

## **DENSITY X INTENSITY**

From time immemorial Man has needed to live in society in order to survive. Life together in society is inseparable from the human condition. And life in society entails exchange, sharing, communication, collaboration and a series of other factors which ensure the survival of the group and/or the efficiency or success of a community.

Therefore, life in a group or community is undoubtedly a characteristic of the species and a fundamental condition for its survival. Community life found its natural form of spatial organisation in the "organism" which we call a "city" – in the broadest sense of the term, which encompasses the village and the large metropolis.

In all cultures – from Asia to America, Europe to Africa – up to the mid-twentieth century the city always consisted of a compact agglomeration of buildings with well-defined boundaries, where public and private open space differs in importance depending on the region and, together with the types of building and architecture, characterises the city's various singularities.

In the Maghreb or Provence, despite the obvious differences, a city has clear boundaries and the built area is highly compact.

In this dense, compact and varied city, which has always served us in times of both crisis and prosperity, we can find all the ingredients we need for our entire busy existence.

The terms "density" and "intensity" are used here as notions relating more to an urban image than to values used in an outdated practice of spatial planning based on mathematical (building potential) indices for population or housing

density, which often resulted in a profusion of urban models that were not necessarily suitable for the place in which they were applied.

Since the idea of density in relation to an urban image assumes a concentration rather than a dispersion of buildings (compactness x diffusion), we cannot identify general “recipes” or models that are more effective than others, because each case is different. Local characteristics – various types of pre-existing physical features, cultural aspects, etc. – have to be taken into account. There are, therefore, no good or bad densities. The density of Manhattan or Paris is as balanced as that of a town in the Alentejo or a village in Tuscany. Different neighbourhoods may likewise have different densities and different relationships between public and built space. Some may have higher buildings than others, but the quality of urban design is just as good.

Due to changes in means of communication, mainly transport, and especially since the mid-twentieth century and the end of World War II, Man started to occupy the territory on the basis of theoretical models which cast aside all the experience and wisdom that had been accumulated over thousands of years. We have created vast monofunctional peripheral areas for housing, commerce and services, interlinked by car and public transport networks.

This development model was adopted mainly in the USA for national security reasons, and was soon combined with property speculation and a whole network of businesses ranging from shopping centre chains to the automobile industry etc. It broke down boundaries, fragmented the [occupation of the territory](#) and destroyed the typical mixed-use nature of the city in its true sense (where the various uses are inseparable from one another). In the post-war decades in America, these places or suburbs (this seems to me a better term, as it assumes or indicates something that is inferior to the “urb”) were often associated with the idea of the “American dream”. Despite warnings from some rather more perceptive scholars<sup>1</sup> that these developments had taken on

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<sup>1</sup> - Jane Jacobs ([the American sociologist](#)) [and](#) Fernando Távora ([architect and head of the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Porto](#), in Portugal), among others.

proportions which we now recognise as very worrying and in some cases even catastrophic, they also served as a model for similar experiments in Europe and to some extent across the world.

The problems resulting from pollution, segregation, illness, loneliness and deep economic recession are so serious that for some time experts and politicians all over the world, paradoxically (or not) in the USA in particular, have been desperately seeking solutions and cure-alls as a way out of this crisis.

Now that we are aware of the severe environmental problems created and have become mired in a deep economic and financial crisis, we once again look in hope to our cities – the real ones, those that have always stood as a monument to human achievement. The extent of the emergency is hard to assess and the solution will certainly be difficult and take time. In view of the scale of the problems, the role of architects and town planners – from education to practice, in schools and communities – will entail a “relearning” of the values or factors that underlie these models. Such disastrous “social engineering” practices must be jettisoned, along with these completely aberrant and even obscene vanity projects of the “star-architect” fashion.

In this context the disciplines of “urban rehabilitation”, “renewal”, “revitalisation” and so forth become more crucial, and the production/creation of urban design goes hand-in-hand with a “movement” that might be called an “urban renaissance”, with no connotations of any kind (stylistic or otherwise), but only as a reaction to a movement in the opposite direction which actually encouraged or practised the “death of the urban”.

This is where the notions of “density” and “intensity” I mentioned in the beginning – associated with an urban image and differing in degrees and characteristics from one place to another – take on a particularly key role. A large part of the solutions to the problems of our cities entail redressing the balance of the densities that constitute/characterise the urban fabric. Life,

exchange and communication can be enhanced by restoring the diversities of the whole of the social, functional and cultural order through a new, richly creative process.

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