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THE HOUSING QUESTION OF TOMORROW

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Front cover:

Housing proposal designed by Krook & Tjäder (architectural office) and Erik Larsson bygg (developer) in a design developer competition 2020 organized by Mark municipality in Sweden.



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## PHD REVIEW: WHEN PLANNING AND DESIGN MEET: TRANSFORMATION OF URBAN TISSUE UNDER DENSIFICA- TION POLICY – THE CASE OF OSLO BY GORDANA ZUROVAC (PHD STUDENT, NMBU)

REVIEWERS: KARL KROPF AND ROLF JOHANSSON

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Gordana Zurovac successfully defended her PhD thesis at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU) in October 2020. It is a paper-based thesis that investigates and assesses the results of urban densification in Oslo, focusing specifically on housing in the period between 2004 and 2014. The investigation looks at both the spatial and procedural aspects of the process, with the spatial aspect framed between the levels of urban tissue and housing typology. Methodologically, the thesis sits within the comprehensive, interdisciplinary field of *Urban Morphology*, to which it is an important contribution both conceptually and in international reach. At the same time, the work strengthens the study of urban form in Norway and enhances our understanding of the characteristics and performance of recent development.

## Presentation

The central questions of the thesis are: what are the morphological characteristics of the building projects produced under the policy of densification in Oslo between 2004 and 2014, and what spatially related concerns influenced their design? There are then six sub-questions that are well formulated to articulate and support the main question. They provide a solid basis for undertaking the data collection and analysis and demonstrate an awareness of the context of wider issues that establish a comprehensive context for interpreting the results. Importantly, the wider context is identified both spatially and procedurally, so the results can be appropriately situated and qualified.

Methodologically, the research takes a mixed, case-study approach, looking at both quantitative and qualitative data where the research questions act as a point of departure to generate hypothesis rather than testing them. The empirical data consists of more than seventy case studies of multi-family residential projects completed within the built-up area in the municipality of Oslo between 2004 and 2014. The range of data collected includes interviews with planners, observations in situ and archival data, such as facts about building projects, planning documents, historical maps and aerial photographs.

## Evaluation

The thesis has a solid logical structure that builds up a foundation for, and facilitates the expression of, the main subject matter. It demonstrates independent, scholarly thinking informed by experience that provides a platform for future research and opens up some points for discussion.

The core focus on the policies of densification and the move toward the “compact city” remain very relevant today and, at the same time, residential use remains a dominant component of current development. It is therefore very appropriate and timely to step back and review the results of attempts to achieve those aims. A potential issue, however, is whether the limitation on cases to housing gives enough data to answer the main research question as posed: *What are the morphological characteristics of the physical outcomes of densification in Oslo, and what spatially related concerns have influenced the design of those outcomes?* Other research on the topic, including that cited in the thesis, suggests that the physical outcomes of densification of commercial spaces or larger mixed-use developments are likely to result in different and more diverse morphological characteristics than those of solely multi-family residential projects. This is to say that the study has narrower limitations than might be indicated by the main research question as stated.

Having defined those limits, Zurovac sets out a detailed statement of the research methodology, explains the process of choosing the main case and sub-cases and identifies their sources. A very large set of cases is included that seems, in general, relevant and representative. Looking more closely at the selection criteria and applying a strictly objective standard of random sampling, there is some scope to tighten up the criteria. As openly stated, the selection process for sub-cases is partly based on “good examples” as defined by the municipality’s planning and building agency. That opens up the possibility of “pre-selection” that might limit the full range of outcomes that the research can reveal. By the same token, the pre-selected samples potentially provided greater insights into the policy objectives and a better understanding of the “spatially related concerns that have influenced the design of those outcomes”, which are central to the main research question.

The analysis and discussion of the results is extremely well executed. It is thorough and comprehensive and usefully brings together text descriptions, graphic representations, photographs and tables with quantitative information. The work makes several significant contributions in terms of raw data, interpretation and critical conceptual tools. The analysis demonstrates how general planning instruments, combined with case-by-case adaptation of individual projects to the local context (urban tissue), create hybrid housing and complex urban blocks. A key result is the identification of an Oslo variant of the “podium type” emerging from the process. Without doubt, the thesis provides useful insights that support the aim of learning from experience and should prove useful to professionals working within the planning system in reviewing the results of their work. Where this aspect of the work could be stronger is to be clear and open about the normative criteria used in any evaluation. In this respect, there is also a question of how we interpret and value the historic urban fabric and its transformations.

There are a few terminological points that might be addressed to clarify and strengthen the methodology. One that would be very beneficial to articulate more fully is the notion of “design performance”. To paraphrase, a central consideration in the research is: “the performance of the physical structures arising from densification within the surrounding urban tissue”, yet the meaning of performance in this context remains a bit obscure. It would seem, in particular, that there is a strong normative core to the notion of performance, so it would be appropriate to set out what “good” performance is, or at least the specific attributes that should be considered.

Densification and the Compact City are fundamental in framing the research as both concepts and specific policies. They are discussed and elaborated as a background but should also have been a central consideration in coming to judgements about the performance of develop-

ments. It would have been helpful for the thesis to include an explicit definition of density, or at least a discussion of the different potential measures of density and a statement about why the particular approach to describing and quantifying density was used. This issue might influence the discussion, for example, of how the parking-norms affect the morphological characteristics of the housing projects. A more specific definition of density would also help clarify the synthesis of the findings. The conclusion that the analyses of the cases demonstrate that there is "... a need to improve the system concerning the implementation and concretization of densification..." (p. 89) would be more convincing if it were supported by an indication of what kinds of improvements might be made or how the improvements might have given different results.

While there may be some critical points to raise regarding the selection of cases and the discussion of them, they need to be seen in proportion. We want to emphasize that the thesis is a very well-structured, well-written record of very thorough research. It is a significant PhD thesis that provides very incisive and productive insights into the results of implementing a trio of urban policies: densification to prevent urban sprawl; increasing the provision of housing to meet population growth; and improving environmental quality in the central areas of the city. The thesis is also a solid contribution to *the study of urban form in Norway*, and thus a contribution to the international network of urban morphological research.