Dialogues in Human Geography

Commentary

Dialogues in Human Geography
2023, Vol. 13(1) 39–43

DOI: 10.1177/20438206221144837
journals.sagepub.com/home/dhg


What planners can learn from geography or what geographers have overlooked about planning

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Abstract
As fields equally concerned with the production of space and place, geographers and planners are engaged in understanding the compact city both as a concept and as a built and lived reality. In response to Haarstad et al.'s renewed agenda for research on compact urbanism, this comment piece seeks to shift their perception of planning and planners as being narrowly focused on urban form, to a more fulsome understanding of planning's contribution.

Keywords
Compact urbanism, planning, planning-geography interface, research

Introduction

As an erstwhile geographer, now firmly in the urban planning field, I welcome the opportunity to comment on Haarstad et al.'s (2023) excellent and thought-provoking piece. In particular, I commend their questions for further debate and research.

The pursuit of the compact city has been widely advocated in the pursuit of a wide range of objectives from carbon neutrality, reduced infrastructure and service costs and neighbourhood revitalisation, to countryside conservation and community engagement (Kain et al., 2022; Puustinen et al., 2022). Consequently, the compact city has become a 'leading concept' (Hofstad, 2012), even elevated to the level of an 'ideal'. This ideal is, if anything, being strengthened by an international focus on limiting land take, with consumption through urbanisation seen as a key cause of bio-diversity loss, and a key driver of (negative) environmental change. Indeed, the European Commission's 'Roadmap to a Resource Efficient Europe' focuses on reducing land take, through densification, brownfield development and land return to non-artificial land categories (Build Europe, 2022). Even where the exact language is absent, attempts to meet a growing population internationally demand, by definition, a focus on the compact city.

Yet, as with any established idea, it should be tested and challenged, else how can we know something is fit for purpose for contemporary practice, delivering the espoused intended outcomes? I am, therefore, in complete agreement with the authors in their quest to contest and explore the 'increasing policy orthodoxy in the current field …' (Haarstad et al., 2023).

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I also agree with the authors in their call for greater connectedness between disciplines. I disagree, however, with their intimation of the gap between the disciplines of geography and planning in relation to their intellectual engagement with the concept of the compact city. Both fields are intimately concerned with the production of space and place (Phelps and Tewdwr-Jones, 2008; Huxley, 1999). Indeed, many planners choose the profession in direct response to their exposure to the ideas covered in Haarstad's piece whilst studying geography, seeing a planning career as offering them an opportunity to effect positive change (Hickman et al. 2019). I thus find the sense of separateness as disciplines, at times perplexing. Although human geography can undoubtedly offer a set of theoretical and methodological tools 'relevant for scrutinizing, critiquing and engaging with the ideals of the compact city' (Haarstad et al., 2023) (the authors make a convincing and a compelling case here), I wish to assert that the discipline of planning is not overlooking some of the key issues in relation to understanding of the compact city, restricting our scrutiny only to physical form and with little attention to multi-scalar effects of the compact city, in the ways that the authors imply.

Thus, in this short response, I am making a plea for geographers to understand the academic discipline and practice of planning more fully. In doing so, I engage with the three areas the authors' state can be learnt from geography and follow with their proposed entry points for a renewed compact urbanism agenda.

Planning's perspectives on the compact city

Firstly, Haarstad et al. assert the need for compact cities to be understood as an ideological agenda. There is a long history of writing on planning as ideology (Gunder, 2010) and Shepherd et al. (2020: 3) are clear that ideology needs to be 'a tool in the analysis of planning problems' (2020: 3) and understood as a way to 'legitimise certain actions, making alternatives unthinkable' (Zanotto, 2020). Harstaad et al. are thus talking to the converted here when they assert the need for the political and ideological effects of compactness to be understood. Indeed, writing nearly two decades ago, Burton et al. (1996) and Breheny (1992) were already acknowledging the motivations for, and potential consequences of, a compact urban agenda, identifying conflicts between competing aspirations. More recently, in introducing a special issue on densification in the journal Town Planning Review, Dembski et al. (2020) are explicit about the politics of densification, and Dunning et al. (2020) and Elvestad and Holsen (2020) engage explicitly with the effects of densification on city regions and suburbs, which Haarstad et al infer are absent from the current analysis.

Secondly, the authors explore how compact urbanism has implications for social justice, with the potential for significant displacement effects. Here, I observe that much planning writing is nothing, if not, explicit about this. Debrunner et al. (2020), for example, are commendably clear on how densification processes have 'threatened' low- and middle-income housing due to higher rents following redevelopment. My own work on soft-densification exposes its hidden and cumulative impacts, highlighting the beneficiaries and the excluded (Dunning et al. 2020). Here, we note, in particular, the market-driven nature of densification and its uneven geographical outcomes.

Thirdly, the authors argue we must 'better understand the interests, powers relations and contestations of compact urbanism' (Haarstad et al., 2023). My response to this is, 'yes of course', but again, now predictably perhaps, I wish to assert that whilst this should be our collective endeavour in engaging with the compact city, it is not entirely absent in either the theory or practice of planning. Understanding agonism in the daily life of planning decision-making is succinctly illuminated in the work of McClymont (2011), Hillier (2002) and Pløger (2004). Furthermore, Haarstad et al. write 'resistances and the divergent lived experiences with compactness is often dismissed as selfish NIMBYism … a common discursive practice among planners and architects in deflecting critiques of compact city development'. Here, I wish to ask the authors who, exactly, they are writing about?

Planners are not the decision makers. Instead, they are tasked with making recommendations based on the balance of evidence. Far from deflecting critiques of the compact city, I see planners consistently and cogently exploring the impacts of decision-making, often exposing (rather than deflecting or even denying) the contestations around a particular scheme. A recent depiction from one UK planner of 'considerate urbanism' (Hartley, 2022) is one small-scale example of planning's engagement with lived experiences. On a larger scale, the global study of densification resistance and acceptance explores people's lived experiences of densification and is an example of the depth of fieldwork that Haarstad et al. argue can be mobilised by the geographical tradition (Wicki et al., 2021).

A collaborative research future?

I have argued above that whilst planning outcomes might be perceived in a literal sense in built form terms, it is a mistake to think that planners and planning are only concerned with the built form of compact urbanism, with lived experiences absent from analytical view or indeed consideration in the development process. However, it would, in turn, be a mistake not to applaud the progressive intent in Haarstad et al.'s call for socially, politically and ecologically progressive critical scholarship on compact urbanism and explore planning's potential contribution here.

Commoning the compact city is their first plea, stating the need to reclaim the values of public interest, equality and social justice. Although these ideas are at the core of planning (see Campbell and Marshall, 2000) with planners clearly highly motivated by ideas of social justice and equity (Hickman and Sturzaker, 2022), there is an increasing honesty about the challenges for planners in mediating the public interest in the face of private interests (see Grange, 2017). I would argue, therefore, that this is less of a renewed agenda for planners, but, instead, an area where planners would benefit from the advocacy of their colleagues in other disciplines, to endorse the positive intent of planning and its public interest-oriented practice.

Greater focus on the metabolism of the compact city is the second focus, with Haarstad et al. asserting the need '… to look beyond the discrete spaces where negotiations over specific densification projects are playing out'). Here, there is an opportunity for productive debate about planning as it is practiced. Although the planning academy does engage with understanding multi-scalar effects, planning practice does not always enable this in decision-making, when systems focus on one development at a time, with little ability to manage cumulative impacts across schemes. This would benefit from more in-depth coverage than this comment piece allows for, but this is acknowledgement that the tools of planning (accepting huge variations in practice around the globe) are potentially not fit for purpose in the way that Haarstad imply.

Finally, Haarstad et al. call for a research approach that understands 'the interests, power relations and contestations of compact urbanism'. Here, I want to return to the interface between planning and geography. I believe strongly that few planning academics would suggest they were doing anything other pursuing a socially and geographically inclusive agenda in their engagement with the compact city. This 'entry point' should, therefore, be less about the subject of research but more about ensuring that research is truly interdisciplinary and understands fully what can be learnt from existing approaches and practice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Haarstad's insights are fulsome and thoughtful, but they are not entirely new or surprising to planners at least! Through this brief comment, I have sought to assert that their conception of planning is incomplete: the planning academy, and indeed planning practice itself, is actively engaged in thinking about the compact city in the ways the authors advocate. So whilst I do not disagree with any of their proposed research agenda, I have a different take: to suggest that geographers would

benefit from better knowledge of and engagement with the planning community, both in practice and academia. This does not mean, of course, that all of the answers are to be found there but rather to assert, more positively, that we should actively seek opportunities for proper cross-disciplinary academic practice here.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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