

# Fear and Loathing of Density

by David Dixon FAIA

I have long been fascinated by the fear and loathing of density. I am not talking about bringing Manhattan to the older neighborhoods and traditional “Main Streets” of Boston, Cleveland, or Chicago...just bringing back the older neighborhoods and Main Streets of Boston, Cleveland, and Chicago. For many years, the phrase “urban density” was a curse, conjuring up images of crime, decay, and poverty. Robert Campbell FAIA, the *Boston Globe’s* architecture critic, helped rescue “urban”; today phrases like “urban vitality” and “urban character” conjure up images of lively cafés and restored historic townhouses. “Density” awaits rescue. When Charles Euchner, director of Harvard’s Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston, declared “density is good” at a recent public forum, community activists complained for two weeks that his comment was “anti-community.” Typical of this sentiment was US Representative Michael Capuano’s recent declaration that he did not want “a single additional housing unit” in his home community of Somerville, Massachusetts. “Why should my neighborhood suffer,” he demanded, “so planners can have density?”

Why did Charles Euchner, knowing the inevitable reaction, tell the congressman and activists that density is good? After all, resistance to density is central to almost every major planning discussion going on today. So why should designers and planners continue to antagonize their client communities by promoting density? Because fear and loathing of density is ironic, counter-productive, dangerous...and based largely on myths.

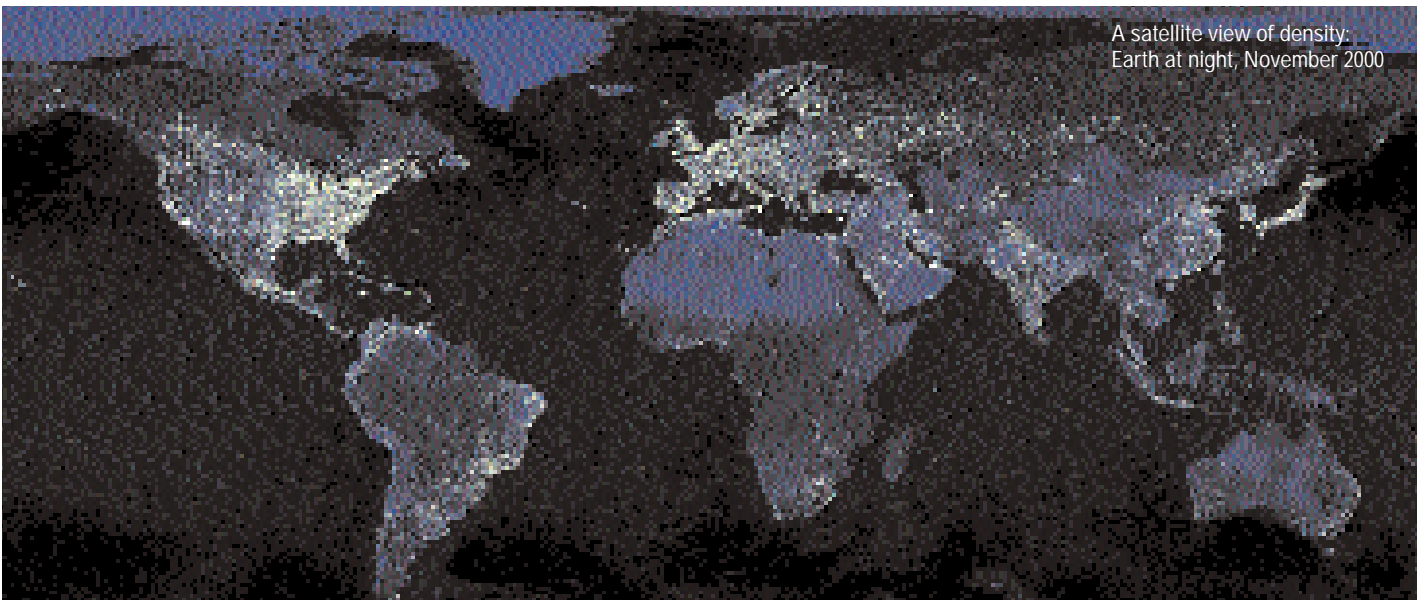
**Why ironic?** Boston’s most expensive neighborhoods are its densest neighborhoods, a pattern repeated in many cities. Somerville has lost 33 percent of its pre-1950 density, a “golden past” for which residents long. Which streets do Bostonians enjoy most? Those within walking distance of large pockets of density that support active street life.

**Why counter-productive?** Density is often the key to achieving the very qualities that make communities more livable. Three very different communities have recently made this discovery:

In Cambridge, Massachusetts, following a successful moratorium campaign to stop rapid development, a community-based task force spent a year preparing a plan to make neighborhoods around Kendall Square more livable. The resulting zoning supports the same mixed-use development level envisioned before the moratorium — including housing at densities ranging from row houses to apartment buildings (30-100 units to the acre) — but reshaped to enhance livability. Development consultant Pam McKinney estimates that several thousand new households will support the cafés and shops that will transform lifeless streets into walkable streets. “Density bonuses” provide incentives to replace industry with housing. Mixed-use development on a 20-acre site can unlock creation of a substantial public park. And ultimately new development can help pay for new transit that has already been planned but that currently lacks funding.

The city of Chicago was committed to densities below 30 units to the acre (single-family rowhouses), but found that higher densities were required to redevelop the notorious Cabrini-Green public housing into a new mixed-income neighborhood with enough units to house both former public-housing tenants and new middle- and upper-income residents — and to support a Main Street. Many of Chicago’s beloved older neighborhoods represent densities 50 to 100 percent higher than 30 units per acre. The city has now embraced a mix of one- to three-family row houses, apartment houses, and lofts at densities ranging from 30 to 60 units per acre, and a new mixed-income neighborhood is taking shape.

Cleveland’s vibrant Ohio City neighborhood initially opposed increasing density on a redeveloped public-housing site. Following a six-month planning effort, the community supported development of more than 500 units with a mix of one- to three-family rowhouses, lofts, and mid-rise apartments, at a density of more than 50 units to the acre, that provides the critical mass to support the community’s goals for a revitalized Main Street, parks, and diversity.



A satellite view of density:  
Earth at night, November 2000

**Why dangerous?** Lack of density promotes sprawl, obstructs diversity, depletes Main Streets, and deprives communities of needed resources. If these sound like the words of a true believer, they are. As the pace of Boston's sprawl accelerates, the fact that household sizes have shrunk by 25 percent since 1970 means that it takes much more housing to return cities to their previous population levels; the alternative is to continue spilling ever-increasing numbers of people farther and farther out. Households are shrinking because families are changing: A developer in Cleveland, forced to build single-family houses for families that weren't seeking them, could not build apartments and lofts for the very diverse mix of people who were actually in the market for housing. Given the immense competition for retail dollars, it can easily take \$10 to 20 million of new household income to support one new shop or café that will enliven a neighborhood Main Street; unless we want only very high-income cities, one block of revitalized Main Street requires 3,000 to 4,000 new households.

So why do people fear, if not loath, density? As cities declined and suburbs thrived following World War II, cities emulated suburbs, hoping to bring back jobs and the middle class. As many cities recover, five "density myths" continue to foster the sense that density degrades livability:

**Myth: Density depletes open space.** I have yet to see a potential park site developed instead for housing or any other use. Parks and development don't compete. In this era of public/private partnership, development is often used to create or maintain parks that the public sector cannot otherwise afford.

**Myth: Density is ugly.** There are many examples of badly scaled and inappropriately designed housing and commercial buildings that denigrate the character of charming older neighborhoods and Main Streets. The problem is insensitive design, not density. Ironically, beloved older buildings are far more likely to represent high density than newer buildings.

**Myth: Density hurts property values.** "Why should my property values suffer so that a developer can make more money?"

No one's property values should suffer, and they don't. New investment — whether in the form of housing, which is invariably more expensive than existing housing, or jobs, which create more demand for nearby housing — raises property values.

**Myth: Density causes gentrification.** While development can be a symptom of gentrification, the failure to produce sufficient new housing to meet demand ultimately pushes prices up and displaces longtime residents. The solution is to build in affordability and diversity, not avoid building. Boston Mayor Thomas Menino's "Housing Strategy" notes that the region needs 15,000 new housing units annually to avoid steep housing inflation, more than twice the production over the 1990s. Building housing in older neighborhoods increases the options for affordable housing.

**Myth: Density causes traffic congestion.** Ironically, our past failure to provide density in the urban core creates the most troubling barrier to increasing density in the core, because people who live farther out are more dependent upon cars to reach the city's jobs and attractions. Architect Oliver Gillham AIA reports that, as sprawl has hit the Boston region over the past three decades, the total miles driven has increased 15 times faster than the population. Streets feel more congested because they *are* more congested. The answer is not less new housing in urban neighborhoods, inducing yet more sprawl, but managing the traffic we have and paying for the public transportation we need. The limited available sites in older neighborhoods are not the problem; they are mostly too small to support enough development to really aggravate traffic congestion.

The problem is not density, but how we shape density. The last 15 years have produced terrific examples of higher-density housing and commercial development that enrich neighborhoods in cities across America. We need to focus on learning from these examples and use them to build a new understanding — and perception — of density. ■■■

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