

## Densification and the ambition for a democratic city

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A view of the Khayelitsha hostels, photo by Bruce Sutherland

### ABSTRACT

In South Africa's planning history, densification with the aim of improving urban sustainability and integration after apartheid, would prove to be a challenging concept. This due to more than a century of draconian planning laws which actively, and violently, built on on the concept of segregation, the social and cultural tensions that remain and the expectations of single-plot housing.

South Africa has since democracy in 1994, developed an abundance of policies and frameworks that promote the role and potential of densification and ultimate more compact and spatially efficient cities.

This paper traces the movement of 'density' and 'densification' from a peripheral concept in the immediate post-1994 policy period in South Africa, to the guiding principle (alongside mobility) of all spatial planning at present.

It focuses on reviewing the thinking on the concept of densification at a national level through key policies in spatial planning, land use and housing, alongside the policy and frameworks developed at a local level, to expressly unpack the role of cities in engaging and promoting the concept of densification.

A key shift to understand is both the increasing relevance and attention given to densification at a local government level through the densification strategy and subsequent transport policies and the nationally-led policy response to direct city-efforts towards densification along corridors and zones through incentives. This renewed local-national relationship has provided a new lens and sense of urgency around the concept as a tool for spatial restructuring.

**Keywords :** densification, sustainable cities, social inequality, Cape Town, spatial planning

## Introduction

In South Africa's planning history, densification - the more effective use of both vertical and horizontal space in a city, with the aim of improving urban sustainability and integration after apartheid, would prove to be a challenging concept. This due to more than a century of draconian planning laws which actively, and violently, built on on the concept of segregation, implemented in large part through the Group Areas Act<sup>1</sup> and the delivery of modernist infrastructure to support the state subsidisation of the car-based suburban lifestyle.

The arrival of democracy in 1994 resulted in a raft of legislation and policies to give effect to the constitutional right of access to adequate housing and the political commitment of free housing as redress. However, the legacy of social and cultural separation, the dominant media representation of density and expectations of single-plot housing created by the political commitment and minimum requirements for housing would make this a challenging concept to promote.

Today, Cape Town, a sprawling city of 3.5 million continues to display signs of of inverse densification, where the peripheries are densifying much faster than the inner suburbs, a lasting symptom of the country's harshly divided spatial history.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Group Areas Act, Act No. 36, 1966.

<sup>2</sup> South African Cities Network, *State of South African Cities Report 2011: Towards resilient cities* (Johannesburg: South African Cities Network, 2011), 65.

The city also has an unusually skewed form, with the bulk of the population – but very few jobs – concentrated in the south-east, while the relatively sparsely populated central city and inner suburbs is where the most employment opportunities are found.<sup>3</sup>

The rationale for densification in policy for Cape Town and to some extent in South Africa is identified by Turok<sup>4</sup> as centering on : (i) the need for a more sustainable city, both environmentally and financially, (ii) the positive externalities or ‘agglomeration economies’ that may result and (iii) the potential for social inclusion and integration.

## Densification in post-1994 policy

In South Africa, neither the definition of densification, nor its degree of priority in the transformation of the built environment, have been stable over time. Densification has gained in priority over considerations as the immediate post-Apartheid policy of housing-as-redress has evolved into a more nuanced campaign to provide shelter (in a multitude of forms) within sustainable and dignified human settlements.

Densification has thus emerged from a peripheral consideration at the margins of the remit of the Department of Housing, to a central aim of the current Department of Human Settlements (DoHS), and at a municipal level as a critical tool to engage with the operational viability of cities and towns.

The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) of 1994 is considered to be the mother policy of the transition to a democratic South Africa and includes “the most ambitious redevelopment and human settlements plans in the last 50 years (perhaps even globally)”.<sup>5</sup> While policies contained in the RDP programme aimed to ‘break down the apartheid geography through land reform, more compact cities and decent public transport’ as well as ‘densification and unification of the urban fabric’ - the dominant form of delivery can be noted by the almost endless series of small matchbox-like homes on single plots in cities and towns across South Africa .

The Development Facilitation Act of 1995 (DFA) was promulgated with the aim of overriding existing apartheid-related planning legislation. It recognises that a key land development objective should relate to “interalia, the overall density of settlements, with due regard to the interests of beneficial occupiers”.<sup>6</sup> It also promotes development principles which discourage urban sprawl and contribute towards the development of compact towns and cities.

The 1996 Metropolitan Spatial Development Framework (MSDF) of the city of Cape Town promoted densification as a whole but was also specific in its promotion of densification along corridors and nodes. The recommendations of this framework went as far as promoting densities of more than 100 dwelling per hectare (du/ha) in the activity spine areas and densities of 40 to 100 du/ha within one

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<sup>3</sup> South African Cities Network, *State of South African Cities Report 2011*, 65.

<sup>4</sup> Ivan Turok, “Deconstructing Density: Strategic Dilemmas of the Post-Apartheid City”, *Cities* 28 , 10 (2011), 450-477.

<sup>5</sup> Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), (Pretoria: Government Printers, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Government of South Africa, *Development Facilitation Act*, Act No 67, 1995.

km of the spine.<sup>7</sup>

The primary piece of housing legislation in South Africa, The Housing Act of 1997<sup>8</sup> provides the legal principles for the sustainable development of housing, including the roles of all spheres of governments, and the basis for financing the national housing development programme.

The act contained an inherent contradiction in that the provision of shelter was privileged over the creation of settlements. "By fixing a ceiling cost, a minimum floor area and land use standards, de facto establishes the cost of land as the dependent variable. The more isolated the location for subsidized housing projects, the lower the price of land and consequently the more financially feasible is the project".<sup>9</sup>

Despite this, Section 2(1)(e) of the Act does make a cursory mention of "higher density in respect of housing development to ensure the economical utilisation of land and services"<sup>10</sup>, but as one objective among many, rather than a guiding idea for the development of all settlements. Furthermore, the wording of the Act does not indicate the parameters by which density might be measured.

By 2002, various unintended consequences of the existing housing policy were becoming apparent. The continued emphasis in discourse on 'housing' in the abstract had failed to produce human settlements in which housing could be an appreciating, well-located asset. Admission of the need for a human settlements policy in tandem with a housing policy, that would give effect and content to what had hitherto been abstract objectives of 'densification', led to the Breaking New Ground policy (BNG) of 2004.<sup>11</sup>

While a key objective of BNG related to eradication of informal settlements by 2014, it intended to shift away from a focus on quantity of houses delivered to quality (size and workmanship of housing product, settlement design, alternative technology, etc) and choice (tenure type, location, etc).

In relation to densification it aimed to: (i) introduce new funding mechanisms to enhance the delivery of medium density social housing and (ii) required municipalities to identify areas for densification within their Integrated Development Plans.

It was however not prescriptive on the financing method or time period over which the proposed areas for densification would be developed. As a result, the Department of Human Settlements and provincial government departments still prioritised fully subsidised, low-density, detached, freehold

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<sup>7</sup> Cape Metropolitan Council, 1996: Metropolitan Spatial Development Framework: A guide for Spatial Development in the Cape Metropolitan Functional Region: Technical Report, April 1996.

<sup>8</sup> Government of South Africa, SA Department of Housing, *Housing Act*, Act No. 107, 1997.

<sup>9</sup> Mark William Massyn, Robert McGaffin, Francois Viruly, Nicole Hopkins, "The challenge of developing higher density, affordable housing in the inner city of Cape Town", *International Journal of Housing Markets and Analysis* 8, 3 (2015), 412 - 428.

<sup>10</sup> Government of South Africa, *Housing Act*, Act No. 107 of 1997.

<sup>11</sup> Government of South Africa, National Department of Human Settlements, "Breaking New Ground: A Comprehensive Plan for the Development of Sustainable Human Settlements", 2004.

family accommodation over other delivery modes, tenure systems and accommodation choices.<sup>12</sup>

In 2008 and 2009, two different plans sought to give a clearer expression to the ambitions for densification in Cape Town.

The Central City Development Strategy of 2008 produced by the Cape Town Partnership included the bold ambition to treble Cape Town's inner city population within 10 years, including a target of 20% subsidized affordable housing.<sup>13</sup>

The strategy was released after an almost decade long turn-around of the decline and flight of capital in the 1980's and early 90's. However, the strategy, while bold in its aspiration to promote opportunity and reduce congestion, remained exactly that, an aspiration<sup>14</sup>

In 2009, the City of Cape Town's Draft Densification Strategy<sup>15</sup> presented by the Spatial Planning and Urban Design department which became the Cape Town Densification Policy in 2012<sup>16</sup> is the most significant policy in the city for the promotion of densification.

It takes a "whole of Cape Town approach" with several technical recommendations and policy mechanisms as pathways towards achieving a target average density of 25 dwellings per hectare. While a major step forward in promoting densification, criticisms have pointed to the fact that no time scale exists and further to this, was less prescriptive in comparison to the 1996 MSDF and hence less politically threatening.<sup>17</sup>

In 2009, the National Department of Human Settlements (DoHS) reviewed the BNG programme and found that the key focus remained housing (i.e. shelter aspect) rather than human settlements development. New grant instruments were which include the Upgrading Informal Settlements Programme (UISP) which promotes an incremental (or phased), holistic and developmental approach to upgrading human settlements.<sup>18</sup>

Contrary to the BNG programmed which aimed to eliminate informal settlements nationally over a defined time period, the UISP was a bold statement to legitimise the existence of the majority of informal settlements. It recognised the importance of improving living conditions where high and often unsustainable densities were in place, as a response to the backlog rather than an appreciation for the potential of sustainable densification.

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<sup>12</sup> Socio-economics Rights Institute of South Africa (SERI), A Resource Guide to Housing in South Africa 1994-2010 Legislation, Policy, Programmes and Practice, (2009) , 67.

<sup>13</sup> Cape Town Partnership, The Central City Development Strategy, (Cape Town: 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Ivan Turok, "Deconstructing Density: Strategic Dilemmas of the Post-Apartheid City", Cities 28 , 10 (2011), 450-477.

<sup>15</sup> City of Cape Town, Spatial Planning and Urban Design Department, "Cape Town Densification Strategy Technical Report", (Cape Town: 2009).

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*

<sup>17</sup> Ivan Turok, "Deconstructing Density: Strategic Dilemmas of the Post-Apartheid City", Cities 28 , 10 (2011), 450-477.

<sup>18</sup> SERI, A Resource Guide, 85.

The Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act (SPLUMA) of 2013<sup>19</sup> emerged to replace the DFA of 1995 as the legislative instrument to regulate spatial planning and land use management in the country.

More specifically it was in recognition that policies since 1995 were unable to steer development of both public and private projects towards more integrated and equitable cities.<sup>20</sup> It intended to contribute to addressing this situation by offering municipalities a number of new opportunities and responsibilities with respect to land use management .

SPLUMA requires that the Spatial Development Framework that must be drafted by all municipalities to include an estimation of housing needs over the long term, along with the identification of planned locations and densities of future housing. Unlike previous policies SPLUMA requires that this is delivered alongside implementation plans (including financing, institutional and partnership arrangements), and that the housing relates directly to the scale and location of capital and infrastructure upgrades. In principle, the densification of future housing developments and infill projects would then become more viable where minimal capital spending on infrastructure was needed or where significant investments in public transport infrastructure already existed..

The more recent development of transit-oriented development (TOD) policies in Cape Town and other metros in South Africa have explicitly recognised the inter-relationship between spatial planning and infrastructure and in particular transport infrastructure - a significant portion of the municipal budget.

In Cape Town the release of the Integrated Public Transport Network (IPTN) for 2032<sup>21</sup> proposes using spatial restructuring to make public transport financially sustainable (operational costs), since the planned public transport network and future investments (rail and road-based) are based on a future city that is denser around that network.

It is estimated that operational costs of public transport in the city have been estimated to break even when the city as a whole reaches densities of 40 to 45 du/ha, and becomes profitable once there are approximately 75 dwellings per hectare.<sup>22</sup> Given, that Cape Town's current density averages between 15 to 19 du/ha it can be suggested the spatial restructuring process required in the coming decades will rely heavily on the tool and process of densification.

As a response the recently released TOD Strategic Framework of the City of Cape Town<sup>23</sup> includes intensification and densification as a core principle of the policy - but relies on the Densification Policy

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<sup>19</sup> Government of South Africa, Spatial Planning and Land Use Management, Act 16 of 2013. (Pretoria: 2015).

<sup>20</sup> South African Cities Network, "From housing to human settlements: evolving perspectives", (Johannesburg: South African Cities Network, 2014), 10.

<sup>21</sup> City of Cape Town, Transport for Cape Town, "Integrated Public Transport Network 2032", (Cape Town:2015).

<sup>22</sup> City of Cape Town, Transport for Cape Town, *Comprehensive Integrated Transport Plan 2013-2018*, (Cape Town: 2014).

<sup>23</sup> City of Cape Town, Transport for Cape Town, *Transit Oriented Development Strategic Framework*, (Cape Town:2016).

of 2012 as a guide.

It is however questioned whether either of these policies are enough to inspired the spatial restructuring and in particular densification, as it will require changes to various aspects of municipal governance, not to mention greater cooperation among various government and parastatal agencies.

<sup>24</sup>There are also no precedents to indicated that TOD strategies implemented have succeeded in limiting urban sprawl and reducing inequality.<sup>25</sup>

Where major metros have been less specific around zones for densification or integration and were also limited by a lack of resources to densify, the recently adopted Urban Networks Strategy (National Treasury) would create an incentive to overcome this challenge.

It specifically prioritises public sector capital spending in primary nodes and along development corridors that link primary nodes and poor settlements that meet minimum threshold targets in terms of population size and distance from the primary node.<sup>26</sup> Grants by National Treasury would then encourages cities to align, sequence and manage public investment, with a specific focus on agglomerating urban activities in so called 'economic integration zones'.

In the City of Cape Town, the transport and planning departments have identified the Voortrekker Road corridor and the Metro South-East corridor as investment priorities within the TOD framework, which draw on, among others, the City's Densification Policy of 2012.

In 2014 the Integrated Urban Development Framework (IUDF), termed the "new deal for South African cities", is a policy initiative which "seeks to foster a shared understanding across government and society about how best to manage urbanisation and achieve the goals of economic development, job creation and improved living conditions in South African cities"<sup>27</sup>

As one of eight policy levers to transform South African cities, the section on Integrated and Sustainable Human Settlements calls for densification and integration as urgent actions in the short to medium term.

Alongside the shift in planning policy through UISP, which legitimises the existence of informal settlements as discussed above, the IUDF encourages cities to promote densification: (i) by supporting the informal and often unregulated densification due to back-yarding in townships and (ii) extending options for suburban densification

## Conclusion

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<sup>24</sup> Rory Williams, e-mail message to author, 25 May, 2016.

<sup>25</sup> Geoff Bickford, "Transit oriented development: An appropriate tool to drive improved mobility and accessibility in South African cities?" (paper presented at the Spatial Transformation of Cities Conference :Johannesburg as a Laboratory, Johannesburg 4–6 March 2014).

<sup>26</sup> Louis P. Boshoff, "Evidence-based spatial analysis for improved urban planning and management" (paper presented at the annual World Bank Conference on Land and Poverty, Washington DC, Louisiana, March 24-27, 2014).

<sup>27</sup> The Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA), *Integrated Urban Development Framework*, (Pretoria: 2014).

The question remains to be answered as to whether the densification of urban areas, touted in many policies as the solution towards the reduction of poverty and the housing crisis, will have any positive influence on the desegregation of Cape Town's suburbs and the dismantling of the apartheid spatial planning legacy.<sup>28</sup>

Despite attempts to address these issues, restrictive planning structures, bureaucracy and the failure to recognize or formalize 'informality' continues to reproduce policies of exclusivity and segregation. In Cape Town and the Western Cape obstacles include the absence of a unified and coordinated approach towards implementing densification. This is due to a lack of agreement between local, provincial and national government department priorities over the reuse of several under-used public assets such as the Somerset Hospital site, Culemborg, and other strategic land parcels and spaces within the inner city area that could be redeveloped.<sup>29</sup>

The obstacles and challenges that Cape Town faces in ensuring sustainable densification, some of which are described above, need not linger if a crucial shift takes place in thinking by today's young urbanists, designers and planners, and ultimately in the political leadership.

Projects like the 10x10 housing in Freedom Park by DesignSpaceAfrica<sup>30</sup>, the Density Syndicate research collaboration<sup>31</sup> and more recently the pilot phase of the Empower Shack in Khayelitsha by Urban-Think Tank<sup>32</sup>, are critical demonstration projects. Though privately or donor funded, they have given room to test densification at the coalface but experimentation of this nature has not been encouraged through planning policy development, creating little incentive for cities and regions to lead or collaborate with such initiatives.

The challenge in communicating the benefits of densification comes to the fore often in informal context, where negotiations with individuals communities, often constrained officials, aiming to balance rapid delivery with the 'single-plot single-dwelling' expectation of individuals and communities. Within these challenging contexts, there is no clear policy direction for municipalities to

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<sup>28</sup> D.J. Du Plessis, "A Critical Reflection on Urban Spatial Planning Practices and Outcomes in Post-Apartheid South Africa", *Urban Forum* 25, 1 (2014), 69-88.

<sup>29</sup> Ivan Turok, "Deconstructing Density: Strategic Dilemmas of the Post-Apartheid City", *Cities* 28, 10 (2011), 450-477.

<sup>30</sup> DesignSpaceAfrica, "Design Indaba 10 x 10 Sandbag housing, Mitchell's Plein", accessed May 13, 2016. <http://www.designspaceafrica.com/design-indaba-10-x-10/>

<sup>31</sup> African Centre for Cities, "The Density Syndicate", accessed May 13, 2016. <http://www.africancentreforcities.net/programme/applied-urban-research/public-culture-research-group/exhibition-2014/density-syndicate/>

<sup>32</sup> Urban-Think Tank, "Empower Shack", accessed May 13, 2016. <http://u-tt.com/project/empower-shack/>



allocate resources and skills for community engagement.

Planning policies may go even further, encouraging communication and marketing campaigns for the long term vision of the city - possibly enacted through existing frameworks like the IDP and SDF - to consistently showcase dense neighbourhoods as liveable and desirable.

While density cannot be considered the panacea to developing an equitable and integrated South African city, its relevance as a policy tool and idea has substantially grown in importance - from a peripheral concept in the immediate post-1994 policy period in South Africa, to a guiding principle in the the City of Cape Town led Densification Strategy and Transit Oriented Development Policy, and the nationally led Urban Network Strategy around economic integration zones. As a result, there is a renewed local-national government relationship which provides a new lense on densification and contributes to sense of urgency for densification as a tool of spatial restructuring.

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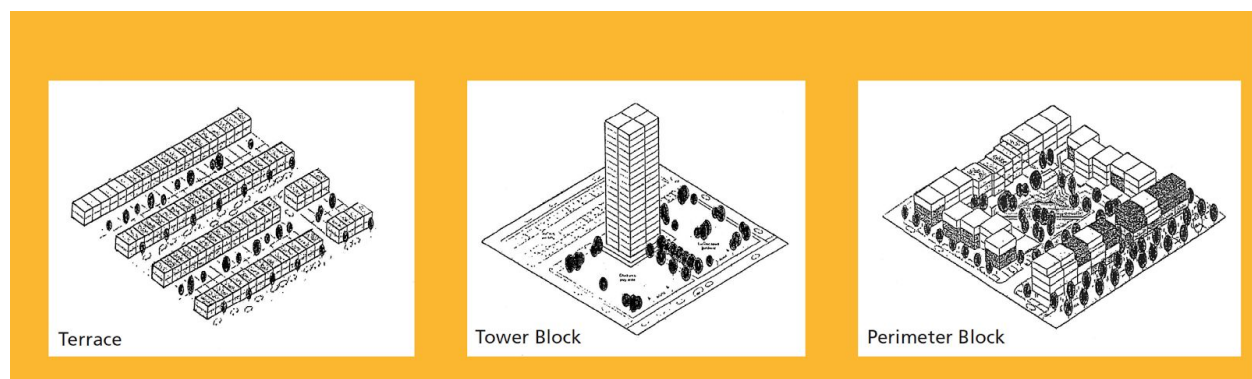
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## Graphic works/Images

The same density depicted in different building forms. Source: City of Cape Town Densification Policy 2011





Changes in the population density of Cape Town 1904-2000 Source: Gasson, B (2001) The Biophysical Environment of the Western Cape Province in Relation to its Economy and Settlements, University of Cape Town



Aerial view of the Cape Town City Bowl by Bruce Sutherland