

Hyperdensity doesn't match up with American freedom

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by [Randy Bright](#)



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It has been my observation lately that there is considerable disagreement between urban planners and authors regarding how cities should be developed.

Consider Andres Duany, the father of New Urbanism, a proponent of dense development of urban areas and the main author of the SmartCode. The SmartCode develops a city through transects – areas of density that theoretically vary from the least densely developed outer edge to the most dense inner core.

But even Duany has realized that there are too many regulations, stating recently that “the New Urbanism is committing to ‘pink codes’ – a reference to any code that reduces red tape by bypassing bureaucrats.”

Joel Kotkin, the editor of NewGeography.com, has been an outspoken critic of densely developed cities, and has written articles that debunk the concept that for a city to be prosperous, it must abandon the suburbs and develop the inner core of the city. But he also comes under fire from its perpetrators and those who believe in varying forms of dense city development.

In an article entitled “Beware the ‘Density Cult’,” author Josh Stevens criticizes Kotkin for writing articles such as “Megacities and the Density Delusion: Why More People Doesn’t Equal More Wealth” and accuses him of creating a “cult of density among urban planners.” He satirizes Kotkin by saying, “I hear they also sacrifice goats on subway platforms.”

Stevens apparently believes that Kotkin is accusing urban planners of advocating “unlimited density” but claims that this is not true. Yet not long after Stevens wrote his article, another article appeared by Vishaan Chakrabarti, the director of Columbia University’s Center for Real Estate, entitled “Building Hyperdensity and Civic Delight.”

Chakrabarti defines hyperdensity as “density sufficient to support subways” and claims that hyperdensity “contributes to the health, prosperity and sustainability of cities” and that dense cities “are the most environmentally sustainable and the most likely to encourage joyful and healthy lifestyles.”

Chakrabarti also believes that there are too many regulations because it impedes his vision of density. He wrote in his article, “regulatory policy and environmental disclosure requirements have become so stringent as to impede the kind of sound, compact development that is in our collective best interest.”

He continued, “by contrast, consider the growing national support for urban light rail, improved subway service and expanded bus routes. It is a conundrum that city residents often support the mass transit networks that hyperdensity requires, but none of the development that would make these improvements financeable and sustainable – namely tall buildings containing affordable housing along transit lines.”

Confused yet? Do the experts really agree on anything, or do they believe in the same things but to varying degrees? Who do you believe when all of them speak with such authority? And is there anything really wrong with each one’s concept of what dense development really is?

If I had to choose someone to agree with, it would be most likely be Kotkin, but the real problem is that the premise of all of the arguments that each of them (except Kotkin) made excludes two things – freedom and sound judgment.

Why should any American be made to choose between living in a densely developed city and a single family home? There are surveys that indicate preference on both sides, but what difference does that make?

The truth is that as cities become more dense, housing choices diminish. In that situation, families can no longer choose to build their own home if the only developments allowed must be multiple family dwellings.

The more densely a city is developed, the more dangerous it is to more people. What would be the consequences of a 911-style attack on a fifty-story apartment building as opposed to the suburbs? Thousands of deaths as opposed to less than a hundred, if that many?

And why do we see people in Tokyo and other dense cities walking around with surgical masks? Because diseases spread much more rapidly and cause far more casualties than you would find in the suburbs.

For these reasons, and many others, I believe that most Americans actually reject the academics’ notions that an advanced society only exists within dense cities. So, why the concern?

First Obamacare has been forced on us, now it appears that an immigration bill will be. Perhaps next, but at least eventually, Americans are going to wake up to find that there are no housing choices except those that are of the government’s choosing. Then it will be a matter of degree – will you live in a three-story or a hundred-story apartment building?

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Randy W. Bright, AIA, NCARB, is an architect who specializes in church and church-related projects. You may contact him at 918-582-3972, rwbrightchurcharch@sbcglobal.net or www.churcharchitect.net.

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