



5 juin 2018

HABITER

*Aménager : expérience et
innovation d'un quartier*



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It's Not How Dense We Make It, but How We Make It Dense: On Porosity as a Corequisite of Densification

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Densification is a tough nut to crack, and it is a touchy subject in urbanism. As [Alex Bozиковic has just urged us to remember](#), it demands regulatory changes that become messy, arousing passions, engendering contestations, and causing headaches for almost everyone involved. Process-wise, the shiny new spaces of Griffintown exemplify this—but, as many readers will recall from the hot arguments concerning this precinct almost 15 years ago, the very prospect of densification is scary for many. Perhaps this is because, as history has shown, it is very easy to do in mediocre ways.

Griffintown has justifiably attracted plenty of attention for Montréal, both in public conversations and in private chatter. As a de-facto megaproject, it is one among many major undertakings that combine infrastructure investments, sharp increases in the density of jobs and dwellings, and dramatic changes to the built form needed to accommodate all that activity. Other such districts are apt to literally sprout up across the Montréal region—both as the REM is completed with accompanying plans, policies, and projects seeking to intensify activity around the new stations, but also as various private-sector actors seek to capitalise on demand for new construction at perceived ‘hotspots’ (think of Royalmount, the Dix-30 precinct, and the Quartier des Spectacles). All this is rendered more complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic, of course. Griffintown reminds us that we need to grapple with densification as a basic phenomenon of change in human sett-

lements (for better or for worse), and how we work on making places dense(r) through time.

In the following paragraphs, I sketch out a few claims¹ on why densification is an important topic for public debate, and how we can be more sophisticated in talking about the various changes that are captured by this tongue-twisting word. Were I to impose a tacky infographic of the *densification* ‘word cloud’ on you, it would include *missing middle*, *infill*, *porosity*, *smart growth*, *contestation*, *populism*, and *stubbornness*. These claims alight in the new Griffintown, but I only use this Montréal megaproject as a *cas de figure* made real. Similar melodramas are playing out architecturally and process-wise in many contexts, including central Sweden, where I have been working for a decade with colleagues on the growing pains, challenges, and frustrations of rapid (sub)urban densification, officially justified by lofty claims of ‘sustainability’ and ‘value uplift’.

In the interest of transparency, let me declare that I love densification. This does not mean that I love density as a static ‘matter of fact’! Rather, the processes are addictive for people such as myself, who work in architecture,

¹ These comments have taken shape thanks to ongoing work with a research group including graduate students Andrew Faber, Guillaume Joseph, Liam Murphy, Michael Nugent, Valentina Samoylenko, Giacomo Valzania, and Basile Van Laer, as well as students working with me this winter in ARCH 673 (Architectural Design Studio 2) at McGill; this work also builds on lively discussions with Anne Cormier, Carole Després, Jean-Philippe Meloche, Owen Rose, Laura E. Taylor, Leo Trotter, and Martin Wexler.



Suburban densification in Sweden: scenes in Knivsta, Rosendal, and Svedala, Nik Luka.



Scenes in Griffintown—in the middle, an image from 2009, as densification was just beginning, Nik Luka.



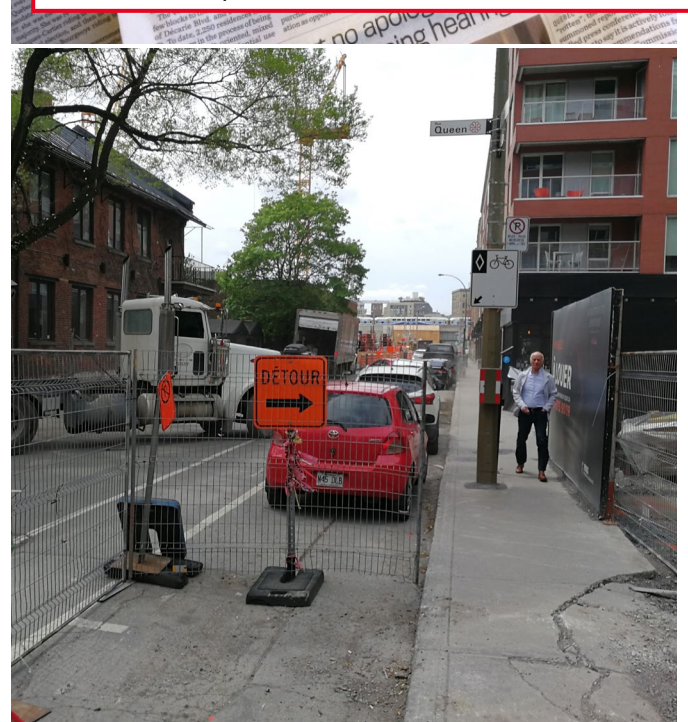
landscape studies, urban design, planning, and governance. As changes occurring in space over time, densification(s) can be fascinating, terrible, magnificent, and perennial, endlessly generating fresh questions and ideas. While perhaps not quite on par with politics and religion in places like Montréal, few things get *Monsieur et Madame Tout-le-monde* more riled than the prospect of densification in their neighbourhood, in their *arrondissement*, or elsewhere in the metropolitan region. When it occurs, normally dull-as-dishwater public meetings become riotous events; artists and writers are inspired by the laments or celebrations buzzing in the air, and researchers are called upon to tell us more about what is good, what is desirable, and what is bad, what is reprehensible about densification. Where it takes place (literally and figuratively), architects and planners usually get blamed for helping to produce physical forms that many love to hate, but which are utterly predictable manifestations of an economic system and governance model driven by private capital.

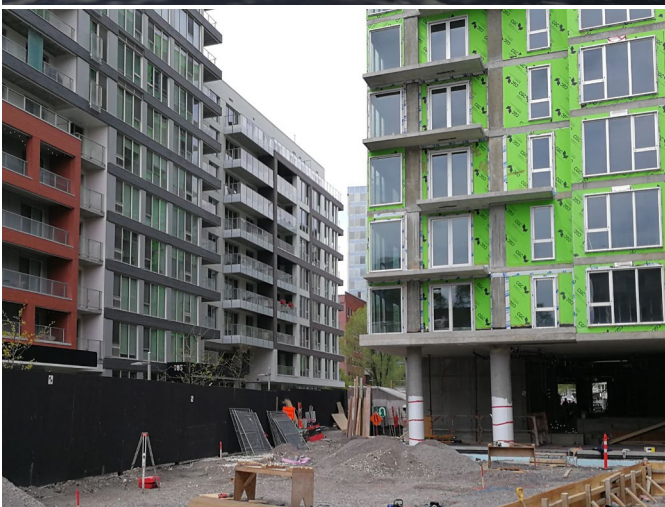
Densification seems to really test the human condition, especially now that the COVID-19 pandemic has literally recalibrated [how we perceive 'nearness'](#) and [the joys of city living](#) while accelerating [what might be termed 'neo-counterurbanisation.'](#) Yet, like the pandemic, densification is a global matter: it dominates planning policy in metropolitan areas across Canada, through the rest of the Anglo-American world, far and wide in the so-called 'wealthy' countries, and throughout the burgeoning megacities and the uncountable 'new towns' springing up in so-called 'emerging economies².' It also gets implemented

2 See Bunce, S. *Sustainability Policy, Planning and Gentrification in Cities*. Abingdon, Routledge, 2018; Charmes, E., & Keil, R. "The Politics of Post-suburban Densification in Canada and France." *International Journal of Urban & Regional Research*, vol. XXXIX, no. 3, 2015, p. 581-602; Côté-Roy, L., & Moser, S. "Does Africa Not Deserve Shiny New Cities? The Power of Seductive Rhetoric Around New Cities in Africa." *Urban Studies*, vol. LVI, no. 12, 2019, p. 2391-2407; Forest, B., & Moser, S. "Building Nations / Building States / Building Cities: Concrete Symbols of Identity." In S. Moiso, N. Koch, A. E. G. Jonas, C. Lizotte, & J. Luukkonen (Eds.), *Handbook on the Changing Geographies of the State: New Spaces of Geopolitics*. Cheltenham, Edward Elgar, 2020, p. 145-156; Haaland, C., & Kon-



Growing pains in Montreal: disruption of activity patterns near Square Cabot, uncertainty over the development of promised amenities in the Triangle, and the ubiquitous mess of the chantier, Nik Luka.





Examples of 'hard' densification in downtown Toronto (top) and Griffintown (bottom), contrasting with 'soft' densification in Ville-Marie (centre), Nik Luka

unevenly, with lower-income or post-industrial areas often subjected to extreme, clumsy forms of densification, while leafy middle- and high-income areas with detached houses resist all but the gentlest transformations³.

In short, my first claim is that densification is an urgent matter of concern. All else being equal, the old logic of neoclassical economics tells us, some (or all) urban land will become more valuable through time, and rational actors can then be expected to make use of that land more intensively, if only because it is an expensive prospect to hold onto that land and maintain it. This often gets accelerated through 'financialization'—a market pathology where speculation and exchange value trump access to shelter and the 'collective good' ostensibly sought through urban planning⁴. The architectural manifestation of these changes, for better or for worse, is densification: an increase in the height, bulk, and overall floor area of useable 'built' space. The transformations engendered cause controversy and angst, and thus tend to have high 'transaction costs' for various stakeholders.

Reality is always more complex than the reductionist accounts of economics and, in this respect, the new Griffintown is a compelling example of rapid densification in urban space. Process-wise, it represents a bewildering mix of factors: changing regimes of State control over what can be done with private

ijnendijk van den Bosch, C. C. "Challenges and Strategies for Urban Green-space Planning in Cities Undergoing Densification: A Review." *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening*, vol. XIV, no. 4, 2020, p. 760-771; Todes, A., Weakley, D., & Harrison, P. "Densifying Johannesburg: Context, Policy and Diversity." *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment*, vol. XXXIII, no. 2, 2018, p. 281-299.

3 Anastasia Touati-Morel has usefully distinguished between 'hard' and 'soft' densification. See Touati-Morel, A. "Hard and Soft Densification Policies in the Paris City-region." *International Journal of Urban & Regional Research*, vol. XXXIX, no. 3, 2015, p. 603-612.

4 See August, M., & Walks, A. "Gentrification, Suburban Decline, and the Financialization of Multi-family Rental housing: The Case of Toronto." *Geoforum*, vol. LXXXIX, 2018, p. 124-136; Glass, M. R., Woldoff, R., & Morrison, L. "Does the Middle Class Have Rights to the City? Contingent Rights and the Struggle to Inhabit Stuyvesant Town, New York." *International Journal of Housing Policy*, vol. XIV, no. 3, 2014, p. 214-235; Stein, S. *Capital City: Gentrification and the Real Estate State*. London, Verso, 2019.



Densification driven by the desire for 'land-value uplift' in Westmount (top), Svedala in southern Sweden (centre), and near Mont-Royal (bottom), Nik Luka

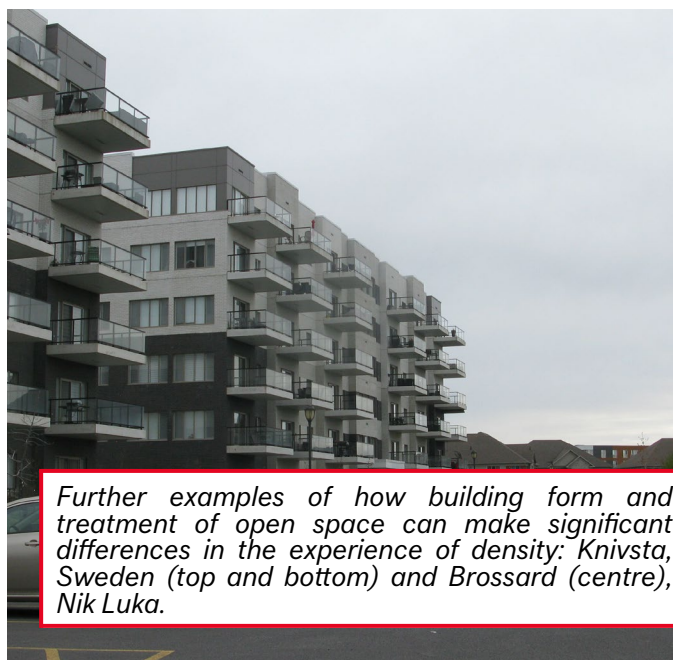
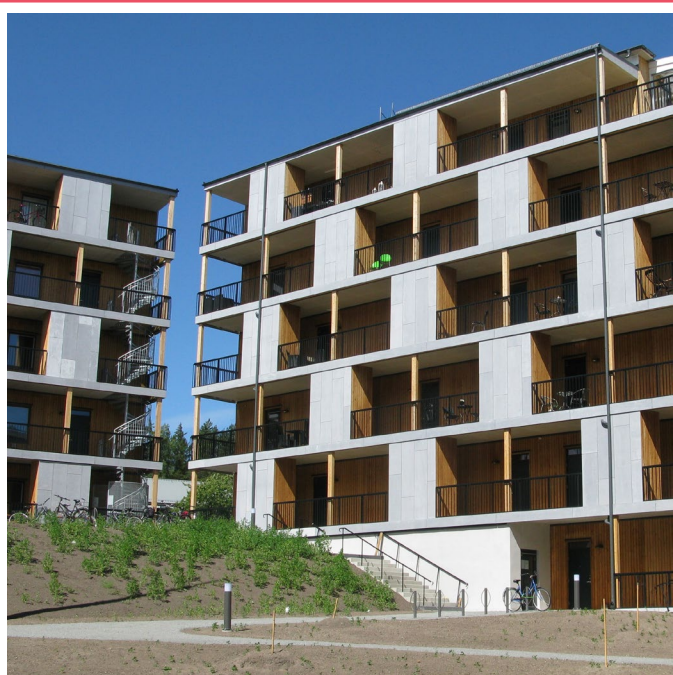


land, shifting patterns of demand for revenue-generating real estate, changing and contradictory expectations about how we should use scarce resources, and renewed collective ideas about where one should live and work in large metropolitan areas, as understood in terms of time—how long one must spend traveling on a regular basis to and from workplaces, services, and so on—but also in terms of comfort or usefulness (that is, how much private space one has in one's dwelling and/or workplace, what sorts of amenities or attractions are handy, and how readily nuisances or irritants can be controlled, to name a few key examples).

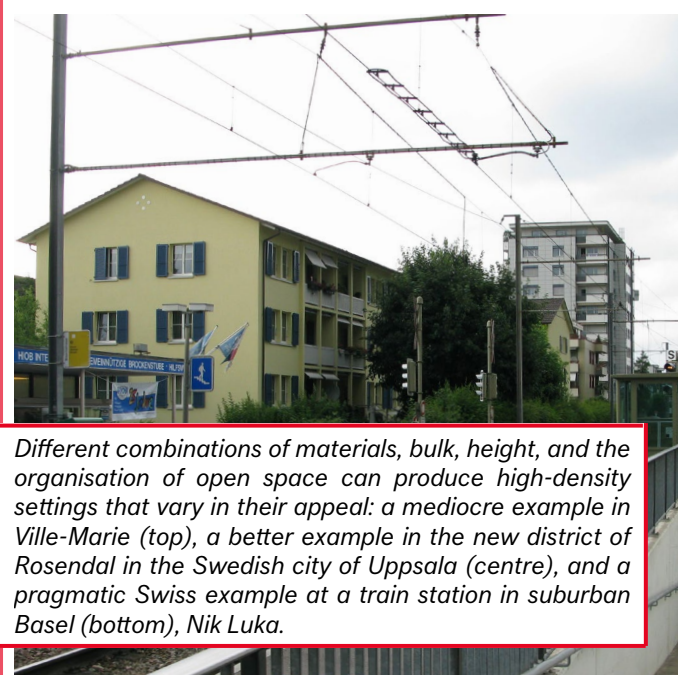
We should avoid the temptation to think of densification as 'natural'—but it is often inevitable, at least in certain locations, as seen through thousands of years of urban history⁵. Of equal if not greater importance for Montréal, as in many other OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) contexts, is the fact that public policy has officially (if not effectively) encouraged densification by favouring 'compact urban form' instead of the sprawling, dispersed patterns of construction that became dominant in the 20th century⁶. The new Griffintown is thus pitted as a *figure de cas*, for better or for worse, against the suburban and periurban growth that gobbles up precious farmland, reducing both biodiversity and biomass and ensnaring us in the global geopolitics and climate change nightmare of automobile dependency. Since the 1990s, the mantra of 'smart growth' has been put into practice through densification, to the point that 'smart growth' and 'sustainability' and 'densification' seem to be seen as synony-

5 See notably Caniggia, G., & Maffei, G. L. *Architectural Composition and Building Typology: Interpreting Basic Building*, S. J. Fraser, (Trans.). Firenze, Alinea editrice s.r.l., 2001 [1979]; Panerai, P., Castex, J., & Depaule, J.-C. *Formes urbaines: de l'îlot à la barre*. Marseille, Éditions Parenthèses, 1997 (2e éd.).

6 See Bunce, S.; Forsyth, A. "Congested Cities vs. Sprawl Makes You Fat: Unpacking the Health Effects of Planning Density." *Town Planning Review*, vol. LXXXIX, no. 4, 2018, p. 333-354. Quastel, N., Moos, M., & Lynch, N. "Sustainability-as-density and the Return of the Social: the Case of Vancouver, British Columbia." *Urban Geography*, vol. XXXIII, no. 7, 2012, p. 1055-1084.



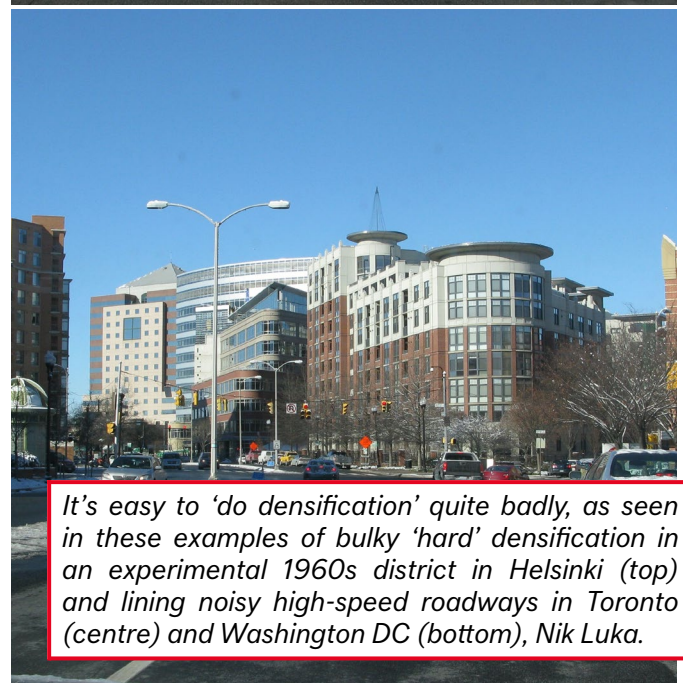
Further examples of how building form and treatment of open space can make significant differences in the experience of density: Knivsta, Sweden (top and bottom) and Brossard (centre), Nik Luka.



Different combinations of materials, bulk, height, and the organisation of open space can produce high-density settings that vary in their appeal: a mediocre example in Ville-Marie (top), a better example in the new district of Rosendal in the Swedish city of Uppsala (centre), and a pragmatic Swiss example at a train station in suburban Basel (bottom), Nik Luka.

mous, flattening debates and understandings of what actually matters. Unfortunately, it is easy to do densification poorly in terms of what gets produced: built environments that many people find hateful, and which engender hardship instead of happiness.

We come to my second claim, which I have declared in my title. The work of densification is not simply that of achieving certain quantifiable outcomes (required minimum numbers of jobs and residents per hectare, for instance—an ‘absolute’ [enshrined in Ontario planning policy](#) since the introduction of the Greenbelt). Paraphrasing the bawdy old saying, it is not how dense we make a place, but how we make it dense that matters. *Quality* matters, and quality is often a matter of perception. Empirical studies have shown for decades that human responses to density—as indicated by stress levels, satisfaction, comfort, and ‘pain thresholds’ where changes occur in the bulk and intensity of the ‘hard stuff’ of our cities and suburbs—almost never map out cleanly, nor are there clear associations between positive responses and higher or lower overall densities once all the change has taken place⁷. Rather, evidence strongly suggests that we must focus on perceptions of density and crowding relative to greenery, the quality of openness or ‘breathability’, and other information that we receive through our sensory capacities; in terms of social acceptability or wellbeing, these details of our everyday embodied experiences of space as human beings seem to matter most. [Mon-](#)



It's easy to 'do densification' quite badly, as seen in these examples of bulky 'hard' densification in an experimental 1960s district in Helsinki (top) and lining noisy high-speed roadways in Toronto (centre) and Washington DC (bottom), Nik Luka.

⁷ See Buys, L., & Miller, E. “Residential Satisfaction in Inner Urban Higher-density Brisbane, Australia: Role of Dwelling Design, Neighbourhood and Neighbours.” *Journal of Environmental Planning & Management*, vol. LV, no. 3, 2012. p. 319–338; Kytä, M., Broberg, A., Tzoulas, T., & Snabb, K. “Towards Contextually Sensitive Urban Densification: Location-based SoftGIS Knowledge Revealing Perceived Residential Environmental Quality.” *Landscape & Urban Planning*, no. 113, 2013, p. 30–46; Leung, H. L. *Residential Density and Quality of Life*. Ottawa, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 1993; Nematollahi, S., Tiwari, R., & Hedgecock, D. “Desirable Dense Neighbourhoods: An Environmental Psychological Approach for Understanding Community Resistance to Densification.” *Urban Policy & Research*, vol. XXXIV, no. 2, 2016, p. 132–151; but also Hur, M., Nasar, J. L., & Chun, B. “Neighborhood Satisfaction, Physical and Perceived Naturalness and Openness.” *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, vol. XXX, no. 1, 2010, p. 52–59. for counterargument.

Perception matters: the Marché Jean-Talon (top) can be crowded, but it's a 'fun' and temporary sort of density; the Plateau Mont-Royal (bottom) is one of the densest places in North America in terms of population, but it feels spacious because of greenery and well-curated public space, including wide sidewalks. In contrast, Sherbrooke at Durocher (centre) is less satisfying because of the in-your-face height and bulk of the buildings and the high-speed traffic, Nik Luka.



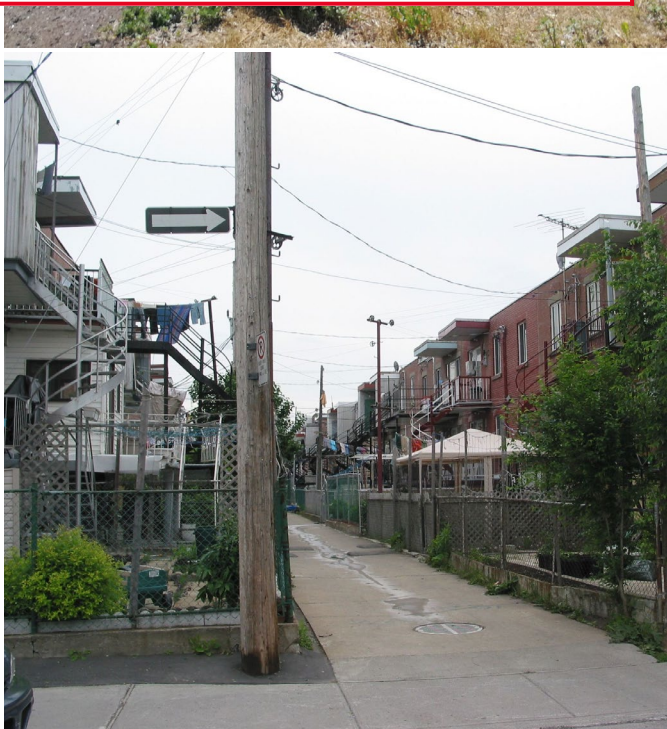
Montréal's new 2030 Strategic Plan acknowledges this by declaring that interventions must attend to the human scale of how we sense, engage with, and dwell in space, as well as conventional analytical scales of districts and the larger metropolitan context.

My final claim, one which is meant as an invitation for further discussion in Montréal, is that we must explore how to ensure that densification is done well by recognising the need for always weaving it in with what Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis called 'porosity' in a celebrated essay on the densely-layered city of Naples, originally published in 1924 in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*⁸. Inspired by the sponge-like porous texture of the volcanic pumice found in abundance around Mount Vesuvius, they argued that the vitality and liveability and sustainability of Naples was due in large part to the way in which the architecture of the city allowed for a blending of private and public life without sacrificing intimacy and the possibility of 'retreat' into one's own space. Similarly, we should strive for a robust mix of 'hard' and 'soft', 'open' and 'closed' moments and spaces where densification is underway, as well as a renewed discussion of who has access to space and for what activities. In other words, porosity is not just about physical characteristics, but about social practice, norms, expectations, and tolerances. In recent years, many observers such have called for work to be done on the notion of 'soft' or 'gentle' densification; this holds promise for how we can make places dense in good ways. Griffintown may not be a poster child in this respect, but if this is true, I think it is because we have not worked through the corequisites of densification as captured in the notion of porosity—in terms of community benefits (improved public space, new *équipements*, etc.)—nor have we demanded higher-quality design with resources appropriate for the thoughtful

⁸ See Benjamin, W., & Lacis, A. "Naples," E. Jephcott (Trans.). In W. Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writing*. New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978 [1924], p. 163-173; see also Viganò, P. "Porosity: Why This Figure Is Still Useful." In S. Wolfrum (Ed.), *Porous City: From Metaphor to Urban Agenda*. Basel, Birkhäuser, 2018, p. 50-56.



Moments of porosity and possibility in dense contexts make all the difference—as seen in the seasonal plaza beside the McCord Museum (top), at the Champ des Possibles (centre), and in a humble ruelle in Villeray (bottom)—if we can keep gentrification at bay!, Nik Luka.



transformations of built environments⁹. A statistician might call this regression to something less than the mean.

Architects, planners, and landscape architects are among the key actors who can help to articulate the criteria, performance dimensions, indicators, and tactics for achieving porosity, but folks like us are surprisingly marginal in key aspects of how places such as the new Griffintown get produced. This includes the meaningful and thorough involvement of ‘nonspecialists’, who also have expertise; [as I have argued elsewhere](#), participatory design strategies offer possibilities for doing better work, at least by [addressing social acceptability](#). I will end, therefore, not just with a plea for basic recalibrations of who is involved in processes and when, but also for focused debate among specialists and diverse publics, all of which will bring us to porosity. Among the questions we need to ask: What defines ‘soft’ densification versus ‘hard’ densification for different individuals, groups, and communities? How might we develop and operationalize ‘critical density’ as a *matter of concern* rather than a matter of fact—going beyond the temptation of quantifiable measures (even if performance can be benchmarked in certain absolute terms, e.g., supporting a local café) and Cartesian approaches¹⁰? Whom should we involve in the crafting of a humanistic agenda, strategy, and set of approaches for soft densification in contexts that are usually driven hard by politics and capital? What are the vital tactics, entailments, and transaction costs associated with ‘gentle’ densification? How do various actors view issues such as institutional inertia and trade-offs? How, in short, should we strive to make porosity a corequisite of densification? ■

9 See Bornstein, L. “Mega-projects, City-building and Community Benefits.” *City, Culture & Society*, vol. 1, no. 4, 2010, p. 199-206.

10 Qviström, M., Luka, N., & De Block, G. “Beyond Circular Thinking: Geographies of Transit-oriented Development.” *International Journal of Urban & Regional Research*, vol. XLIII, no. 4, 2019, p. 786-793.



Coopérative des Bassins du Havre, 5 juin 2018.



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