

## **Densifying Johannesburg: resilient, sustainable, inclusive?**

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The idea of compacting cities and limiting sprawl has become a predominant policy prescription among international agencies and in many countries and cities. Dense, compact cities are seen as more resilient, vibrant, diverse, inclusive, and sustainable. There has been intense debate over these claims (see UN-Habitat, 2009 for a summary), and several authors argue that dominant spatial trends are moving in opposite directions, undermining the plausibility of these policies. In particular, Angel (2010) shows that densities are declining in most cities studied internationally. Johannesburg in South Africa however is an exception, as it has densified since the 1980s, in part reflecting the collapse of controls associated with apartheid and modernist planning. In Johannesburg, densification is relatively moderate in most areas, and has also gone along with further expansion on the edges, albeit at higher densities than in the past. Patterns of densification however vary across the city, and there are even some areas that are dedensifying. Johannesburg is not unique amongst South African cities, although trends are more pronounced there, reflecting its position as the dominant economic centre in the country.

Reacting to the inequalities and inefficiencies associated with sprawling apartheid cities, and in line with policy prescriptions internationally, post-apartheid planning has emphasised urban densification and compaction. Policies centre on urban infill, densification around corridors, and reducing regulatory constraints on densification. While these policies might be having some influence, they have not for the most part driven densification, which has largely occurred through both formal and informal market processes, often in ways that are unforeseen and sometimes contrary

to city policies. Densification takes different forms across the city, with varying consequences. This variation offers the opportunity to assess the claims of densification policy, and also their appropriateness.

This paper draws on four case studies (Todes et al, 2015) to explore the effects that densification is having in the city, showing how diverse, complex and contingent it often is, presenting a contextually situated mix of benefits and challenges. Standardised policy prescriptions have little value in this context. The areas examined include: Hillbrow, a high-rise suburb in the inner city; Bram Fischerville, developed in the post-apartheid era as a low-cost 'RDP' housing project, and on the edges of the Soweto, a 'township' once reserved for black African people; Houghton, an upper income former 'white' suburb; and North Riding, where clusters of middle-income gated housing estates in the north of the city have developed since the 1990s. In all of the case studies, densification is driven largely by economic or market forces and is happening because the localities are attractively located for at least segments of the population, meeting needs that are responsive to the characteristics and expectations of these groups.

There are clear positives. In Bram Fischerville densification processes have transformed the suburb from a monotonous, mainly residential settlement, to a more vibrant mixed use one, with diverse identities and senses of place developing in different parts of the community. Hillbrow conforms to several of the claims put forward by advocates of densification policy – high levels of accessibility at low cost, a diverse environment offering economic opportunities. The area is increasingly stabilising from a transient to a more permanent community; North Riding provides young professionals with an affordable entry point to the property market, while offering a sense of safety for its residents. Importantly, too, the suburb is catering to a racially diverse middle class that is growing in South Africa. Houghton, which is changing at the slowest rate of the four case studies, is seeing demographic and economic diversification, although it is still considered an 'elite' suburb, and remains high income. There are also negatives. In most cases infrastructure and social services have not been upgraded to accommodate increasing populations. Densification is also associated in some cases with overcrowding and growing management challenges.

The paper considers these experiences of densification for the debate and for policy. It suggests that greater engagement with actual dynamics of densification and a deeper understanding of the decisions of ordinary people are critical in developing appropriate policies.

### **References**

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