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Introduction: rethinking urban density

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ABSTRACT

In this piece, we introduce a special issue on “Rethinking Urban Density” which asks: what are the meanings and implications of density in cities today? How might we understand and research it? This collection offers a set of reflections on urban density in different parts of the world. Ranging from the urban forms, lived experiences, and perceptions, to the policy trends and politics of urban density, authors in this collection explore together the dynamics and implications of urban densities in cities of the global South, East, and North. Emerging from the 2019 *Rethinking Density* workshop in the Department of Geography at Durham University, this evolving dialogue on urban density identifies some key debates and critical reflections on wider urban processes and futures.

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Introduction

This collection focuses on a fundamental and defining concern for cities, one which has long been at the center of the urban question, connecting policy-making and research on cities: urban density. We ask: what is urban density in cities today? What are its stakes? How might we understand and research it? To respond, we have assembled a range of commentaries written by urban scholars working across the global South, East, and North. Together, the collection examines the forms urban density takes and the debates and politics it engenders, from London, New York, Toronto, Delhi, Mumbai, Hong Kong, and Beijing, to Johannesburg, Bharatpur, Jakarta, and Tokyo.

Today, density is a linchpin for exploring the politics and life of the city, urbanism and urbanization. Forms of density – in its lived beings, things, places, numerical parameters, or discursive performances – are a vital fuel for urban aspirations and encounters of the social, material, affective, sensorial and aesthetic. In the face of a global decline in urban population density (Angel et al., 2012, 2018), density has been positioned as vital to the goal of “sustainable urbanization”. From the *New Urban Agenda* propelled by United Nations (2016) to various local government strategies, global think tank reports and scholarly works, “compactness” and “intensification” are often situated as vital for economic, environmental, and social success (eg Florida, 2012; Glaeser, 2012; Neuman, 2006; Power, 2016). Some forms of densification are celebrated, others portrayed as

a problem, and with all manner of social, economic and environmental consequences and debates.

Density is not fixed, nor is it a singular process or “thing”. It is, rather, enrolled in all kinds of politics, contexts, and understandings. At times of catastrophes and insurgencies, and we have seen this in the Covid-19 pandemic, density is often positioned as an object of blame. Threads of policy debate on urban density have profoundly shaped policy imposition and capital investment in the built environment, caught up with the speculation of urban land and air, and processes of gentrification and exclusion. Yet density is also seen as providing clues and means for collective solutions. In view of the importance of urban density to the city, in this collection we ask how might we understand its coordination, conflicts and contradictions? What are the ideas and processes that connect various forms of density? And what does density mean for urban geographers seeking to make sense of the urban condition today?

Density is increasingly freighted with all kinds of aspirations, expectations, and fears. In examining these investments, urbanists are developing insights into what urban density is and how we might research it (e.g., Dovey & Pafka, 2016; Keil, 2018; McFarlane, 2016, 2020; Simone, 2014, 2018; Wachsmuth et al., 2016). The collection emerges from a workshop held in the Department of Geography at Durham University in October 2019, titled *Rethinking Urban Density* and funded through the European Research Council project based at Durham, *DenCity: Living in a Global Urban Age*. It brings together twelve short interventions on urban density alongside a concluding reflection. Our hope is that this format of short essays will take the reader on a tour of some of the research horizon on urban density in contemporary urban geography, and provide new insights into how we might conceptualize and research this key element of cities, urbanization, and urban life.

In the rest of the introduction, we spotlight some of the key questions and discussions that run through the collection. These are issues that identify questions for the wider research agenda on urban density. The collection is based around five themes and research agendas for understanding urban density today. Our aim is to identify the questions and issues that are assembled and their wider purchase for urban research: focussing on patterns of *densification, de-densification, and re-densification*; understanding dynamics of density as *historic ensembles of the temporal and mobile*; critically investigating efforts to “sort” density in the city, spatially and socially; the different ways in which density becomes *politicized*; and processes of *work and repair* in the reproduction and transformation of densities. All of the interventions demonstrate the value of thinking space and time together in order to make sense of density and the contexts it is embedded in.

Key themes on urban density

First, the collection demonstrates the value of bringing processes of *densification, de-densification, and re-densification* into the same analytical frame. Taken together, they provide an entry point to the role and limits of the state and the wider political economies of urbanization in driving density. An important research agenda here is to see density as a dynamic and contingent political process that intersects with state practices to reveal trends in how cities and urbanization are transforming. The commentaries by **Yimin**

Zhao, Margot Rubin, and Hanna Ruszczyk in particular explicate the dynamic processes of density-in-transformation. **Zhao** uses Houchangcun road in Beijing to investigate the power that density instills on the legitimacy of the state in the urban process, a process he describes as a regime of state-led de-intensification of road infrastructure. Drawing on Johannesburg, **Rubin** parallels moments of auto-construction with state-led densification programmes to illuminate the dilemmas of urban governance of density and densification. **Ruszczyk**, by contrast, points out that in addition to the trend of densification in shaping “cityness”, Bharatpur, a metropolitan city in Nepal, exhibits us a significant and yet largely overlooked trend of de-densification – that is the dynamic process of incorporating rural municipalities into the boundary-remaking process of cities. Their takes show us how the states hold vital roles in devising the forms, shaping the esthetics, and informing the political economies of (de-)densification (Keil, 2018; McFarlane, 2020). Meanwhile, these commentaries also reflect on the limits of state power in the face of economic transformation and cultural conditions, as well as areas where the state needs to focus energy on ensuring more socially inclusive, publicly-oriented and ecologically thoughtful forms of (de-)densification.

Second, the collection considers how density emerges as *an historical ensemble of the temporal and mobile* – the mass coordination of histories and spaces. In particular, **AbdouMaliq Simone** and **Romit Chowdhury** offer ways in which the sense of historical awareness and temporal complicity enroll density into different social continuums and/or disjuncture. Density has specific histories connected to all manner of antecedents, from colonial logics and imaginaries to particular cultural inflections of what constitutes adequate or tolerable densities in different parts of the urban world, whether in relation to housing, movement, work, economy, or social life. It is often linked to particular metrics, regulations, and forms of governance, and while the state plays a vital role here, such modernist impulses are also culturally produced, shaped both locally and in conversation with all kinds of elsewhere.

Simone demonstrates how density could be approached through what he calls “the complicity and inter-dependency of temporalities”. Density’s temporal articulations, in Simone’s terms, are found in managing circulations (for example, in short-term labor contracts and rentals), and in the logistical designs and arrangements of urban economics. In this way, density could be read as the transient embodiment of precarious modernities. **Chowdhury** reflects on Tokyo’s experiences of the physical crowdedness of the everyday commute, arguing how density is not only the habitual negotiation of bodily encounters but also the sense-making of the individual, social, affectual, and emotional qualities of cityness.

Third, and following on, several commentators develop analytical lenses into probing *how densities are differently sorted in the city*. In this thread, **Roger Keil** and **Jenny Robinson and Katia Attuyer** are especially relevant. **Keil** offers two distinct cuts: density as political ecologies and as political pathologies. The former leads us to explore how the ecological imagination of “sustainable densities” feed into the housing and climate debates, thereby echoing the first theme on densification and sprawl. As a politics of the city, density has become – to use a phrase **Keil** used in the workshop – “a currency for global capital”, less fixed on location *per se* and more aligned with real estate speculative economies and the capacity to flip between them. Advancing this thread, **Robinson and Attuyer** examine the ways that the densification of London is driven by a nexus of

housing targets, finance, and the anticipated yields of building heights, bringing with it all kinds of openings and closures that present ongoing challenges for those seeking a more inclusive politics of density.

Fourth, as indicated from the first three themes, a recurring question is how densities operate politically and *become politicized*. In particular, the contributions from **Hung-Ying Chen** explores a critical but overlooked aspect that has sustained and repaired the urban protests in Hong Kong: “densities of care”. Conceptually this offers a trope to reveal how the politics of density is not only quantitative but both material and affective. **McFarlane** discusses the multiplicity of “political crowds”, and reflects on how high-density crowding goes beyond density as a socio-demographic indicator to contain the unfolding force of shock, surprise, and political agency. In doing so, these commentaries further our understanding of urban politics by relating the protesting crowd to the politics of proximity in cities.

The fifth and final focus is on the labor of sustaining fluxes of density, namely around the theme of *work, repair and maintenance*. This is addressed most explicitly in the contributions of **Fanny Blanc and Tim White, Priyam Tripathy and Damien Carriere, and Sarah Knuth, Nate Millington, and John Stehlin**. **Blanc and White** examine fourteen housing schemes across London, and explore the lived densities that reveal housing politics in moments of community formation to everyday maintenance. **Tripathy and Carriere** bring us to Delhi and Mumbai, exploring how security guards, waste and sanitation workers – the critical labor forces – sustain the routine orders of urban density. **Knuth, Millington, and Stehlin** in a critical review of “green” densification projects in the United States, elaborate on how urban climate politics feature in the planetary repair agenda, where densification processes are rendered by various ideas and praxes of green growth. Taken together, these commentaries allow us to see how the political economy of density has always been multidirectional, reshaping through patterns of city-making, speculation, creative destruction, and urbanization that operate at different spatial scales.

Concluding remark

This collection attempts to both take stock of and open up potential research avenues for urban density studies. First and foremost, we can see that the *ideological operations of density* – whether material, discursive or imaginative – leads to all kinds of social, political and economic inclusions and exclusions. Commentaries in this collection show a consistent focus on whether and how efforts to build density are genuinely inclusive of the varied social worlds in different cities, and – especially important – on what terms, and in this sense operate within the traditions of larger critical urban geographical debates.

Second, a common thread throughout many of the commentaries is a concern with density not simply as spatial and bounded in space, but as *trans-local and multiple in its temporal trajectories*. In several of the accounts, density in place emerges as a bundle of multiple temporalities variously intersecting and diverging, located in relation to one another in space and in turn re-shaping and being shaped by urban geographies. Third, urban/regional politics emerges across the collection as the interlacing scales of density. We might think here of large-scale societal transformations – the “big time” of shifts in

capitalist production and ideologies of (sub)urban or vertical living, or the production of entire housing programmes – but there is also the “small time” of labor migrations, urban everyday mobilities, multicultural encounters, and questions of access and affordability, all of which enter into the kinds of densities that are made and remade in the city and across an urban region. Taken together, the collection demands that we understand the spatialities of density alongside its temporalities, as we grapple with the politics of urban density and seek to develop analytical frames to account for its transformations and explore its potential futures.

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