



Happiness per hectare

RIBA Journal May 2006

If housing density was defined by rooms rather than dwellings per hectare, it could have huge implications for development. Rather than cramming couples into tiny boxes, we could create city places that would draw families back from the suburbs.

By Jan-Carlos Kucharek

One tiny little annex in the proposal for PPS3 has thrown open the debate on density. The consensus on high density housing that emerged following the Urban Task Force's recommendations on brownfield development and was incorporated into PPG3, is being questioned. Now the consultation period for the draft is over, and the ODPM's intended publication date is 'summer 2006', interest lobbies are having to sit and sweat.

PPS3 talks about density only in annex A of its draft consultation paper, giving figures of between 30 and 70 dwellings per hectare depending on whether it is a rural or city context. But Esther Kurland, senior planning adviser at Cabe, feels it needs to be far more integrated, and a basis for wider social policies. 'If planners aren't looking at the issue of urban density, what are they looking at?' she says.

The definition of density and how it is measured is important, because interpretations can lead to wildly varying design approaches. The government's preferred method of calculating density is dwellings per hectare, which works fine when considering uniform house types, but not if you are trying to encourage a variety of unit sizes. The latter produces a far lower average density than a mass of one-bedroom apartments. Alternative methods of calculation are beds per hectare, or habitable rooms per hectare.

Better way of measuring

Cabe sounded out professions and the industry last month, and its research culminated in a joint letter to the ODPM outlining their concerns. Kurland says: 'We were keen to draw attention to the way that density is measured, which we felt can be manipulated and skew the outcome of a density study.' Cabe proposed that it be measured by floor space and not dwellings per hectare, discouraging developers from increasing density figures by sticking to identical, small one- or two-bedroom units. Measuring density by floor space, it argued, will be done anyway through the forthcoming Home Information Packs, which will legally oblige house sellers to state the floor area.

'How you measure density has always been a problem,' says Roger Chapman, head of strategic planning at the Government Office for London's planning and housing division. 'But the point is that land needs to be used efficiently, and PPS3 should be setting higher density guidelines. What we need is a spread of densities across the city worked out on a site-by-site basis, taking account of local characteristics. Density might be a good start, but it's not the endpoint.' For Chapman, it's about sustainable densities predicated on infrastructure, transport links, health and educational provision; all criteria which cannot be quantified solely in net density averages.

Can the planning system cope?

For Kurland, too, this would be the right approach, but with an already heaving planning system, could this additional breadth be accommodated? 'It's not about intensifying the process but frontloading it, such as with area action plans,' she says. 'Setting density criteria before the detail planning stages should help ease the process, not complicate it.'

Chapman's comments point to differences between gross and net densities: gross density includes open space, roads and other buildings on a site; net density refers only to the actual housing. Kurland says: 'There should be a recognition within PPS3 that density is about intensity of use, about functions and services supporting the housing component - that it's more about optimising land use and about the spatial planning of neighbourhoods. Local authorities should consider the synergy between housing and how it relates to service provision. PPS3 should be founded on good masterplanning principles like these.'

At the core of the planning regulations is the link between car parking provision and housing, but Cabe is keen on planners having a more understanding view of how the regulations are interpreted. 'It's unrealistic to expect parking restrictions to affect travel patterns,' says Kurland, who wants a more flexible approach to inner city living. She would like to see a trade-off in which individual units are given less car parking space in return for more generous provision for families: 'Family housing

opportunity. There's a lack of relation between the planning of units and consumer choice.'

And in a stakeholder market, consumer choice is everything. June Barnes, CEO of the East Thames Housing Group, believes the public have the wrong idea about what high-density housing can be like. 'People still think it means tower blocks, associating it with noise, smell and overcrowding, but technically the Barbican complex is high density and yet it gives a good standard of accommodation for families, with full access to local amenities. The public needs to be educated as to density's positive aspects.'

Only then will we start seeing families moving back to the centre rather than drifting away as needs change. In fact, Barnes has a more serious worry: 'It's not density we need to worry about, but hyperdensity. I note that in the PPS3 draft document, we are given density floors, but no ceilings.'

Bring the suburbs to the city

Barnes is not the only one reacting to the Urban Task Force's inner city agenda and a climate in which developers are maximising returns by constructing small, compact non-family units. There are moves afoot to mix up the inevitable heterogeneity: architect Richard MacCormac is looking to suburbia, which, he's convinced, 'is the aspirational English way of living. We are keen on testing whether it's possible to meet the sustainable housing agenda using the suburban housing idiom.'

Following the Department for Transport's 5000 homes agenda, which describes the minimum catchment to support a viable transport network, MacCormac recently compiled a paper, Sustainable Suburbia, analysing these suburban conditions in an urban context. The study starts with a 50 dwellings per hectare scenario and looks at the design implications of increasing it to 120dph. 'In fact, achieving 50dph is a doddle,' he says. 'The Thames Gateway is experiencing densities of 150-200dph, which, while half that of some London developments, hugely increases the viability of public transport.'



Playstreet image from MJP's study 'Sustainable Suburbia'

Designing for families

MacCormac has made it his mission to draw families back into urban centres, knowing designers will have to address how to house the demographic mix. He thinks in terms of gross densities, and of road layout design as pivotal in whether a community will interact with its inhabitants and its surroundings (see box, page 66). He sees places like Manchester as leading the push to bring families back into city centres. 'Ten or 15 years ago there were 2000 flats in the city centre, now there's 20,000,' he says. 'It's compact, and looking for a richer demographic mix without compromising its urban nature. It's a trade-off in the end - can the key environmental qualities of suburbia be sustainably created next to Manchester Piccadilly?'

And what of the natural migration of families from the city centre to the suburbs as needs change? MacCormac Jamieson Prichard director Duncan McKinnon senses a shift in cultural thinking bubbling beneath a sea of new developments that are out of step with their potential market - one in which the suburban family can return to the urban centre: 'What all our studies are addressing is the ageing of a generation of people who are aware of the benefits of living in the city and yet who are feeling forced out once they have families. We aim to break that cycle - with pressure coming from market expectations,' he says.

So what are we to expect of the new PPS3 when it finally comes out? Barnes mentions PRP Architects' report, High Density Housing in Europe: Lessons for London, conducted on what are considered 'successful' estates. The results are not surprising: good design is subordinate to the issue of location, and only slightly more important than effective facilities management. So it is imperative that the ODPM makes location a key element in its guidance to planners.

But as far as design policy goes, addressing gross density is going to force developers, architects, planners and traffic engineers together to deal with a far more complex and nuanced environment. The interdependency of all these elements, along with a richer mix of tenure, is what will make the density question add up. Without this support, even low density is doomed to failure.

People-friendly roads



Access roads that are effectively pedestrianised are a key aspect of Richard MacCormac's developing proposal for high density living.

Only bollards demarcate car and walking areas and natural surfacing gives the impression of increased width. Beyond the bollards are seating areas, trees, shrubbery, and children's sandpits. This concept of 'playzones' and 'homespace' is fundamental to the proposals.

Although the inner-city access roads are narrower, they are far more effective at distributing traffic quickly, reducing congestion. Rear alleys are used for parking, making the site work better.

The gross density figure for housing includes such issues as infrastructure and roads and has a fundamental impact on the eventual look of the site.

MacCormac helped develop Milton Keynes along very low density guidelines, but he based this new urban housing model on an 1880s railway worker terrace.

He found that, at 52 dwellings per hectare and in the town centre, these houses sold for more than large suburban ones where road layouts reduced local density from 25dph to 7dph gross.

Despite the good intentions, MacCormac felt this dispersed and isolated local populations. His new proposals aim to redress that.

Feilden Clegg Bradley's Beaufort Court for the Peabody Trust in Fulham provides 65 social houses and flats at a density of 122 dwellings per hectare. Parking provision is 0.67 cars per hectare.

Where will the people go in the 21st century?

In Building the 21st Century Home (1998), authors David Rudkin and Nicholas Falk reconfigured Ebenezer Howard's seminal diagram The Three Magnets, published a century earlier in Tomorrow – a Peaceful Path to Reform, to depict the challenges now facing the city.

RIBA Journal 2006