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Editorial: Density, sustainability and the governance of urban futures

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Editorial on the Research Topic
Density, sustainability and the governance of urban futures

As city populations have increased, densification has often been seen as a solution to urban challenges such as sprawl, housing, and amenity provision. A compact city usually stands as the representation of improved land use (Breheny, 1996) and enhanced urban sustainability (Dempsey et al., 2012). Density, however, can also create or exacerbate urban issues, for example relating to conservation and cultural heritage (Gassner, 2019), or widening the negative impacts of property-led (re)development (Tallon, 2013) including gentrification, social injustice, and housing inequalities (Immergluck and Balan, 2018). This Research Topic invited contributions which explore the nexus between density, sustainability, and the governance of urban futures in global cities. Each contribution reflects on questions relating to how the potential conflicts and consequences emerging from densification are being addressed (or not), across our urban environments. Through considered governance, planning and urban design agendas, which respond to specific contexts (local through to global), cities are evolving toward the apparent creation of successful and resilient urban futures—but what will such cities look like, and how are these agendas being operationalised and experienced today?

In this issue of Frontiers in Sustainable Cities, our topic includes five papers, which reflect on the complex and nuanced interpretations of density, as are explored through different types of contributions. The papers range from perspectives (Bunce) and conceptual analysis (Cipkar) on Canadian experiences, to a mini review (Livingstone et al.) and original research articles (Mellen and Short; Matillana and Livingstone) which unpack density in the UK through both London specific experiences, and broader analyses of English planning mechanisms.

The two Canadian based papers each explore housing intensification as an aspect of "gentle" densification, but from different perspectives and positions. Cipkar's conceptual analysis uses Fainstein's (2010) Just City model to consider the potential social benefits that could be achieved through the effective regulation, and encouragement of, constructing "additional dwelling units" (ADUs), to successfully create a more spatially just and affordable housing market. ADUs are additional dwellings built on existing single-family plots by the property owners. These ADUs are usually offered for rental, augmenting supply in typically low-density neighborhoods, and Cipkar queries whether they are ultimately producing more equitable housing outcomes, or perpetuating the "urban socio-spatial polarization

in Canada" at the local level (Bourne and Hulchanski, 2020: 6). Cipkar concludes that although ADUs are not a "silver bullet" to Canada's housing challenges, they suggest that more equitable outcomes could be achieved through varied innovative approaches and the systematic regulation of ADUs.

Bunce's perspective piece examines the growth of a specific type of ADU, the garden suite (or more informally, "beds in sheds"), and suggests that there is a "yes in my backyard" (YIMBY) movement embracing this sort of neighborhood intensification and apparent "sustainable urbanism" across Toronto. The article unpacks the contradictions inherent within perspectives and policies following the recent introduction of a Garden Suite by-law and concludes that through the cultivation of YIMBYist discourses in Toronto intensification "retains its long-standing and problematic connection with market-led, pro-growth urban development".

Three other articles contribute perspectives on density, sustainability, and urban governance in the United Kingdom. The two original research papers by Matillana and Livingstone, and Mellen and Short, specifically examine urban design agendas in London, the former in relation to conflictive policy discourses and the latter in relation to outcomes for housing across this global city.

Matillana and Livingstone considers how policies relating to densification have evolved to the current "design-led approach" and analyse the strategic and local conflicts of governance resulting from responses to planning applications which have been considered under the increasingly discretionary system within the UK. They conclude that as multiple readings of density are possible, conflictive interpretations are inevitably going to be a cause of tension across local authorities, and that outcomes are inherently connected to political will.

Mellen and Short examine the specific outcomes of the delivery of high-density housing through case studies in London, querying whether policies could be better designed to improve social interactions and sustainability within such developments. They use three case studies and examine to what extent social contact and interactions were influential in the design for each development. Mellen and Short concluded generally that effectively designed developments contributed to positive social interactions and activities, although across case studies the governance mechanisms adopted by tenants and owners varied and was socio-economically and culturally specific.

Livingstone et al. explore a broader perspective on density, and examine its interpretation through the lens of purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA), connecting relevant policies from the national to the local, across England in key university cities. The PBSA market has been growing consistently across England in recent decades, and due to the interpretative nature of the discretionary planning system, local authorities have adopted myriad responses to policies, which reflect both similarities and differences, and vary depending on the concertedness of efforts to account for PBSA related policies in relevant plans. In conclusion, the authors suggest that there has been a somewhat delayed response to densification through PBSA policies, and that both universities and local authorities should better identify the possible locations for PBSA growth via effective policy making to create sustainable university cities.

Each of the articles in this Research Topic critically reflect on possible best practices, policy making and regulatory processes, and consider approaches toward urban design and real estate development within diverse built environments. The pieces in this Research Topic ultimately observe that the different nuances and challenges offered by density in global cities are created by the variegated interests at stake within our diverse and dynamic housing markets in urban areas. The articles prompt further questions, and present thoughtful and suggestive provocations as to how we can successfully create sustainable and resilient cities of the future, through better accounting for appropriate and context specific densification.

Author contributions

NL: Conceptualization, Writing—original draft. MS: Writing—review and editing. SF: Writing—review and editing. SB: Writing—review and editing.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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