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# Why is 'dense'

In Australia density too often speaks to the bottom line: residential units per square kilometre. But the term also encapsulates the possibility for improved space efficiency, liveability, and a nurturing relationship between people and place.

## the dirty word?

Words Aleesha Callahan in conversation with Yoshiharu Tsukamoto, John Doyle and Graham Crist

As the title of this article suggests, dense doesn't need to be a dirty word. The catch cry of increasing urbanisation often comes back to density, but is it a bad thing if the fabric holding it together brings something more valuable, like social cohesion? These key points came out of a round table discussion between Atelier Bow-Wow's Yoshiharu Tsukamoto, and RMIT's Graham Crist and John Doyle – co-curators of the RMIT Design Hub exhibition *Super Tight* (July - September 2019).

### Tightness is different to denseness

**Yoshiharu Tsukamoto:** The idea of tightness is not just about size and density, there is a relational aspect that comes into play – how people and buildings can interact with one another. It raises questions like, how can architects design to facilitate relational qualities rather than homogenised design?

**John Doyle:** I think a key difference for us is that density is purely quantitative, and tightness is qualitative. It's also about reconciling that you can live with less space if you use it in a more sophisticated way, which can be achieved by overlapping functions or relating space together in different ways. Mixed-use is a fundamental necessity for density. Even if the square metres per person are quite high, if it's done properly you can fold multiple uses into the one space and suddenly you're being efficient.

Density is an artificial number in some ways, it's so overwhelmingly focused on residential units per square kilometre that we often overlook the fact that if we can collapse the relationship between home and work we can minimise the footprint of the city without necessarily needing to increase the size of it.

**Graham Crist:** Tightness is scalable. The difference between density and 'tight' is that the architecture is about making everything overlap and work hard. The very high-density cities in the world, that also appear very liveable, are liveable because there are spaces created that can be used for so many different things. It's a super efficient way of city making. Most people are used to seeing the model that only looks at more and more square metres – or has more and more floors added to it – which, as mentioned, becomes purely quantitative.

In Australian culture, density is seen as something pejorative, something that needs to be limited. I would rather that it be seen as something that we might actually want to achieve for social reasons, not just economic reasons.

### Bringing back social cohesion

**YT:** Where tightness can succeed is in the fact that it brings back social cohesion to society through shared relationships. This is key, but it's also up to the people

who inhabit the spaces to bring these to life. As humans we inherently know how to behave, but bringing shared commonalities into our cities is critical and that's what multi-residential towers should be doing.

It's about how we can have a sense of 'commons'. Our social system is constructed on a clear division between private and public but somewhere in the middle is how we could establish this sense of sharing, which has a kind of social capital. There is value in social capital.

**GC:** It's impossible to have density without curating a social or community relationship as well. This means giving land up for people to use how they choose to use it. For example, traditionally in Saigon, Vietnam, open public spaces have always been for everyone to use and what is starting to happen now is that as multi-residential towers go up, the shared spaces are being closed off to the public. It's going to dramatically change the nature of the city.

**JD:** Many of the multi-residential towers in Melbourne are completely devoid of sharing relationships (apart from things like Airbnb, which doesn't contribute to community). In Australian multi-residential, that sense of sharing is really only seen through things like a shared pool or a shared barbecue area, these aren't enough to create the social cohesion that cities need.

### Changing the assumption

**JD:** In Australia at the moment, apartment towers are thought of as only catering to one socio-economic group, which is generally international students or young people. One of the big conversations that we need to overcome is that density is not designed for families.

**GC:** There's an assumption in Australia that children don't live in apartments.

**YT:** That kind of assumption is something we should challenge, we should tackle. Most people unconsciously accept assumptions like this. So I think it is really important for architects to think about it, to do something, so that it can be changed.

**JD:** People want architects as problem solvers, but what can often happen is that architects just end up expressing the difficulty of density, perpetuating it by designing in a way that only caters to this assumption.

*This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.*

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