a narrow street might be like. Food trucks and farmers' markets offer the opportunity to create urban retail without bricks and mortar.

Campoli said we all should ask ourselves, "Do you live in a neighborhood that makes you happy?" The answer will have something to do with design and urban amenities, but it will also have to do with your neighbors. "It's all about the people," Campoli said. "Great places begin with design, but they can't be designed to be great; they have to evolve over time."

How Do We Get There?

It's all about vision and transparency, agreed five local panelists—while acknowledging that not everyone is going to buy into a vision for higher density in their own neighborhood. Lisa Bender, Minneapolis City Councilmember and chair of the Council's Zoning and Planning Committee, said, "We need to start asking these big vision questions." She said the committee is now working on a protected bikeways plan for the city, "instead of asking, 'Hey, do you want to take out 30 parking spots?'"

Everyone on the panel talked about the difficulty of presenting ideas at public meetings. Nelima Sitati, a community organizer, said that transparency is essential. She said many people who go to public meetings to present their views and then end up frustrated because they don't know what happens next. "Be very clear about who will make the final decision and how that decision will be arrived at," she said.

Max Musicant of The Musicant Group said he is doing a lot of communication work up front, including through social media. "The public meeting is the last thing we do."

Campoli said it's important to recognize that sometimes people need to vent and the first public meeting is likely to be their time to do just that, so those promoting a change need to understand that.

Moderator Colleen Carey of The Cornerstone Group asked the panelists what they think make great places:

- Campoli: "Places that understand transportation and put in transit systems … places that understand nature, like Vancouver."
- Bender: "Cities I can wander in, like New York and San Francisco. I think Minneapolis can be that kind of city. We have a city where you can live in a single-family home and be a 15-minute bike ride from downtown."
- Musicant: "Ones that empower the nonprofessional. Cities that allow merchants and homeowners to interact. That's where you get that organic feel."
- Sitati: "I live in Brooklyn Park; I love Brooklyn Park. There's a wide range of housing, access to transportation, walking distance to parks, diversity. We're an example of what this region is transforming into."
- Michael Kisch, architect at RSP Architects: "A vibrancy, 24/7 activity. It's mobility and connectivity in general."

For more information:

- Julie Campoli's website, including her blog and a free chapter from her book: http://www.juliecampoli.com
- Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, with quick links to ideas about density: http://www.lincolninst.edu/pubs/2150_Made-for-Walking
- The Street Plans Collaborative, with examples and ideas of tactical urbanism: http://streetplans.org
- A version of the density quiz Campoli used in her presentation: http://www.lincolninst.edu/subcenters/visualizing-density/quiz/index.aspx
- PDF of Campoli's presentation: Part 1, Part 2, and Density Quiz Results