Rethinking Density

Art, Culture, and Urban Practices

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Density and City Growth

For urbanists dealing with the current global phenomena of growing cities, the concept of "urban density" is the key to pressing questions—such as access to affordable housing, reduction of urban sprawl, and creation of urbanity. The "density turn" started with Jane Jacobs's quest for (then still unpopular) denser cities in the 1960s,[1] and gained momentum with the "urbanity through density"—a slogan of the 1980s. Today, density is a pivotal term in cities' commitments to compactness—even more since increased density is accompanied by a promise of increased (equal) access to mobility, jobs, or culture, a promise that reacts to the scarcity of urban land resources. While this is true for many cities, my case study focuses on Vienna, where over the last decade the population has been growing due to migration from the countryside as well as global migration.

There is a lot of empirical evidence to the intensified densification currently happening in Vienna. An increase in building density is manifested by the number of construction sites—many of them accompanied by the loss of unbuilt space (as well as sometimes public resistance against such loss). Notably, social density is also increasing: more people than ever share the same urban spaces—public transportation, central public spaces, free-time recreational spaces.[2] This, of course, makes such urban spaces into increasingly lively areas; but it also turns them into conflictual spaces, as public space is under pressure from quasi-privatization and commercialization (e.g., by a growing number of cafés or urban beaches). Not all of these phenomena are, of course, related to urban densification as an answer to population growth. The growth in city tourism also stimulates and intensifies the commodification of public space. Yet, part of the privatization of public space is directly linked to raising density quotients in building plans, as I will show later. And aside from growing city tourism numbers, the recent price reduction for public transportation tickets—a (most welcome) measure proposed by the Green Party—has triggered an increase in the use of subways, trams and buses. More worrisome empiric evidence on the increase in population (rather than of building density) is given in the pressure on the housing market, which goes hand in hand with a significant raise of rents. Just as in other places, Vienna planning officials have been reacting to the housing shortage with a dedication to expedite housing construction: almost 50 percent of the expected construction should take place within the existing city quarters (hence densifying their structure)

1   See Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961).
2   Until today, Vienna profits from infrastructural concepts of Otto Wagner's 1893 "Generalregulierungsplan," which was predicated on the prospect of Vienna's population growing to four million inhabitants.

while the other half is to be achieved by fostering mostly high-density housing in new city development areas—supported by a special SMART housing program in order to stimulate apartments that are smaller than usual.[3]

Mathematically, the formula is easy, even similar to Isaac Newton's mass-to-volume quotient: increasing the number of population (mass) within the city's built volume. Yet, instrumentation of building density as a planning goal tends to be reductive since it understands space (or the city) as a container that can be filled with inhabitants. Problematizing such "container thinking" has led to the most conceptional and far-reaching critique of density in contemporary urban-planning theory.[4] Space—be it urban or other—is regarded as being the permanent product of the city's subjects and their social and cultural activities and practices on the basis of on Henri Lefebvre's Marxist spatial theory. And it is most often the overall socioeconomic conditions of the renters that make the difference in dense housing: whether there is richness and urbanity or poverty and deterioration. Finally, there is the question: Who profits from an increase in building density? So what is required is a conception of the urban as a space in the making and as a space of power relations instead of container reductionism.

Density and Post-political Urban Governance

The extent to which density has become a multifold parameter within contemporary city-planning management—from high density as a planning goal to density as a general city-planning tool—it may well be compared to the parameter sustainability, which is rightly critiqued, when, for example, reducing the complexity of the built environment to energy efficiency numbers. It is within the context of contemporary urban governance and its ideals of technocratic management and depoliticized "neutral" technologies of planning that mathematical formulas such as energy efficiency or density quotients help support the idea that there could be absolute, undisputed values in urban planning. The replacement of political positions and urban visions with technocratic management is what critics call the *post-political city*.[5]

The post-political city's central political form of expression is *consensus*, if we follow radical democratic theorists such as Jacques Rancière or Chantal Mouffe, who instead hold *dissensus* to be the core element of the political. The current dedication of city-planning officials to cooperative planning processes and processes of participation contribute to consensual urban planning. The dispute over the make up of urban society is reduced to technical issues—to either technocracy or mere technicalities.

Let's look at the role of density in this context: density (understood as high density) represents a technical solution to the housing shortage. Yet, the housing shortage is taken as the precondition to densification also in areas that are already quite dense (e.g., in central urban areas). At the same time, it is exactly in these areas that we find an astonishing amount of vacancies, part of which are directly related to contemporary investment strategies. Since money does not generate safe profits when invested in stocks, cities have offered plenty of opportunities in times of financial crisis, that is, investment in the real estate market. It is exactly in growing cities where we can find vacancies for speculative reasons or future investments, keeping apartments away from people in need. However, the statistics of Wiener Wohnen (the largest municipal housing provider in Europe, which manages two thousand community-owned housing estates of Vienna), reports only on those apartments that are officially vacant (as constantly needed stock), other than that no numbers are available. Vacancy does not feature as a specific parameter in the calculation of density.[6] Theoretically, according to this logic of counting, you *could* have a super-dense city with no one living in it.

Housing density also says nothing about the quality of the space, nor does it speak about just or unjust distribution of public infrastructure or access to public services. Density may become an active agent in an uneven development of the urban landscape and its infrastructure. To question who gets a share of urban density and its qualities in the places where density means urbanity and access to mobility and who is excluded from it, density needs to be confronted with a political agenda. Put more soberly, some places need a sort of vacancy tax rather than higher density. Keeping owners from withholding apartment space becomes even more important in a time when refuge is needed. Asylum permit holders seeking an apartment in Vienna are confronted with shortage of housing, but also with rejections based on racist prejudice.

3 The housing program's problematic notion of "smart" became synonymous to "as small as possible"—a notion that seems to be derived straight from the marketing success of so-called smart cars. See SMART-Wohnbauprogramm, https://www.wien.gv.at/bauen-wohnen/smart.html.

4 Nikolai Roskamm, *Dichte: Eine trans-disziplinäre Dekonstruktion: Diskurse zu Stadt und Raum* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2014).

5 Erik Swyngedouw, "The Post-political City," in *Urban Politics Now: Re-imagining Democracy in the Neoliberal City*, edited by Guy Baeten (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2007), 58–76.

6 Vienna's first district is a good example of the relative dimension of density with regard to vacancy, but also for uneven development; it is one of the two districts in Vienna without a growing population; rather, it has a population decrease of 11 percent—a phenomenon quite usual in city centers, where apartments are being bought as investment goods (rather than as homes). All other Viennese districts (with the other exception of the bourgeois thirteenth district) have growing population numbers, up to 20 percent.

Of course, neither racism nor classism for that matter is part of the numerical calculation of a density quotient. What the post-political mathematization and reductionism of the urban makes disappear from the picture are issues of solidarity, equality, and the contestation of spatial distribution. In other words, urbanity is so much more than density (and politics is an eminent form of testifying to this "more").

Density as Stimulator for a New *Existenzminimum*

There is another problematic development being stimulated by the current discourse on the need for density: it is the establishment of a necessity to redefine a new *Existenzminimum* (existential minimum). What happens in this process is that smaller and cheaper housing units are being stipulated. The attribution of smaller spaces as livable housing comes across as a purely technical measure—and is thus ever more ideological. To study this pheno-menon, I propose a detour to the 1929 CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne) in Frankfurt, which was devoted to "minimum housing," to architectural solutions regarding housing shortages as well as bad housing and hygienic conditions in cities after World War I. CIAM's analyses objected to urban structures developed during the so-called *Gründerzeit* (a period of economic innovation in the second half of the nineteenth century) in Europe. In this period, also large areas in Vienna developed into an extremely dense city structure. Housing conditions in these areas were deplorable as a result of speculation and site exploitation, which resulted in extremely dense building blocks as well as overcrowding in the apartments due to housing shortage and lack of rental rights (which often meant that there were up to thirty inhab-itants in small flats and led to the mass phenomenon of *Bettgeher*, people who rented somebody's bed during the daytime). The situation was not least the result of building laws that allowed for such high degrees of density.

However, as Jacobs argued, modernist architects all too readily confused the problems of overcrowded dwellings with high density of urban structures. For these architects, the misery was due almost only to building density,[7] which they blamed for lack of sun, air, and ventilation—necessities that modern architecture would triumphantly provide by developing concepts such as the garden city or mass construction of standardized, low-cost housing based on Le Corbusier's writings and the *Athens Charter*. Internationally renowned architects worked on housing blocks with creative solutions for apartments with a tolerable minimum in terms of floor area (existential minimum)—an effort that Giancarlo de Carlo would, in 1970, critique as playing "into the hands of the power structure" by not asking why (i.e., for what social and political reasons, and to whose benefit such reduction was necessary).

While today the outcome of modernist urbanism still poses problems related to a lack of urbanity, the Gründerzeit quarters in Vienna and other cities were finally turned into high-quality and hyper-urban quarters, especially after the period of *Sanfte Stadterneuerung* (gentle city renewal) in the 1980s, when dense building structures were thinned out and small and low-standard apart-ments were merged with larger units. Today, this Gründerzeit city, with its lively streets, provides some of the conditions contributing to Vienna's turning into a post-Fordist city, with that high building density representing an ideal ground for a "city of short paths," favoring flexible and well-scaled living and working units.[8] This also shows how the perception of building density relates to the individual housing situation (e.g., apartment size). The adaptive quali-ties of the historical urban structure and the constructive entrepreneurship of the private land and house owners during Gründerzeit have become some sort of urban-planning blueprint for today, as politicians invoke a new Gründer-zeit (accompanied by the hope that it would create urban areas not as heavily densified as they were during the nineteenth century's Gründerzeit).

Yet, with a maximum exploitation of urban land and the pressure on the housing market currently at a peak, we have to expect a renewed call To reduce the floor size per person and increase occupancy rates. Even if the floor area were to remain the same, the "volume" of the newly built apartments is already significantly lower than during Gründerzeit, since today's ceiling heights are much lower.[9] However, there is a reduction of floor area, and it is even subsidized through the already-mentioned SMART housing program. With the growing number of refugees in need of apartments in Vienna, it can be ex-pected that the floor size per person will be reduced even more, as migrants from outside of the EU already live on a much lower average than the "Austrian average": twenty-two to twenty-six square meters as opposed to forty-five square meters per person.[10]

7   Walter Gropius did differentiate building typologies from speculation though: "However, the cause for the misery of these undignified dwellings is not the dwelling form of the multistory apartment house as such but the shortsighted legis-lation which permitted the construction of this class of low-cost dwellings to fall into the hands of unscrupulous speculators without adequate social safeguards." Walter Gropius, "Houses, Walk-Ups or High-Rise Apartment Blocks?" (1931), *The Scope of Total Architecture*, trans. Roger Banham (New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1980); available at https://modernistarchitecture .wordpress.com/2010/10/28/walter-gropius '-"houses-walk-ups-or-high-rise-apartment -blocks"-1931/.

8   Renate Banik-Schweitzer, "Postfordistische Gesellschaft in unterschiedlichen Stadte-bautypologien," In *Urban Form: Städtebau in der postfordistischen Gesellschaft,* ed. Renate Banik-Schweitzer and Eve Blau (Vienna: Löcker, 2003). 137–58.

9   During *Gründerzeit,* building regulations did not limit the height of buildings, but the number of floors.

10 Statistik Austria, Kommission für Migrations- und Integrationsforschung der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften: migration & integration, zahlen.daten.indikatoren (Vienna, 2015), http://www.statistik.at/web_de/statistiken /menschen_und_gesellschaft/bevoelkerung /demographische_prognosen/ bevoelkerungsprognosen/index.html.

Density as a Pretext for Neoliberalization
and Land Speculation

As discussed above, in some contexts the current drive toward densification acts as a post-political answer to ecological challenges and population growth (i.e., a solution beyond dispute). While of course some city areas (mostly on the city margins) could do with more density, in already dense areas, densification is an enabler and active agent for neoliberal planning politics, especially regarding privatization of public services and public space.[11]

To understand this process, we have to look at density as a planning tool. In building plans, the maximum zoning density quotient effectively limits the amount of square footage that can be built on a piece of land.[12] This way the quotient has been and still is used to limit the possibility of (extreme) exploitation of a site. At the same time, the definition of maximum density recorded in building plans also indicates the value of land. The more one can build on it, the higher the value of the land.

Yet, land prices are skyrocketing independent of their dedicated density quotient, especially in growing cities such as Vienna, as there are ever less empty plots, and ever more people also invest in urban land, for which there is no real state-directed price control or market regulation. Now, of course the higher the price for a piece of land, the more an investor wants to exploit it. With fast population growth and housing shortage acting as the supporting argument, the pressure on politics is high,[13] and it also comes directly from investors and developers: they urge administrations to raise density quotients and propose planning processes to "test" possible maximum volumes independent of existing building plan regulations. This situation is destined, of course, to cause a situation in which city planning departments are—seemingly—forced into advocating speculation, which comes along with generally desired high density. So, administrations find themselves authorizing neoliberal investments that will lower achieved standards: apartment blocks exploiting their site in an ever more dense way, or: obvious processes of gentrification, when new construction of higher housing density pushes low-income residents into peripheral areas; or poor locations for housing. This pressure, under which the city government finds itself in the wake of the expected city growth, is at the same time also, and even in exacerbated form, a precondition to speculation in already perfectly urbanized locations, especially in central urban areas, where existing lively urbanity makes apartments sell even better. After such high-level land speculation, the goal of investors is maximum density for their expensive plot. Along this line of thought the argument is turned around: density is not the reason for speculation but—the other way around—speculation is the reason for high density.[14] Of course, wherever high density translates into a maximum of privatized floor area to be rented or sold for

profit, the density of public infrastructure also has to be raised. This task is usually left to the cities, many of which recently tend to declare that they lack the resources (in terms of budget and staff) to develop as well as to maintain public services—also due to the lack of redistribution measures of the excessive private profits. Many cities have adopted some sort of cofinancing model in forms of public private partnerships for streets, parks, schools, and other public infrastructure. With growing numbers of planning deals (with regard to higher density quotients, e.g., deals in which a private partner pays for infrastructure as a payoff for an increase in building density), cities enter into a neo-feudalist era: whole parks, streets, and schools are currently being developed by private investors, and they are often rented or leased to the city while remaining private property (according to the neoliberal logic of privatizing gains and collectivizing losses). Given the speed by which such deals are becoming the norm, phenomena that until recently felt like science fiction in (post-)welfare state cities are now just around the corner: private control over access to privatized urban spaces, such as plazas or squares;[15] entrance fees for parks that are maintained by private companies; urban citizens divided up into consumers and nonprofitable non-consumers.

Reclaiming Density for Radical Democratic Urban Space

If we imagine a city according to Lefebvre's claim for a "right to the city"—a universal claim that insists on the possibility for everyone to have an equal share in the making of the city—then this city of universal rights will by necessity be a dense city. In this sense, and in this sense only, density is destiny. What is not predestined, however, what is therefore up to change and contestation,

11 For a discussion on neoliberal city planning in Vienna in its early phase, see Andreas Novy, Vanessa Redak, Johannes Jäger, and Alexander Hamedinger, "The End of Red Vienna: Recent Ruptures and Continuities in Urban Governance," *European Urban and Regional Studies* 8, no. 2 (2001): 131–44.

12 Generally, it seems counterintuitive, and also has been subject to critique (see Roskamm, *Dichte*), that the density quotient as an instrument in urban planning effectively *limits* density, even today, when the general goal is to *increase* density. Historically, using the density quotient to limit the maximum density per site is based on the experience that private owners tend to overexploit their plot of land.

13 This is also why the maximum density is raised around high-level public transportation nodes. In order to stimulate growth Vienna dedicates minimum density factors to special areas in the city: next to urban infrastructure: minimum density of 1.5 NGFZ net floor ratio (*Nettogeschoß-flächenzahl*) to up to minimum 2.5 NGFZ when there is high-level of public transportation.

14 In such cases, high density does not mean high residential density, because in these urban sites marked by their high cultural capital the aim of investors is to construct highly profitable luxury condominiums.

15 The privatization of public space is most conspicuous in so-called BIDs (Business Improvement Districts) as they recently emerged in London or Hamburg.

is how we define urban density in a democratic manner. To some extent, it would amount to a contradiction in terms if one were to neatly and solidly define the fundamental elements of democratic urbanity (cast in stone, as it were). But we can and we must always attempt to map out some of the criteria for what democratizes the making of cities and collectivities. At this point, sketches of a few ideas must suffice.

First, and also generally, we must reconnect density to content in a political way. When we speak about density it makes a big difference if the density in question relates to luxury condominiums—or to affordable housing, affordable work spaces, and public infrastructure. This issue becomes especially salient in those frequent cases when high-density quotients turn, for instance, into high-rise buildings: with such literally "outstanding" buildings, we should be even more mindful of their content.

Second, if we take Lefebvre's "Right to the City" seriously, one of the consequences of this claim is that it loses much of its meaning if it is not immediately qualified as a universal "right to the center," a right to have access to urban centers and to public infrastructure. To insist on this right is, in a general sense, part of the creation of a publicness based on egalitarian freedom concerning the use of that space: it also means increasing de-central infrastructure density and at the same time defending open access to the center. More specifically, the claim for a right to the center answers to growing inequalities in the distribution of access to city centers, with new elites claiming a monopoly over (in the name of "security") more and more sanitized and militarized centers, while living on low-density city edges comes along with long commuting time and high costs for private transportation, to name just some of the problems affected by this.

Third, in redefining democratic, equality-oriented urbanity in times of density, one should look to history, to historical attempts, and solutions in urban planning politics.

What I have in mind is, among other examples (such as some building regulations introduced during Gründerzeit), the active redistribution of social wealth toward housing programs for the poor enabled through a progressive redistribution tax (e.g., on luxury items) as it was introduced by the Social Democratic city government of Red Vienna in the 1920s and early '30s. But, I hasten to add, we have to be mindful of the paternalistic and disciplinary aspects that came along with the politics of Red Vienna: therefore, a renewed legislation of justice has to be combined with spaces that allow unforeseen agencies and options for many—as long as this does not lead to the appropriation of space by just a few.

This brings me to a final point, which is complimentary to the latter, history-oriented one, and that is the invention and development of new tools in urban planning (not least in order to replace supposedly "neutral" technocratic formulas such as density quotients in building plans and city planning). So, along with the economics of maximum density (and existential minimum), we have to question the logic of the plans in which density, along with other parameters, is recorded and prescribed. Let me conclude by mentioning an example out of my own planning practice, the *Donaukanal Partitur*:[16] in the context of defending what remains of public space along the Donaukanal-Ufer, the Danube Canal waterfront in Vienna's center, we developed what we called a "nonbuilding plan" (*Nichtbebauungsplan*). This plan is the opposite of a building plan and its goal is to avoid an increase in privatized densification in this booming urban recreational area that has been under high pressure from investors for years. We consider this area in the center highly valuable not as a profitable piece of urban land, but as a public zone with universal access and without mandatory consumption.

If we demand a universal right to the city (and to urban centrality) and work toward this right becoming a reality, then this reality will certainly involve building density, especially around nodes of public mobility and culture. But there will at the same time have to be ample public space, nonprogrammed space remaining an unexhausted potential, not as an option for future profit, but as social space in an emphatic sense, which is a space allowing for contact and conflict to happen. This also necessitates the political will and skills—on the part of governments as well as of civic society—to defend it.

16 Gabu Heindl and Susan Kraupp,   https://www.wien.gv.at/stadtentwicklung
    "Donaukanal Partitur," Vienna, 2014,   /studien/e000012.html.

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Rethinking Density: Art, Culture, and Urban Practices considers new perspectives and discussions related to the category of density, which for a long time has been part of urban-planning discourses and is now regaining the attention of artists and practitioners from a number of different disciplines. In an interplay of models, coping strategies, and experimental approaches, this publication combines research from cultural studies, artistic research, sound studies as well as architectural and urban theory.

The issues discussed include the consideration of retroactive architectural design as a means to retrace the historical layers of a city, a proposal for space-sharing concepts as instruments for urban revitalization processes, and a case study on the potential for new sonic social spaces as subversive modes to undermine prevailing power structures.

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