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Spatial Justice and the NIMBY Effect: An Analysis of the Urban Densification Debate in Switzerland and the Netherlands

Tanja Herdt [1],*, Arend R. Jonkman [2]

[1] TU Delft, Department of Urbanism 1; e-mail t.herdt@tudelft.nl; ORCID ID 0000-0003-2789-0667
[2] TU Delft, Department of Management and the Built Environment;
    e-mail A.R.Jonkman@tudelft.nl; ORCID ID 0000-0002-8928-2846

Abstract: This paper analyzes public debates around land use and densification in Switzerland and the Netherlands to understand how private and public interests are related in the context of urban growth. It is based on the hypothesis that, while there is consensus on the desirability of densification, its implementation can lead to tensions on a local level. Therefore, the acceptance of densification is considered essential for successful implementation. We report on quantitative and qualitative discourse analysis covering public media outlets between 2010 and 2019. During this period, both Switzerland and the Netherlands implemented policies to limit land take and promote densification. Focusing on indicators of spatial equity, we examined the debates in terms of distributive and procedural dimensions of justice. The results show that the debate in both countries revolved primarily around private interests related to ownership, property value, and character of place. Most debates documented the interests of insiders and, in particular, revealed the NIMBY effect (for "not in my back yard") associated with issues of change in the built environment. Public interests and the interests of outsiders, in contrast, were rarely considered in the debates. In addition, we find that, in the face of impending building change, arguments often reflected conflicting social values, such as perceived restrictions on choice, fears of increased social division, and lack of community.

Keywords: Densification; Discourse Analysis; Spatial Justice; Urban Design and Planning

1. Introduction

Densification is a policy objective in itself and part of broader urbanisation strategies like the Compact City (European Commission, 2011), Green Growth (OECD, 2012), or New Urbanism (Dierwechter, 2014; Westerink et al., 2013). The advantages and disadvantages of densification (Barresi, 2018; Cerin et al., 2020; Claassens, Koomen, & Rouwendal, 2020) and its potential to absorb population growth (Amer, Mustafa, Teller, Attia, & Reiter, 2017; Nabielek, Boschman, Harbers, Piek, & Vlonk, 2012) have been extensively studied. Less attention has been directed towards related perceptions of tensions between private and public interests (Honey-Rosés & Zapata, 2020). Whereas protecting green space, providing needed housing, supporting urban services, and promoting more sustainable lifestyles are widely endorsed, densification implementations are nevertheless

often met with opposition. Such resistance may lead to NIMBY-ism (for "not in my back yard") and underscores tensions between public and private interests.

This paper addresses such tensions between private and public interests in public discourse on densification in Switzerland and the Netherlands. This discourse reflects both substantive and procedural concerns. Furthermore, it influences the extent to which the spatial distribution of benefits and burdens is perceived as equitable and whether individuals and communities consider themselves represented. More than a purely local issue affecting just a few, the debate shapes how spatial developments contribute to shared values (Campbell, 2006). This paper aims to understand better the connection between private and public spatial justice interests.

2. Theories and Methods

2.1 Values and public and private interests

Even when values, such as ontological security, autonomy, well-being, inclusiveness, sustainability, social stability/order, and market efficiency (Elsinga, Hoekstra, Sedighi, and Taebi, 2020) are shared, they can be incommensurable (Dignum, Correljé, Cuppen, Pesch, & Taebi, 2016). Value conflicts primarily surface when inherent values are translated into operational values, norms, and principles.

Conversely, interests reflect a person's or group's stake, such as their welfare or gains and losses. Importantly, conflicting interests may be rooted in the same value sets. Consequently, our analysis of public discourse about urban development and the local implementation of densification focuses on expressed interests rather than the underlying values.

We distinguish between private and public interests. The former may be an individual's, a household's, or a bounded community's. Regarding public interests, we follow Campbell and Marshall (2002), who differentiate the sum of private interests, a collective value that extends beyond the sum of private interests, the upholding of rights awarded to individuals, and the outcome of a process of deliberation or procedural rules. As a policy focused on the societal advantages of compact urban development (Dierwechter, 2014), densification reflects collective values beyond the sum of private ones, which may complement a procedural conception, e.g., planning law. Yet, public discourse may also express utilitarian views, and publicly stated opinions may differ from those of policymakers or planners. Moreover, even if there is broad agreement on public interests surpassing the sum of private interests, some may be more adversely impacted than others. Therefore, we investigated how private and public interests are expressed and how they interact.

2.2 Spatial justice

Fainstein (2010) names equity, democracy, and diversity as integral parts of the just city. Such social justice extends beyond the distributive issue of 'Who gets what?' (Moroni, 2020) and includes values related to how decisions are made and whether individuals' needs are recognised (Fainstein, 2010; Fraser, 1995; Young, 1990). Since just procedures cannot guarantee just outcomes (Fraser, 1995; Jonkman, 2021), distributive justice is only necessary, not sufficient for social justice (Marcuse, 2009).

Next to substantive questions regarding the immediate impact of urbanisation processes, policy implementations have to balance public and private interests and address the localized effects. Madanipour, Shucksmith, and Brooks (2021, p. 6) regard spatial justice accordingly as a "struggle towards equity in social space, a search for a just process that aims at a just outcome, in a combination of the distributive and procedural aspects of social justice."

2.3 Methods

To investigate public and private interests and urban densification's social, economic, and environmental issues, we employ quantitative conceptual and relational content analysis of the public discourse in Switzerland and the Netherlands from 2009 to 2019. Two country-specific datasets of newspaper articles were compiled using a selection of 18 national and larger regional and local newspapers from public news databases (LexisNexis (NL) and Swissdox (CH)).

The two datasets were analyzed using a standardised bilingual coding list of 24 German and Dutch search terms that address economic, social, and environmental issues

related to urban densification. We chose analysis categories based on the model of values and norms in the field of housing suggested by Elsinga et al., (2020). In the paper, the authors define seven values that affect housing design: (ontological) security, autonomy, well-being, inclusiveness, sustainability, social stability, and market efficiency. Additional codes relate to general terms, such as: adaptation of densification policy and planning. A more detailed description of the coding will be provided in a forthcoming publication.

We selected nine codes, three each relating to urban densification's economic, social, and environmental aspects (Table 1). The selected codes capture both the material (e.g., *affordability*) and procedural dimensions of spatial justice (e.g., *public support/protest*, *freedom*). In each category, codes speak to either more public or private interests. For example, in the category *economy/market efficiency* the code *affordability* refers to public interests, whereas *cost* refers to more private interests. To increase analysis precision, each code was defined by multiple terms and synonyms (Table 2).

In two rounds of coding, we used the program Atlas.TI for an analysis of the selected years 2010, 2015, and 2019. Categories were first quantified by automated coding, after which positions and arguments were manually analyzed. Changes in frequency and relative importance were determined through a longitudinal approach. As initial level of analysis, we searched for keywords within a sentence or related paragraph. Subsequently, the identified categories were analyzed for proximity of related concepts referring to societal values.

Table 1. Frequency table of auto-coding results for 2010, 2015, and 2019 in Switzerland and the Netherlands

	Switzerland			The Netherlands		
	2010	2015	2019	2010	2015	2019
Number of articles	59	117	111	28	10	97
Costs	15	8	40	9	1	23
Affordability	18	17	19	2	4	37
Market	23	16	25	3	2	20
Spatial Quality	47	53	19	5	3	12
Community/ Social Cohesion	9	8	28	5	3	24
Identity	13	21	59	7	1	10
Public Support/ Protest	3	31	14	13	1	21
Justice (distr.)	5	10	5	4	1	2
Freedom/ Independence	4	8	10	1	0	0

Table 2. Coding examples

CODE	VALUES	GER	NL
Community and social cohesion (COM)	Inclusiveness, social stability, autonomy	Soziales | Gemeinschaft* | Zusammenhalt* | Nachbarschafts-initiative* | Engagement | Nachbarschaftsgefühl | Zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl | Bindung	sociale | gemeenschap* | samenhang | cohesie* | buurtinitiat* | betrokkenheid | buurtgevoel | saamhorigheid | binding
Affordabilty (AFF)	(ontological) security	Bezahlbar*|erschwinglich|günstig*|preiswert*|	Betaalba*|socia*|dure | goedkoop *|

3. Results

3.1 Frequency of addressing issues

3.1.1 Switzerland

In Switzerland, the public debate on densification correlates with public referendums, ultimately determining legislature. Before a referendum, interest groups bring issues to the focus of the deliberation. For instance, the "Landschaftsinitiative" (literally translated as "landscape initiative") in 2009 triggered a debate on densification. The referendum was accepted by public vote in 2013 and came into effect in 2014, tightening the regional planning act, the so-called "Raumplanungsgesetz" (RPG).

After 2014, the debate turned towards the law's implementation on the level of federal states and municipalities, addressing densification strategies through communal zoning and land-use plans. From 2015 on, the debate has focused on local effects of built examples and extensive areal developments. The discussion continued on a more general level following a second public referendum initiative, i.e., the "Zersiedlungsinitiative" ("Sprawl Initiative"), started in 2016 and rejected by the public in 2019.

The topic's presence in the political agenda likely contributed to the number of articles addressing densification doubling from 2010 to 2015. It remained stable until 2019 (Table 1). Auto-coding results show that identity issues have been addressed most frequently and have further increased over time; similarly, cost-related matters. In contrast, "spatial quality" was highly present in 2010 and 2015. In 2019, it was discussed less, as were "justice" and "public support/protest." The frequency of "community/social cohesion," "affordability," and "market" did not change significantly.

3.1.2 The Netherlands

For the Netherlands, the overall number of articles increased sharply in 2019 (Table 1). The fact that almost all topics have been addressed more frequently can be interpreted as response to the economic crisis of 2008 and its impact on the Netherlands' housing market and urban development. Plans were stalled and canceled around 2010, and densification was less of an issue. After 2015, however, the housing market recovered again, and housing prices and the pressure for development increased rapidly. The data also indicate a shift towards urban densification. Compared to 2010, less housing has been developed on green-field locations (Nieland, Meijer, Jonkman, & Hartmann, 2019). This trend is the result of the VINEX-program of large-scale urban extensions ending. In addition, the Ladder for Sustainable Urban Development policy required municipalities and provinces to prioritise inner-urban development.

More frequent references to *affordability*, *market*, and *costs* (Table 1) reflect the rapidly increased market pressure and concerns about housing prices. Cities increasingly struggle to secure affordability. *Community/social cohesion* was found more frequently in 2019, reflecting concerns about the effects of affordability and market developments. In contrast, in relative terms, *public support/protest* and *identity* were more frequent in 2010, addressing non-distributive issues related to the process of urban change.

3.2 Public and private interests

3.2.1 Switzerland

A primary concern of public debate in Switzerland is on identity-related topics, for which there are two distinct sets of arguments. Most arguments focus on private-interest concerns regarding changes in local identity, e.g., the shift from rural to urban lifestyles. The second set comprises arguments of cultural heritage protection as a public interest. It reflects an inherent conflict between preservation and sustainable development, stating that preservation of historic housing may prevent densification and therefore hinders the protection of landscapes and ecosystems (2019: seven sources).

The topics *costs* and *market* rank second in citation quantity. Similar to the topic *identity*, views on *costs* are inward-looking. They articulate the residents' fear of rising housing costs causing gentrification. In 2019, the most cited argument was the critique that municipalities and developers used densification projects to attract taxpayers as new residents (eight sources).

Arguments related to *market* link the issue of gentrification to a mismatch between need and demand. Most statements relate to private interests, such as finding suitable housing despite the increasing shortage of affordable options for middle-income groups in metropolitan areas. The criticism that densification is driven by speculation rather than

environmental concerns is part of this chain of arguments (2015: five sources). Similar to the *cost* debate (eight sources), the call for municipal intervention to prevent higher prices addresses, in effect, public interests.

Loss of social cohesion is also a prominent concern. The number of sources addressing *community/social cohesion* is in the midfield, but gains importance as the debate progresses. The predominant argument against inner-densification projects is the fear of gentrification effects and the loss of social diversity (2019: 28 sources). Both reflect private interests. However, when politicians target the middle-income strata, they address social cohesion as a public value. Social cohesion is particularly important in Switzerland since the promotion of national cohesion is enshrined in the constitution (Federal Constitution, Art. 2). It is further perceived as an essential aspect of economic prosperity and sustainable development. In 2010 and 2015, a relatively small number of citations point to public-interest arguments that call for strengthening social cohesion in densification projects, such as a diverse social mix, citizen participation, and new forms of community housing and public infrastructure. The transformation of arguments from private to public interest is particularly evident when, for example, it is claimed that the new zoning law will not only affect inner-city areas, but will also make housing in the suburbs too expensive for the middle class.

The call for public interventions to ensure affordability appeals also to the public interest. In 2010, this argument led the debate, demanding additional policies or mechanisms against speculation (five sources). Whereas in 2015, the debate focused on the potential impact of downtown densification on the housing market, this shifted in 2019 to more precise observations, for example, the statement that high-rise buildings were not suitable for affordable housing due to their high construction and maintenance costs (2019: three sources).

In contrast, topics coded by *justice* and *public support/protest* do not register significantly. One possible reason for the low number of citations could be the Swiss right of appeal, which allows for demands to adjust a building project before the building permit is granted. In 2010 and 2015, concerns focused on the anticipated surge in appeals and compensation claims resulting in delays and increasing development costs. In 2019, however, concerns shifted toward the unequal distribution of burdens from densification projects at the local level. According to this new line of argumentation, densification is a planning requirement that primarily causes redistribution in favor of private profit, disregarding existing common values. This argument also resonates in the code *public support/protest* results. While the numbers of citations were on a stable low, they increased in 2015 due to a public referendum on a much-debated project: In the case of the Pilatus Arena in the rural community of Kriens, high-rises were developed to cross-finance the public arena project. This triggered a debate on the supposed neglect of rural community values in favor of the arena project and its considerable financial impact on the region. In 2019, the high-rise was often cited in arguments associated with NIMBYism, which reflect homeowners' opposition, for instance, fearing overshadow-effects, which may decrease property value and overall quality of life.

3.2.2 The Netherlands
The primary concern regarding the distributive effects of densification is the potential impact on segregation (four sources). It is argued that urban expansion has favored suburbanisation and enhanced the segregation between urban and suburban dwellers. In contrast, densification is thought to result in fewer socio-spatial divisions and more social cohesion. In 2019, however, also high-rise developments were criticized for their distributive effects. According to architect Sjoerd Soeters, high-rise buildings are exclusive and expensive and not suited for families.

Also regarding affordability, densification is described both as a solution (eight sources) and a problem (five sources). It can be part of a strategy to add much-needed housing and provide suitable housing opportunities for the young and elderly. Simultaneously, densification and large-scale redevelopment projects are feared to displace low-rise social housing, e.g., in Amsterdam and Eindhoven. Residents expect they cannot afford to return once their neighborhood has been redeveloped. They highly appreciate the present sense of community and their neighborhoods' quiet spaces within the buzzing city.

Between 2010 and 2019, market conditions changed significantly. The pressure for new construction has increased, but municipalities' requirements to include high fractions

of social and middle-income housing reduced new developments' financial lucrativeness. It is questioned whether high-rise provides affordable housing, given significant construction and service costs. Similarly, the longevity of demand for high-density living environments is challenged. Because of the urgent housing crisis, pressure to use green fields for development is expected to increase.

Since 2010, a recurrent point of discussion has been whether urban expansion or densification is cheaper (11 sources). Answers depend on the extent to which commentators consider costs related to new infrastructure (e.g., public transport) and externalities (e.g., traffic jams), and on the type and scale of the development.

Next to large-scale green-field developments' effect on segregation, commentators stress their impact on the sense of belonging and social cohesion in suburban city districts (three sources). As part of densification strategies, diversification of neighborhoods is seen as a suitable strategy to strengthen social sustainability. However, residents in low-rise neighborhoods who fear large-scale redevelopment expect densification processes to diminish social cohesion (five sources).

Whereas for cities like Eindhoven and Rotterdam, new developments are seen as adding new layers to the city, several articles critically assess how densification projects blend in with the existing city. In particular, large projects (e.g., Sluisbuurt in Amsterdam and Eindhoven city-center) provoke opposition for the sharp contrast *vis-a-vis* the current city. Thus, the question is how to reconcile the new with the old.

Many projects face opposition from residents who resist change in general or disapprove of particular elements like size, scale, height, or expected effects on parking or other services, e.g., public green space. Often, local opponents stress that they are not against densification *per se*, but that they do not think the location is well chosen. Sometimes they explicitly distance themselves from NIMBY-ism and claim rational arguments for their opposition.

In contrast, urban professionals support densification passionately. They are much less unanimous, however, about the desirability of high-rise buildings. Some take a principled stance, whether in favor or against. Others see high-rise developments as a possible strategy, but only if implemented with care. Several professionals stress that high densities can be achieved without high-rise buildings and that high densities can be realised while still providing sufficient high-quality public spaces. Politicians, such as mayors and council members, seem to struggle to connect the desirability of densification in terms of public interests with residents' concerns and their affected private interests.

4. Discussion

The empirical analysis of public debates in Switzerland and the Netherlands shows remarkable similarities. In Switzerland, building projects' legitimacy is based on a planning system that leaves extraordinary decision-making power to the municipalities while providing processes through which citizens may intervene. When public referendums are discussed, the debate shifts to public interests and involves many stakeholders. This results in a lively public debate of densification and a variety of arguments. In contrast, while the Netherlands' governance system is also increasingly decentralised, there are fewer participatory processes, and planning discussions are more confined to professionals. The new law to prioritise inner-urban development, for example, was hardly mentioned in public discourse.

Our findings show that, in both countries, the debate focuses on private interests, e.g., protection of ownership, private autonomy, and identity. In contrast, arguments that address public interests and communal values are less well represented. For example, with rising costs and inefficient market strategies being the target of the debate, densification is seen in Switzerland increasingly as a threat to social cohesion, especially by middle-income groups. In the Netherlands, the discussion focuses more on which type of development may be suitable and whether high-rise projects can provide affordable housing for inclusive communities.

Most arguments take an inside perspective, referring to current residents' perception of densification as an unwanted agent of change. Accordingly, NIMBY-ism dominates the debate. Outsiders' views or potential benefits of change are rarely addressed. For instance, public interests are not well represented compared to statements about loss or prices and costs. There is only a minimal acknowledgment of public interests that would demand political intervention, such as measures for affordable housing or greater distributive

justice. Accounts on public interests are mostly limited to abstract discussions on the advantages and disadvantages, e.g., saving green space or support for public transport.

Private and public interests are primarily discussed separately and by different groups. Public interests are frequently more abstract and often not addressed by residents who focus on changing their immediate environment. Accounts of specific plans and projects are, in contrast, focused on the impact on the residents here and now. In these accounts, deliberation of the potential for 'outsiders' and benefits concerning public interests only plays a secondary role. Thus, private interests and non-distributive dimensions of equity, including recognition and diversity, are discussed completely separately from public interests and insider/outsider issues. Yet, on their own, both discourses are incomplete and miss essential elements necessary for a thorough and fair "situated ethical judgment" (Campbell, 2006).

5. Conclusions

This study aimed to understand how private and public interests regarding urban growth interrelate in view of spatial justice. The results have shown a disconnect between private and public interests in the public discourse on densification. The fact that decisions may result from systematically incomplete deliberations presents a challenge to fair negotiations and may be detrimental to spatial justice.

In Switzerland, debates on public referendums are held in the media, giving stakeholders and parties opportunities to opinionate and make recommendations. The quality of public debate thus has a direct influence on the planning legislation on the local, federal, and national levels. When private interests dominate the discussion, the result is likely to reinforce existing inequalities in legislation.

Concretization and spatialization of more abstract policy discussions, for instance, by increased engagement of professionals when discussing specific plans and projects, will improve the public debate. Making conceptual considerations more tangible and linking concrete discussions to a broader perspective could facilitate situated ethical judgments. In particular, spatial justice cannot be assessed without connecting private and public interests and situating policies.

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