



PHOTO BY CLAYTON CUSAK
 ABOVE: An example of an early 20-century commercial district in the Columbia City neighborhood with plenty of present-day vitality.

Why Urban Density Needs Preservation to Succeed

By Liz Dunn Hon. AIA Seattle

In recent years, cities like Seattle have seen their pro-density agendas come to life. Suburban developers have bumped up against urban growth boundaries, cities have implemented successive up-zones and density bonuses and, as a result, speculative mixed-used development has mushroomed in our downtown and urban village neighborhoods.

We are now starting to understand what real density looks like—or rather what it looks like when it's developed within a relatively blunt and undifferentiated policy framework for how density gets added. Many neighborhoods are getting a version of density that involves the wholesale replacement of already moderately dense, early-1900s commercial, mixed-use and multifamily buildings.

Urban up-zoning—changing the zoning in an area to allow greater density or commercial use—together with the scarcity of land for greenfield development, have created enormous upward pressure on urban land values and an inherent incentive for long-term property owners to sell out rather than to retrofit their existing buildings. The “old guard” of developers from the suburbs do not consider alternatives such as retrofit, adaptive re-use, or small-scale infill, even when a robust financial case can be made, because their skill set and that of their lenders, vendors, and employees is oriented to new construction of large, suburban-style projects. Small old buildings are being demolished three, four, or five at a time, replaced with single structures covered with block-long, homogeneous, street-level facades.

While the selling property owner and the speculative developer may make a tidy short-term profit in this demolish-and-replace scenario, the neighborhood and the city often lose in this scenario over the long term. The most obvious impact is on vi-

sual architectural character, which has a vast influence on neighborhood quality of life and on public opinion, and therefore on how density policies will be received in the future. Architects should be equally concerned about the impression made by their profession with this kind of density because (as many recent examples demonstrate) it is much more difficult to create good architecture when the footprint of a building is grossly out of scale with the existing grain of the neighborhood.

The loss of viable old buildings (not just those that are historically significant, but the dozens of vernacular buildings that collectively give a neighborhood its character and identity) also creates significant cultural, economic, and environmental costs and consequences for city governments that are not well understood but should be of even greater concern. Old buildings are much more likely to attract the small local tenants that give a neighborhood its identity and provide the “unique value proposition” (to use a well-worn marketing cliché) that attracts residents and tourists to shop there and businesses and residents to locate there.

Why are old buildings more attractive to unique local tenants? First, the size and rental rate of new space is inappropriate and unaffordable to all but regional or national chains. The bank and lenders that produce this space are quite happy to rent to them because they prioritize financial guarantees over the value a tenant might provide to the long-term economy of the neighborhood. But even if this were not true, small local tenants would still choose old space over new space because they want age, character, authenticity, and architectural style to help them express their unique identity. Many national chains, on the other hand, prefer new generic space because it's a blank slate on which they can affix

the marks of their corporate brand. The only exceptions to this, ironically, are the new “lifestyle centers” like University Village in Seattle, where in the midst of acres of mall parking one finds a standard high-end mall camouflaged by all the trappings of “Main Street” authenticity: small facades, sidewalks, benches, and plantings, but with no real pedestrian access in or out.

Why should small local tenants be more desirable to neighborhoods and to cities? A block composed of five or six small shops, versus one or two large chain stores, provides much more diversity and utility to residents, making them much less likely to get in their car and drive elsewhere to buy what they need or to have a unique experience. These local enterprises (whether retailers, restaurants, night clubs, or art venues) are more likely to sell locally-manufactured products or locally-produced cultural content, employing higher-skilled and higher-paid labor. Local owners spend or invest their profits locally, instead of sending them away to a headquarters halfway across the country. All of this translates to a healthier local economy and a more robust tax base. And while individual businesses of any size are vulnerable in an economic downturn, a neighborhood with a diverse collection of small businesses that provide the sole source of livelihood for their owners is far more resilient than one that relies on a handful of national chains liable to retrench by shuttering hundreds of stores at once.



PHOTO BY LAURA CURRY
 ABOVE: A view of 11th street from Pike looking north toward Pine on Capitol Hill, showing how, today, these early-1900s commercial buildings are vital and thriving.

It is no accident that the most successful emerging neighborhoods in Seattle (Old Ballard, Pike-Pine, Columbia City, Georgetown) and Portland (Hawthorne, Mississippi) are anchored by a core of vernacular buildings populated by small local tenants. How ironic that it is this very character and resulting degree of commercial success that attracts developers of large new construction, who then proceed to wipe out pieces of the very fabric that made the neighborhood attractive to them in the first place.

The point is not that new density is bad; in fact it is critical if we hope to mitigate the environmental impacts of sprawl: a shrinking supply of viable agricultural land; the impacts of spreading human settlements on wildlife habitat and ecological biodiversity; the fuel consumption and carbon emissions associated with single-occupancy vehicle travel in spread-out communities that are difficult to serve with public transit, and the higher heating and cooling burdens associated with low-rise office parks and single-family homes compared to more compact office and apartment blocks.

New infill development can provide the critical mass of population needed to support small neighborhood shops, cultural institutions, and new public infrastructure (public transit, parks, sidewalks and streetscapes). But studies show that most of these gains, especially in terms of reduction in vehicle miles travelled, are achieved at densities of 50 units per acre and above (compared to the 7.6 unit per acre urban/suburban average reported in ULI's *Growing Cooler* report).

Our urban villages of two- and three-story buildings already have the capacity for 50-100 units per acre if converted to housing above the street, and we still have many surface parking lots in these neighborhoods on which we could build. If we merely filled in the two or three “missing teeth” on each block to the capacity of the zoning envelope, we could easily add another 50-100 units per acre. In other words, our urban village neighborhoods and our historic downtowns are already an order of magnitude denser than average, are already at “critical

mass” density for dramatically reducing car travel, and could be twice as dense again, without demolishing a single building.

We need policies that recognize we can both increase density and preserve the fine urban grain that makes neighborhoods successful. This will require zoning incentives (such as density bonuses and transfers of development rights) and zoning mandates (such as community review of demolition of all older buildings and restrictions on the footprints and/or façades of new buildings). We need incentives in order to level the playing field financially to compensate for the financial gap created by up-zones and by the myriad ways cities make preservation and small-scale in-fill development more expensive than it needs to be (i.e. by the undifferentiated way that building codes, energy codes, and public infrastructure requirements are enforced). We need mandates because, even with incentives that level the playing field, established developers will continue to do what they've always done, which is to build large new projects on whichever properties they can buy and aggregate, whether already built or not.

What all of us who care about growth management and climate change need to keep in mind is that density is merely a means to an end: to make our cities successful, attractive places to live and work. A recent Pew Research survey showed that, for a variety of lifestyle reasons, American cities still compete poorly with their own suburbs in terms of attracting all but the young, the old and the poor. If the urban neighborhoods we create turn out to be as generic as our suburban ones, we certainly can't expect that to change. ■

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