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– THE DENSITY DIALECTIC: Between Hard and Gentle Densification in London

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Abstract

Density is critical to cities, but how might we conceive and research its role in urban development? We argue that a conceptualization of the 'density dialectic' offers a productive response. Drawing on research on urban development in Tower Hamlets (London's densest borough), we identify the tensions and contradictions of current densification approaches. A dialectical approach illuminates those tensions, examines the range of actors, processes and social, economic and environmental concerns that become enrolled, and identifies how densification operates to accommodate its changing relations and contradictions. In a context of rapid and intense urban development, we draw on interviews with planners to show how 'gentle' and 'hard' visions of density connect, conflate and collide as the borough looks to meet challenging housing targets alongside social and environmental objectives.

Introduction

The Landmark Pinnacle building, completed in 2020, is the tallest residential apartment building in western Europe. Located in the Isle of Dogs area of Tower Hamlets in central London, the towering 75-floor narrow building with its small footprint is emblematic of the wave of tall structures that have transformed the city's skyline over the past two decades. For a city with an intensely debated housing crisis, buildings like the Landmark Pinnacle do little to create space for residents on lower incomes. When we visited the building in October 2022, prices for the small apartments, ranging from 40 feet for a one-bedroom place to 109 for three bedrooms, went from £559,000 to £1.9million. We saw one small two-bedroom apartment that had sold for over £1million, with a view onto the construction of other tall buildings, wind howling through the air vents. Most residents at the time were under 40, working in the offices of Canary Wharf and the surrounding financial district, or students at one of London's Universities. In recent decades, there has been a growing emphasis on building at higher densities in UK planning and urban development debates. *Financial Times* columnist John Burn-Murdoch (2023: npn) reflected some of this when he complained about the historic preference in UK planning for low-density urban developments, including what he called an 'anti-apartment' ethos. He noted that in the UK housing density per 1000 people is lower than anywhere in Europe, except Ireland, and argued that greater density is 'the answer to so many woes', from tackling the housing crisis and protecting the environment to boosting productivity. The policy and planning debate on densification has positioned density in either/or terms, as Susannah Bunce (2023) has argued: either choose higher density and address multiple crises at once (housing, climate, economy), *or* cities sprawl unequally and unsustainably at lower density.

The debate hinges on two built forms, broadly conceived: 'hard density', the construction of tall buildings with small land-footprints like Landmark Pinnacle, and 'gentle density', which refers to infill building and housing verticalization but in low

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to moderate heights (Sim, 2019). In late 2022, for example, the then Conservative government published a set of reforms to the National Planning and Policy Framework (NPPF) proposing that local authorities 'embrace gentle density', building through 'airspace development above existing residential and commercial premises for new homes' (UK Government, 2024: npn). 'Gentle densities' have been described as the 'missing middle' in UK housing stock (Smith, 2023). The research institute Centre for Cities has argued that 'cities like Paris, Barcelona or Madrid offer positive examples of gentle density levels that UK urban areas should learn from' (Quinio, 2021), and that building dense housing around transport hubs will increase public transport, reduce carbon and act against sprawl (Rodrigues and Breach, 2021).

In 2022, the government's then Housing and Levelling Up Secretary, Michael Gove, proposed planning changes to housing that would allow 'gentle densification' (Brown, 2022). The government's thinking was informed by a 2021 report by the centre-right thinktank, Policy Exchange, which argued for 'gentle intensification' as a means of adding density to existing urban areas. The report suggested that residents be given 'street votes' and develop 'street plans' for adding to existing housing, for instance by converting bungalows to terraced housing, leading to the provision of more people, services, business and schools. It claimed this would lead to 100,000 new houses per year, growing property prices—'the average participating homeowner would make £900,000, while the local authority would get an average of £79,000 for every new property delivered', the report enthused—and even add 0.5% to annual GDP (Hughes and Southwood, 2021: 14). Critics pointed out that the approach would likely benefit already expensive and often Conservative-voting areas (Booth, 2022a). Indeed, it was telling that the example the report chose to illustrate the approach was a wealthy area of Enfield in north London.

Beneath the ostensibly benign discursive shift towards gentle density is a political debate about the purpose of densification and who benefits. Is densification a mechanism to provide affordable housing in increasingly expensive cities like London? Is it another vehicle for neoliberal development and speculative global capital? For those suspicious of the economic potential of gentle density, building high is the route forward (Glaeser, 2011). But while some have argued that higher density leads to lower prices (Kulka *et al*., 2022), the affordability of housing in a given place is shaped not just by the number of housing units but by the political economies of land, location, housing speculation, the actions of developers and the power of the local state (Marcuse and Madden, 2016; Blanc and White, 2020; Slater, 2021). Others have argued for ways of combining hard and gentle densities, for a kind of softening of hard densities through green and public-oriented services in and around tall buildings. Indeed, while Policy Exchange is a staunch advocate of gentler mid-rise densities because they can support 'vibrant streetscapes, contextual engagement and human intimacy that tall buildings are strategically ill-equipped to bestow', they have also argued that tall buildings 'could prioritize beauty and design quality' that protects 'heritage' and 'soften' their impact on locales (Ijeh, 2024: 8; 100).

We argue for the value of a dialectical approach to densification. What we call the 'density dialectic' is a holding together of a set of increasingly politicized, expanding and often contradictory positions: between discourses and forms of 'gentle density' and 'hard density', between generating economic surplus and affordability, and between discourse and material form. As we argue, the density dialectic expands, resolves and reforms over time in response to changing events, processes and discourses.

We focus on a particularly intense site of urban densification: Tower Hamlets, a small, rapidly densifying borough of central London. We introduce the context below, but a statement from one of our interviewees serves here to point to why we have arrived at the density dialectic approach in our analysis of densification in Tower Hamlets. When we asked whether she felt the talk of 'gentle' densification in Tower Hamlets could

be realized in practice, Jane (pseudonym), an urban planner at the borough, interviewed in October 2021, insisted: 'You can't deliver gentle density and deliver … almost 4000 homes a year'. She went on to describe the growing land prices, high housing targets, intense competition for space in a small borough, the sheer pace of development, the struggle to ensure infrastructure and services meet new buildings, and the fact that planning decisions are made not just by planners but by politicians, different state levels (e.g. the Mayor's office, the Greater London Authority (GLA)), and in negotiation with often powerful developers in the context of a weak regulatory environment.

Jane felt a keen sense of being caught in a contradiction between gentle and hard densities, between affordable home policy commitments and increasingly exclusive market developments, and different power relations between state levels and developers. The operationalization of densification from the perspective of many of the planners we spoke to is a growth machine almost out of control, with different actors and imperatives attempting to wrestle it into shape. In what follows we examine these contradictions as a density dialectic, focusing in particular on the narratives of planners as one entry point into the struggles over and politics of density, and consider its implications both for Tower Hamlets and for how urbanists research density and densification.

The research took place in 2021–22 and involved 35 interviews with planners, other municipal staff, councillors and developers in Tower Hamlets, as well as several planners and infrastructure managers working at London scale. The participants have been anonymized. Our focus was on how they see the problematic of densification in the borough. We began these interviews during the Covid-19 pandemic and they were carried out online; only towards the end of the research were we able to conduct site visits and meet people. Conducting interviews online brings advantages in that it can reduce the time respondents have to set aside for an interview. However, it can also reduce the scope for building rapport, reading the informal signals of discomfort or interest, and limit space for conversations to move into potentially productive tangents. We tried to mitigate this by taking the semi-structured interviews slowly, creating space at the start for more informal discussion, and building-in time for other reflections at the end of interviews. We also asked interviewees to prepare photo examples to discuss in the interviews to best describe density cases in the boroughs, which was a tool for eliciting more in-depth discussions around 'on the ground' cases. Finally, we conducted walking tours and observation in different parts of the borough during 2022 and analysed policy and literature relevant to planning, density and Tower Hamlets.

Density, urban development and dialectics

Density is not simply an objective, neutral number of people or buildings in place, but a series of subjective and often political claims and values about what density does or does not offer places and the wider city (Churchman, 1999; Short and Livingstone, 2020; Perez, 2021; Habermehl and McFarlane, 2023). It is well-suited to a dialectical approach, given that dialectics seeks to examine how multiple relations and contradictions are variously accommodated, resolved, or thrown apart. Across numerous works, David Harvey (e.g. 2008; 2010; 2012) has deployed dialectics, via Marx, to analyse urbanization. In Volume 1 of *Capital*, Marx set out a dialectics to capture the motion, transformation, transience and contradictions of capitalism. If capitalism, and its operation through cities and urbanization, entails constant reinvention, then so too, Harvey has shown, must analytical method. Rather than a dialectics of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, Harvey's is a dialectics which is always expanding as capitalism accommodates and replicates rather the resolves contradictions (between capital, labour, class relations, places, land, commodities, forms of value, environment, accumulation, dispossession and so on).

The way in which density changes over time, both materially and discursively, is an expression of the geographical transformation of capitalist urbanization, shaped

relationally through political, economic and social change including economic cycles of investment and disinvestment, ideologies of planning and design, and the role of often powerful developer, construction and real estate actors. The relational production of densification, de-densification and re-densification across space and time connects the densifying of place(s) in the city to the de-densification of elsewhere (McFarlane, 2020). The densification of housing in London, for example, is connected to what happens to housing and planning in satellite places like Milton Keynes or around East Anglia through changing relations of concentrated and extended urbanization (Brenner and Schmid, 2015). For example, Harvey (2008) has argued that China's rapid urbanization has required vast ecological transformation locally and globally, with half of the world's cement supplies in the early part of this century pulled into urban densification, and entangled too both in raw material economies in Australia or Chile, and the displacement within China of huge numbers of residents from previously rural land. Density is made and unmade, not just in place topographically, but topologically through multiple places, processes and actors across space (McFarlane, 2016; Haarstad *et al*., 2023).

While there has been a significant growth in research on urban density in recent years in urban studies, the dialectical method itself has not featured. We hope to show that it is useful for understanding the range of relations and contradictions that are pulled into imaginaries, debates and processes of densification. Despite a period of intense questioning of higher urban density during the Covid-19 pandemic (Chen and McFarlane, 2023; Yan *et al*., 2024), international agencies and central and local states, as well as mainstream urban writers, have increasingly argued that, in the face of increasingly sprawling cities, density and greater compactness is 'good' for the city (for reducing carbon, enhancing social life, boosting economies, reducing transit and other service and infrastructural costs, and improving 'well-being'; for a critical interrogation of these claims, see e.g. Keil, 2017; Ahlfeldt and Pietrostefani, 2019; Perez, 2020; Robinson and Attuyer, 2021; Haarstad *et al*., 2023). While there is certainly a long tradition of critical urban work that explicitly values how density features positively in social, economic and political life (e.g. Simone, 2022; Amin, 2023; Chen *et al*., 2024;), the claims made on its behalf—that it leads to greener, more socially inclusive, 'thriving' urban areas—are being ever more intensely questioned and debated. The density dialectic is one useful method for analysing the changing relations and contradictions of density as they unfold over time.

Our focus on the density dialectic marks a new contribution to debates on urban density in four ways. First, the density dialectic is a process shaped by urban political economy, discourse, and policy and planning at national and local levels, as well as global processes of speculation and investment in land and built form. The dialectic is not the *cause* of the forms of urban development that result, but instead the *means of operation* through which urban form surfaces, with all its attendant social, economic and environmental consequences. Part of the value of the density dialectic is in how it focuses attention on the 'mid-range' of urban transformation, operating between processes of political economy and policy, and 'on the ground' experiences of spatial production (Yeung, 2023). Second, a dialectical approach entails attending to how the different elements of densification variously connect, collide, contradict, conflict and become contested in urban change. The dialectic highlights, for example, the contradiction of various policies, often emerging from actors at different spatial scales (e.g. borough, city-wide and nation-state), that are pushing density processes in different directions, as well as the interactions with distinct discourses, organizations and places.

Third, the density dialectic shifts our attention away from arguments that position density as necessarily 'good' for places and the city (Habermehl and McFarlane, 2023). This 'density solutionism' tends to overlook the actual conditions of place, including its political economies, actors, and material geographies. Rather than adopt a normative position on whether densification is good or bad, the density dialectic

approach becomes a means for analysis to arrive at such a judgement. Finally, fourth, a focus on the density dialectic allows us to see how densification surfaces differently as idea, discourse, policy and form in cities across the world. While our focus is on London, the density dialectic does not belong with a particular case but can be applied to analyse any densification strategy. Different urban spaces and times are shaped by different density dialectics—in other words, the key elements composing the dialectic can and do change between and even within cities, and there could therefore be useful points of comparative learning across cases.

– Positioning hard and gentle density in London

The tension between hard and gentle densities in London was articulated by the former national Conservative government's critique of the increasingly tall London skyline, exemplified by Tower Hamlet's Isle of Dogs. For example, in a letter to Mayor Sadiq Khan, responding to a draft of the London Plan in 2021, then Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, Robert Jenrick, used gentle density as a critique. Jenrick wrote that while tall buildings have their place, the plan should be clear that boroughs can make their own decisions on whether they are appropriate to the 'character' of their area, and that it was important to enable 'gentle density across London' (Jenrick, 2021). Jenrick and other senior Conservative politicians used 'gentle density' as an opportunity not only to attack Khan, but to appeal to wealthier suburban voters. This was part of a national political positioning by the Conservative Party. As Mike Raco and Frances Brill (2022: 143) point out, the Conservative government responded to the mushrooming of tall buildings in the capital by being 'torn between, on the one hand viewing tall buildings as engines of urban growth and supercharged housing delivery, while on the other being fearful of their impacts on the place-based character of central and suburban areas, and their core constituencies of voters'. Indeed, the 2021 London Plan was amended to reduce proposed densification in outer London boroughs partly in the context of these apprehensions. In both this decision, and in Jenrick's critique to Khan we see the dialectic of hard and gentle density in contestation.

This language of placemaking reflects a wider move towards building compact urbanism (Kjærås, 2021) and ideas of 'high-quality design', 'design-led', 'liveability', 'well-being', 'social infrastructure', 'community assets' and 'cultural identity'. While these discourses and ideas have their differences in form and operation, and the term placemaking is difficult to define clearly (de Graaf, 2024), the logic, broadly cast, has been for a seemingly softer and gentle urbanism, to densify and in-fill urban space through mid-rise buildings, reduce car-based travel, lower per-capita energy use, and create walkable spaces with services and facilities nearby. 'Placemaking' was a recurring term in our interviews, and while it is not equivalent to 'gentle' density, the latter is one form of it. It is a vague and controversial idea in urban planning and research, with origins in the thinking of Jane Jacobs and William H. Whyte, whose work—particularly in relation to in New York in the 1960s—promoted the social and economic value of dense urban spaces of mixed social and built form (Laven and Bradley, 2019). It is often caught up with forms of gentrification and sometimes expensive consumption-oriented development, identified with efforts to stimulate land speculation and property-driven development, and criticized for undermining the ability of poorer groups to inhabit and consume in cities (Sweeney *et al*., 2018; Bose, 2021). The pandemic intensified the discourse amongst local authorities, developer application, and in the media, including on placemaking as a route to pandemic social and economic recovery (Allison and Doody, 2022).

'Gentle' or 'soft' densities are positioned as both the built form and affective output of compact or 'intensified' urbanism, and proponents often make explicit claims about the benefits for social life, well-being, and sustainable cites (Southwood, 2021), while critics question whose interests the resulting form of density typically serve. In Toronto, for example, Susannah Bunce (2023: 2) describes how the new policy aspiration

to push a 'gentler' form of low-scale and incremental intensification in the form of what is commonly referred to as the 'missing middle' of housing often takes the form of a YIMBYism for neoliberal homeowner market-oriented housing. What Bunce (2023) calls 'frontier intensification' positions gentle density as a tactic of property ownership and wealth-building.

– Housing in London and Tower Hamlets

While London is often proclaimed as a global success story of post-industrial high economic growth, job creation and infrastructure development, critics have become increasingly vocal, particularly on the lack of attention to parts of the city that are not growing, and have worried about its dependency on a complex and changing set of market actors and investments (Minton, 2017). Critics have attacked the London success story for its failure to meet affordable housing needs (Rolnik, 2019). The combination of London's success in generating jobs and the financialization of housing markets has led to increasingly economically prohibitive housing, which has contributed to the expansion of often expensive rental markets, while affordable housing stocks have diminished (Heslop and Ormerod, 2020; Raco and Brill, 2022). Even socially driven not-for-profit Housing Associations or local housing companies (developers established by boroughs) are 'caught in a significant bind between acting as market players and delivering welfare-based housing needs' (Raco and Brill, 2022: 131; see also Penny, 2021).

The process of affordable housing is indicative of the wider contradiction between the aspiration to density, its calculative basis and its materialization (Shih and Chiang, 2022). Affordable housing is defined through housing survey data on housing costs as a percentage of household income. The London Living Rent is revised yearly for boroughs by the GLA based on costs at one-third of median gross household income. Affordable housing comprises dwellings with affordable rent (no more than 80% of local market rent) or social rent (state-subsidized rent measured at market value and average earnings by area), social housing built or maintained through local authorities or independent Housing Associations with lower rents and forms of shared ownership, delivered either through the Council, the not-for-profit sector or the market.

Affordable housing targets vary across the city based on those in the London Plan, which currently has a target of 60% of all new housing in London being 'affordable', distributed across boroughs, with places like Tower Hamlets typically receiving higher targets. In Tower Hamlets, of the 4097 homes that the borough built in 2019-20, 1007 (24.5%) were affordable homes, while the 689 built in 22-23 made up just under 20% of the overall 3486—the Council points to national challenges with cost inflation, labour and material supply shortfalls slowing delivery (Tower Hamlets, 2024). Given that in London the average rent is £1861 per month, and that median annual gross earnings in 2022 for Tower Hamlets were £22,000 (£1833 per month), affordability measures based on market data of income and existing rents, even if partially subsidized, leave many priced out or struggling to do much else other than pay rent (London Assembly, 2023; Guler, 2024). The focus at national and local government on building more housing as the solution has often served, perversely, to feed the growth model, with boroughs focusing in practice on hitting targets for housing rather than building the right kinds of housing in the right places at genuinely affordable prices.

Densification, especially vertical building, has been a primary means to propel the city's growth model (Holman *et al*., 2015; Cerrada Morato, 2022). The state is an active agent here, seeking, as Jennifer Robinson and Katia Attuyer (2021: 305) argue, to 'adopt the calculative and extractive practices of developers even as—and in fact largely because—they seek to continue to meet residual welfare-state priorities in the face of strong fiscal retreat'. The combination of an embedded neoliberal market-driven growth model with high housing targets and minimal planning and state regulation has left developers with huge power, and planners struggling to extract contributions that

might mitigate negative aspects of proposed developments while shaping the potential for residential quality of life or infrastructural provision.

The current density dialectic in London is shaped in the vacuum resulting from the city ceding more and more of its functions and provisions to the private sector and market logics, to the point that 'all planning deliberations and political choices are now conducted in the shadow of the market' (Raco and Brill, 2022: 1). Planning in London, and across the UK, is deregulated and discretionary, with planning decisions on building proposals made not through clear, simple, enforceable regulations, but in negotiations between developers, planners, committees and politicians on a case-by-case basis (Breach, 2020). Planners we spoke to often felt caught in the middle between state housing targets for affordable homes and the power of developers to get their way. There are few restrictions on what can be proposed, while recommendations by planners can be ignored by developers, politicians or other state bodies (e.g. see Cerrada Morato (2022) on the Johnson and Khan mayoral periods). In their negotiations with developers, planners are limited to utilizing existing planning policies or special advisory policy guidance they create.

This guidance is increasingly focused on hard-density tall buildings. For example, the High-Density Living Supplementary Planning Document (HDL SPD) prepared by the Tower Hamlets borough aims to wrestle greater provision for public and green space from developers but takes the form of recommendations only (Cerrada Morato and Mumford, 2021). London is highly under governed when compared to other European capitals, and state authorities—particularly insofar as the city's public authorities have suffered significantly from austerity cuts since the 2008 financial crisis, and are often in debt to the private sector—lack the power and capital to shape urban development (Raco and Brill, 2022). Meanwhile, the city's skyline has changed dramatically and the speculative international housing economy has prospered, with the number of tall buildings doubling in the four years 2014–18 from 263 to 541 (*ibid*.: 151).

Tower Hamlets is London's most rapidly growing borough and one of its most unequal, with the highest levels of child and pensioner poverty in England and London's largest high to low pay ratio (Tower Hamlets Strategic Planning Team, 2020). It is the most densely populated area of England (15,695 residents per square kilometre), most people live in apartments and pay rent, and 70% of homes are rented (half are private market, half are social rent) (Tower Hamlets Partnership, 2023a). Two-thirds of its population are from a minority ethnic background, and two-fifths were born outside of the UK. The borough is the fastest growing amongst working-age residents and there has been a doubling of the number of jobs over the past 20 years, much of it in tall office buildings at Canary Wharf and the Isle of Dogs. Michael Keith (2023: 281), who between 1994 to 2006 was borough leader for five years, and lead on regeneration and planning for seven, has described a 'a long decade of expansion' in the 1990s, on the back of rapidly growing financial services and property prices: 'A market had developed for big blocks of upmarket apartments and bigger towers of commercial space; HSBC established its global headquarters and Citibank its European capital at Canary Wharf. A long list of signature architects, leaders of multinationals, and developers ranging from the more enlightened to the nakedly avaricious all foresaw a profitable future in the borough'.

While the borough has built more homes than any other in London in recent years (Tower Hamlets Partnership, 2023a; Trust for London, 2023), most of these are 'market' rather than 'affordable' housing, and the affordable housing challenge has been growing, with particular challenges in the shape of expensive overcrowded rental homes (Tower Hamlets Strategic Planning Team, 2020). Planners in the borough have been given the second-highest housing targets for new homes in London, while consultation on the 2020 Tower Hamlets local plan found that 35% of respondents said housing was unaffordable. At the same time, the plan recommitted the borough to 'embrac[ing] its role as the engine of London's growth' (*ibid*.: 11).

Densification takes on different forms across Tower Hamlets. High-rise hard density is presented as a favoured option in the Isle of Dogs, with its proximity to Canary Wharf, and for student housing, but densification does not necessarily happen vertically across the borough. There are, for example, significant areas of gentrification, including in Whitechapel, on the edges of Shoreditch, and in Spitalfields—indeed, the Bangladeshi-descended community in Spitalfields has experienced gentrification and a drop in number (Peek, 2015; Begum, 2023)—all reflecting and generating different density conditions. The changing legacy of past waves of densification in Tower Hamlets reflect this diversity, including high-rise development in earlier periods of mass housing, such as the iconic Ernö Goldfinger-designed Balfron Tower—built in the 1960s as an affordable and socially mixed neighbourhood building but more recently sold off by its housing association as expensive private apartments—to the knock-on effects of higher-income residential densities with often single-occupation demographics on urban markets, restaurants, schools, parks and public services (Peek, 2015; Wainwright, 2022; Keith, 2023). The dialectic has changed over time.

This current mix of social needs, economic pressures and diverse urban conditions creates a challenging environment for planning. Tower Hamlets Council has sought to position social needs and welfare as central, and has demanded that 25% of private developments be social housing, but there have been mixed consequences and frequent court fights with developers, and the art of compromise can be highly challenging. Keith (2023: 282) reflects: 'Like a poker player working out when to cash in a winning run, we often opted for what the South African artist William Kentridge describes as "the less good idea", a deal that was progressive, that contained much of what we wanted but not everything, that could stand up in court to challenge. In a sense, I am defending the ethics of the "less good idea"'.

In Tower Hamlets we find the peak of a wider condition of southeast England's urban development: a confluence of global discourses on placemaking and gentle density, national political discourses and debate on the role of hard and gentle densities, steep housing targets driving development, a powerful and fast-moving growth model connecting land and construction, and a loose multi-level state regulatory environment in which planners have limited scope to guide development (Cochrane *et al*., 2015; Cochrane, 2019). In what follows, we examine how the density dialectic operates by focusing first on hard densities and then on gentle densities, then consider the implications in the Conclusion.

Hard densities: the 'Manhattanization' of the Isle of Dogs

Housing targets are a key driver of hard densities. Targets are shaped by national frameworks and regional density policies for London. The 2018 London Housing Strategy estimated that 66,000 new homes are needed each year for 20 years (GLA, 2018). The specific housing targets in Tower Hamlets are set by iterations of the London Plan produced approximately every five years, and targets are spread more or less evenly across several years (e.g. the Tower Hamlets target for 2020–21was 3931, and for 2022–23 it was 3473) (Tower Hamlets, 2024). Densification has taken the form of tall buildings—with more than any other London borough—and the in-filling of brownfield sites (Cerrada Morato, 2022).

One of the key changes in the 2021 London Plan was the removal of the 'density matrix' on new developments. The matrix operated as a tool to provide a basic range of ideal densities for new development, including caps on building size, set for different locations based on links to transport hubs and targets for housing units in different areas (Matillana and Livingstone, 2023). However, in a reflection of both developer power and the pressure on boroughs to build homes, it was routinely flouted in practice (in 2019, the Mayor's office estimated that over 50% of buildings contravened the matrix for their location, London Assembly, 2019). One Tower Hamlets planner estimated that 'only 35%

of development has been within the density matrix range' (Mayor of London, 2019). Rather than continue with the matrix the 2021 London Plan prioritized density 'as a process of assessment rather than an input', prioritizing a 'design-led approach' (*ibid*.). The plan focused more on 'placemaking' and 'design-led' high-quality spaces than previous iterations (Matillana and Livingstone, 2023). Planners in Tower Hamlets, Lucía Cerrada Morato (2022) argues, assess proposals in an increasingly granular way, including their impact on the locale, skyline, street and individual buildings.

Planners we spoke to were concerned that removing the density matrix, even though it was often flouted, meant reducing their power to restrict the overdevelopment of sites. Just Space, a citizen action group, highlighted similar concerns in response to the draft London Plan. They were concerned that removing the matrix would lead to 'widespread inconsistencies between boroughs' and 'inadequate guidance': 'Even the best borough staff will find it hard to enforce high standards on developers' (Just Space, 2018: 1). The concern was that there will be nothing to discourage 'speculative over-bidding for sites' (*ibid*.: 2). Instead of fewer restrictions, Just Space argued for more, especially in relation to improving levels of 'daylight, sunlight, children's play space and many aspects of social infrastructure' (*ibid*.: 1). For all the talk of design and placemaking in the Plan, the sense here was that, in practice, the density dialectic would remain dominated by powerful developers who see greater profit in focusing on building height over social or environmental concerns.

Indeed, the planners we spoke to were keenly aware of the resulting pressures on decision-making and infrastructure. They were keen to 'step back' and question the strategy of agreeing to such high housing targets in the first place, and the risks of a market-dependent strategy to get there. Even if enough new development is approved to meet housing targets, projects then need to be brought to fruition, which, as one Tower Hamlets report report noted, cannot always be guaranteed given the strong dependence on unpredictable market forces and limited available land (Tower Hamlets, 2021). One planner (interviewed in October 2021), referring to housing targets, said: 'To get 59,000 homes in, there's going to be some pretty serious density … It's comparable or exceeding Manhattan, Singapore or places like that'. Another (also interviewed in October 2021) explained that despite wanting to create a 'great place', what it came down to was a scramble to meet targets:

> If you want to get 59,000 in, the options are somewhat limited … [Tower Hamlets is] eight and a half square miles of land. With 320,000 people already living in it, you want to get another 100,000 people in, in these 59,000 homes? … The council doesn't have a lot of wiggle room of how it deals with that. So, it feels a little bit as if well [we are being told], the density is coming—with infrastructure—what are you going to do to make this work?

The pro-growth hard-density approach in Tower Hamlets has led to dense tall developments and, as one respondent (interviewed in October 2021) put it, the 'Manhattanization of the Isle of Dogs' area, with insufficient open space, inadequate infrastructure and an underdeveloped street network because developers have resisted changes that might reduce profit margins (Cerrada Morato, 2022). The scale and intensity of hard density tall development in Tower Hamlets is without parallel in the UK, with significant impacts for infrastructure needs, social infrastructure and existing facilities (Blanc and White, 2020). As one planner told Cerrada Morato (2022: 277–8), the 'negotiation system' between developers and planners 'is proving not to be fit for purpose in shaping areas where tall buildings are emerging', with the result being 'a series of piecemeal and fragmented open spaces … [that] do not respond to the scale of these neighbourhoods'.

The lack of guidance is why the borough developed its supplementary advice through the HDL SPD, which helps planners to promote good design through evidence on the value of communal spaces, homes, circulation and more (Cerrada Morato and Mumford, 2021). However, this remains advisory and demonstrates the limited powers of the borough as compared to the city and national state scale (Cerrada Morato, 2022). A local councillor (interviewed in October 2021) expressed concern that 'nobody's really thinking through' the implications of this, as we are 'heading to be denser than Manhattan'. He was worried that insufficient consideration was being given to how new tall buildings would change the 'feel' of the borough, and was apprehensive about the level of pressure being placed on infrastructure.

Despite the London Plan's emphasis on locally relevant density, ultimately planning decisions are made by politicians and can shift with changes in the political parties at Westminster and City Hall, including the London Mayor. The Mayor and national state have significant scope in establishing policy directions and frameworks and can overturn local authority decisions. In addition, failing to meet housing targets can result in measures being implemented by the national government, under what is known as a 'presumption in favour of sustainable development', which further limits the role of planners in proposals unless adverse impacts 'significantly and demonstrably' outweigh their benefit (Cuffe, 2022).

The constant demand for more and more housing was often described by planners as a 'London problem', one in which global real estate development meets a crisis of housing affordability. Brexit and Covid-19 did little to derail the production of hard densities. As this Tower Hamlets planner (interviewed in September 2021) put it:

> I think London is a bit of a bubble. I think Tower Hamlets is probably a bubble within that bubble. And it feels pretty resilient. In some ways, if there was a pause on the amount of development happening, that could kind of be a good thing, because there's so much infrastructure that needs to be delivered. It would give us a bit of a chance to catch up.

Indeed, planners explained that during the pandemic, they were seeing an *intensification* of development proposals in the pipeline: 'It is extraordinary how little things have changed!', said one (interviewed in August 2021).

There was a larger sense in the interviews that the possibilities for genuinely affordable housing had been foreclosed, and a mood of resignation, even hopelessness. The density dialectic expands over time to accommodate more factors—even a pandemic—and resolves in favour of fast-paced speculative housing markets, while at the same time the negative impacts of that 'resolution' are continually exposed.

Planners worried that the level of construction was further increasing land prices, constraining the range of choice in new sites, and generating significant challenges—often not met—in providing the services required alongside housing, such as social services or new parks. Some planners worried that for all the talk of the value of open space in the pandemic, places really in need of it, such as on the boundary with the City of London, are less likely to be provided with it. 'It's gonna be a problem, the more the population grows', said one (interviewed in October 2021). Rather than being able to address these larger-scale issues, planners often found themselves focused on small tweaks that could be made to tall building proposals, such as 'nooks' to work from home and winter gardens, which were ultimately at the discretion of developers and politicians.

There is a structural problem here in that too often infrastructure comes *after* rather than before development. Funds are raised through development, but the sheer size and scale of hard-density developments means that retrospectively meeting infrastructure needs can be a huge task. One planner (interviewed in September 2021) highlighted that this contrasted with other European countries (e.g. France, Denmark

and The Netherlands), where infrastructure is built in advance of development. He explained that the current system had left new residents in 'places like Barking Riverside in there waiting for the Overground to be put in but you already have the 10,000 new homes in East London'. Planners were increasingly encouraging developers to undertake direct delivery of infrastructure at the same time as development. Water was a particular concern, with frequent reports of insufficient water in tall developments, including problems in basic supply and pressure to apartments (indeed, during the pandemic, planners noted that having office workers work at home and not at key office sites in the borough, particularly Canary Wharf, helped ensure supply to tall buildings). Hard densities bring other challenges. Planners spoke of the impacts of generations of people brought up with constant building and development noise, with continuously yet-to-be completed services, roads, infrastructure and developments.

An important element in the development process are Section 106 agreements to secure social housing and other amenities.[1] These agreements are negotiated by the GLA and not Tower Hamlets planners. While one planner in Tower Hamlets has said that the GLA has been 'very uncritical, always pushing for more height and density … in many instances closer to the developer than us. And that weakens our position' (Cerrada Morato, 2022: 281), Section 106 provides at least some potential resource for social ends. It is, however, discretionary in its form, arrived at through judgements between planners, developers and sometimes politicians, and an inefficient way to support coordinated social or environmental goals (Breach, 2020).

Another relevant provision is the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), which applies to all but the smallest buildings. This is a charge to ensure new developments fund the infrastructure they will rely on. One planner noted that Tower Hamlets uses 25% of the CIL for community projects with social, environmental and economic benefit. In the infrastructure funding statement from 2021–22, Tower Hamlets collected £15.8 million in CIL, £12.3 million for the Mayoral CIL, and £25.5 million in Section 106 income (TH Council, 2022).[2] Planners have also sought to harness these funds to support existing communities and spaces beyond the development site in question, such as leisure centers and parks in different borough sites, or resident groups researching issues like the impact of construction noise—although one planner (interviewed in September 2021) noted that using funds from a new development for another place in the borough carries a risk because it might be audited as 'unfair'.

While hard densities are often positioned as a solution to housing shortages in land-scarce areas, the buildings that result do little to provide affordable homes to the range of people living in TH. Instead, they often become enrolled in, and further propel, a growth model that builds expensive apartments in buildings with, despite Section 106, CIL, and requirements to build social housing in new developments, few social amenities and adequate infrastructure. The density dialectic operates to accommodate changes from the scrapping of the density matrix to the impact of a pandemic, in ways that maintain speculative business-as-usual. Do, then, the discourses of 'placemaking', and in particular 'gentle densities', operate to disrupt the growth machine of hard densities, or do these too becomes accommodated within it?

Gentle densities: softening urban space?

Throughout the research, hard densities were often positioned alongside, or against, 'gentle' densification. One developer (interviewed in September 2021) told us that he felt there was a broader shift going on, catalysed by the pandemic, from 'stacking'

1 Agreements under Section 106 of the 1990 Town and Country Planning Act also known as 'developer contributions', operate like a tax that gives local government powers to claim compensation for any harmful impacts from new development.

2 The Mayoral CIL is used to fund infrastructure projects across the capital, such as the large cross-rail development.

people into increasingly tall buildings to maximize profit and house numbers, towards a focus on what dense developments might 'mean for the communities':

> There's a greater responsibility on developers to do more … When we are planning high density, I think that we really we need to think about how our customer needs are changing … [So] we've started looking at social value … Let's look at the scale and massing of buildings. Does it feel right? Does it work? … actually, you know, if you if you apply a different mix to a building, you'll get a different density.

Terms like 'social value' and 'placemaking' operated as a bridge from hard to gentler densities. Respondents explained that the pandemic had lent greater social prioritization to certain urban spaces during lockdowns, including parks, open spaces, play areas, walkways and cycle lanes, as well as greater domestic space for working from home. The consequence, one borough parks officer (interviewed in September 2021) argued, of this new attention to the 'immediate area', was a 'whole shift in mindset' that positioned local provisions and spaces as fundamental to healthy living. Rather than just focusing on the numbers—the stuff of hard density: buildings, targets and units in particular—there was, she continued, greater attention to the *quality* of inhabitation, including making places more 'liveable'. Gentle density might mean a different approach to hard densities or a form of lower-rise in-fill densification that offered a counter-point to taller buildings. While placemaking exceeds gentler densification alone, it emerged in these accounts as a shorthand for a suite of processes that included gentle density as a central part. The planners we spoke to typically used 'softening' more than 'gentle', but with similar intent to the larger 'gentle density' discourse in the UK context.

The pandemic intensified what had been a relatively new agenda in Tower Hamlets, and which featured in the Tower Hamlets HDL SPD and the 2021 London Plan. These documents included a stronger focus on frontloading design and public space in proposed developments. The SPD called for a greater focus on 'quality of life' in new high-density buildings and surrounds, including green community gathering places, play areas, aesthetically welcoming active frontages that allow cross-movement of people, daylight, cooling and ventilation, space for home-based working and so on. While some planners linked placemaking to specific ideas, such as the growing focus on cycle-lanes, most saw it as addressing how densification might proceed with greater focus on the 'character of the area' (De Graaf, 2024). This included, as one planner (interviewed in September 2021) put it, considerations ranging from 'transport connectivity' to 'access to services [and] social infrastructure', and 'historic character' and the 'nature of the built environment'. The challenge, he went on, is 'to piece all of that together'. Planners in Tower Hamlets have talked about the need to 'always go back to place-making principles' rather than focusing on building height in hard densities: housing targets, one planner told Cerrada Morato (2022: 279), 'should not be an excuse that justifies the poor quality of some of these new neighbourhoods'.

This thinking chimes with discussions of 'soft densification'. For architect David Sim (2019), softness is about building flexible urban spaces that are diverse and 'human scale', using for instance 'density devices' that 'smooth out' buildings and allow greater fluidity of movement, including corners, medians, curb extensions, active frontages, building layering and set-backs, walk-throughs, cycle lanes, and so on. At the heart of Sim's argument is the mid-rise housing block. These arguments for a softer or gentler density are not new. Perhaps most influentially, Jane Jacobs (1961) argued in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* that 'in-between' densities of mid-rise urbanisms such as Greenwich Village in New York, were both more pleasant than high-rise alternatives and could generate diverse social and economic activity, and which has had a lasting legacy for example through the mid-rise 'walkable' design-led

movement of New Urbanism, shaped in particular in by Andrés Duany in the United States (McFarlane, 2016).

In Tower Hamlets, the pandemic brought a new emphasis to placemaking by placing health, well-being and the public realm more centrally in discussions with developers. One planner (interviewed in October 2021) said that with the pandemic 'accessibility to services, also to open spaces … starts to be a bit more highlighted'. Another (interviewed in August 2021) spoke about a new sense of 'daring' to tell a borough planning decision-making meeting that proposals for certain tall buildings needed rethinking. One example is student accommodation. While student accommodation is monitored separately from housing targets and metrics like affordable housing, students were 13% of the borough's population in 2021, and therefore a significant consideration for planners and surfaced across the interviews (Tower Hamlets Partnership, 2023a). One planner (interviewed in September 2021) said that planners were looking at proposals for student accommodation, which tend to have lower requirements for public space and amenities, in a new light. London's universities have been an important part of London's growth model, and not immune to the hard-density tall buildings described earlier (Raco and Brill, 2022). A development manager at the council (interviewed in October 2021) reflected:

> I think there was one where there was … a tower … with individual student study beds. So, rooms on a landing, and served by two lifts. And now I'm sort of thinking, 'right okay, so what if everybody came out and wanted to go down to the ground floor at the same time?'

A planner (also interviewed in October 2021) said the pandemic had given greater cause to push beyond minimum standards for student accommodation with developers:

> It's hard to kind of fight against what they propose … I think we're saying we're going to push, push a lot more for, for the quality of student accommodation schemes now, like coming off the back of the pandemic … providers never want to provide, like outdoor space for students or roof gardens. They sometimes do but they close them off. They say, 'too dangerous', or 'it's too much trouble'. But I think we're going to be a lot more pushy, on ensuring that kind of stuff.

While there is little doubt that the pandemic lent weight to the discursive emphasis on forms of gentle density, there were strong limitations. Planners consistently pointed out that they were granted no additional legal power, budget or staff to support different configurations of density. There were no changes, for instance, to minimum space standards within homes, or any strong push away from intense housing targets that drive taller structures. One planner (interviewed in August 2021) described the challenges of trying to address what he perceived as insufficient facilities brought forward by developers, despite them technically fulfilling criteria. He gave an example. A proposal might be next to a busy road with 'dreadful' air quality, but the developer may insist that the air ventilation brings interior air quality within an accepted range. His point was that this kind of positioning by developers is symbolic of the larger problem: planners can push 'gentler' agendas, but developers—often themselves using the language of placemaking or 'quality of life'—will return by technically fulfilling highly limited formal criteria while in practice making little positive difference to local residents.

What this means is that gentler densities effectively become a kind of marketing balm applied to hard densities, with developers effectively attempting to resolve the dialectic of 'hard' and 'gentle' densities by arguing that both can be integrated simultaneously. This is, of course, no meaningful resolution to the dialectic of hard/

gentle, much less that of market/affordable housing, because even if hard densities are 'softened' by developers, it is typically only resolved for the high earners who reside in these structures. In early 2022, for example, one controversial proposal for Tower Hamlets involved a tall building with just one narrow staircase. The building was proposed by Ballymore, one of the most powerful developers in the city, for a building of more than 400 apartments close to Canary Wharf. The application was withdrawn after critical media coverage and when fire safety experts described it as 'madness' (Booth, 2022b). There have also been controversies over 'poor doors' in tall buildings—separate entrances for lower-income residents—and the installation of an exclusive suspended swimming pool bridge connecting two buildings in a structure in Embassy Gardens has become symbolic of the frequent exclusivity of hard densities.

In Tower Hamlets, land and housing markets combined with steep targets mean that, in the dialectic of hard/gentle market/affordable densities, it is the former that becomes dominant and, for all the well-meaning efforts to use gentle densities as a means of foregrounding social and environmental concerns linked to placemaking and more-than-economic notions of value, in the end these discourses are subsumed by—or actively facilitate—the economic speculation of actors and processes peddling hard densities. The discursive turn towards gentle density serves, from context to context, as either a critique of or a complement to hard densities, not a meaningfully new direction on affordable homes or more socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable neighbourhoods. The dialectic is resolved by attempting to accommodate gentle densities within hard densities in ways that nonetheless remain contradictory and subject to debate within and beyond planning contexts in the city. Gentler forms of density are just as likely to be rolled into existing urban growth models as hard densities (Bunce, 2023).

Conclusion

Our focus on the density dialectic has allowed us to examine some of the tensions, contradictions, and confluences of urban development. Hard and gentle density discourses sometimes work in tandem, and at other times against one another, with the latter sometimes providing planners with another foothold, albeit a limited one, from which to push for more social provisioning such as open space, playgrounds and green space. As a mid-range approach, what we see in this dialectic is the tensions in the state between market-based and welfare logics, including how the two clash and how planners seek to find ways to make them work together, as well as around urban aesthetics, form, and the larger question of social and environmental provisioning. In a city like London, with deeply embedded vested interests in profit-driven property markets and steep housing targets and a multi-level state that sometimes itself works in tension across urban space, the dialectic effectively accommodates different imperatives over time in favour of a growth model of speculative development.

The 'resolution' of the density dialectic, as the intense and ongoing housing debates in London continue to show, is, however, never settled, and the contradictions continue to surface. The dialectic, as an approach to understanding density, builds on previous efforts to conceptualize density not just as a process taking place within a territory—a topographical understanding of density—but as a set of subjective and power-leaden concerns distributed across a range of issues, actors and places, which comes to be know through different and often contradictory epistemologies and ideologies of urban space and housing (McFarlane, 2016; Perez, 2021; Haarstad *et al*., 2023). The dialectic operates topologically across space, actors, events and processes, variously expanding and contracting, stabilizing and destabilizing over time. Despite claims that higher density leads to falling house prices and more inclusive communities, densification that does not shift the dominant form of the dialectic typically produces exclusive housing (Ahlfeldt and Pietrostefani, 2019).

While the density dialectic we have described appears 'locked in' to a hard-density growth model, with even a pandemic doing little to substantially unsettle conditions, cities do change, and London is no exception. There are some small shifts at play which could shift the dialectic. The switch from office working to working at home since the Covid-19 pandemic has left a legacy of vacant or under-used office space (Kollewe, 2023). Indeed, Tower Hamlets council itself sold and reduced its office capacity during the pandemic. In London more generally there was a 60% reduction in office use in the pandemic, and since 2019 the proportion of homeworking in London has grown by 23%, while 37% say they work partially from home (Crosbie, 2023). One planner at the GLA wondered if the growth in working from home might eventually mean not denser cities but that 'we need to build endless suburbia'.

A senior figure at Transport for London (interviewed in October 2021) suggested that the combined impact of the pandemic, climate change, labour market changes and advancing digital technologies could mean a low-carbon localism where Londoners are more neighbourhood-based for work. This would be experienced differently across London, he added: 'In outer London local living could mean more short car trips, whereas in inner London it might mean less cars … [There are] big spatial differences we're trying to pay attention to'. The extent to which these changes will be realized or whether they would in fact undermine the hard density dialectic and its growth model remains to be seen, and the dialectic has proved remarkably able to accommodate new conditions. While densification is often positioned as an urban good in mainstream urban development, a focus on the density dialectic can reveal the limits, and constrained possibilities, placed on density and its dominant characteristics in different cities across the world. Future urban research would benefit from examining how density dialectics operate in different contexts. Doing so provides a useful route to learning how actors and logics unequally interact, and how different possible urban futures might emerge.

How might the density dialectic be better managed for meeting more socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable housing? First, it is clear that meaningful change towards socially inclusive housing requires more than a shift in discourse to, for instance, placemaking and gentle density. Instead, there has to be greater power for welfare-driven interventions to provide genuinely affordable housing alongside controls on a runaway speculative housing markets (Minton, 2017; Shih and Chiang, 2022). This includes powers to tackle, for instance, the practice of developers 'hoarding' land, waiting for market options to change in ways that suit profit margins, which limits the state of its power to plan effectively. The Local Government Association has repeatedly drawn attention to this problem, with one estimate of up to 500,000 plots of land banked across the UK (Jefferys, 2016). Second, planning needs new regulatory powers. The UK's discretionary planning system, whereby decisions are made not through clear enforceable regulations but on a case-by-case basis is not suited to delivering a housing system that works for all. Instead of discretionary Section 106 guidance, for example, there could be regulatory requirements that developers must legally conform to for affordable homes and public space (Breach, 2020). The Labour government elected in July 2024 has made much of tackling the planning system to support housing targets; the years to come will reveal whether the changes to be made will culminate in a meaningful shift to a deeply entrenched density dialectic.

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