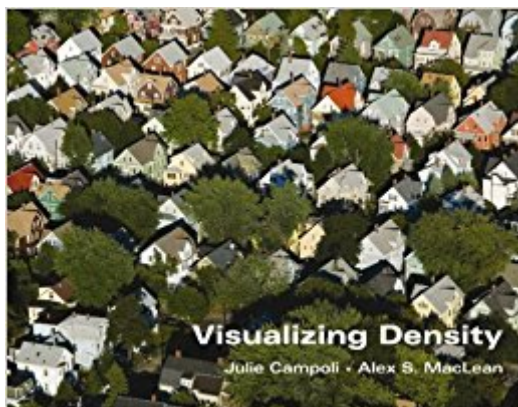


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# Visualizing Density



## Synopsis

The American Dream of a single-family home on its own expanse of yard still captures the imagination. But with a growing population—100 million more people expected in the United States by 2050—rising energy and transportation costs, disappearing farmland and open space, and the clear need for greater energy efficiency and a reduction in global warming emissions, the future built environment must include more density. Landscape architect and land planner Julie Campoli and aerial photographer Alex S. MacLean have joined forces to create a full-color, richly illustrated book to help planners, designers, public officials, and citizens better understand, and better communicate to others, the concept of density as it applies to the residential environment.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Choice Magazine Outstanding Academic Title of 2007—“This beautiful book by Julie Campbell and Alex S. MacLean is an excellent reference for coming to grips with that slippery but important issue, density. Density can have both positive and negative connotations—and effects—depending on its context and execution. The photos in *Visualizing Density* illustrate this wonderfully, and can help us get a better mental grasp on the variety of ways people can live at a variety of different density levels.”—*Post Carbon Cities*—“This vivid and visual book is one of the essential guides to understanding the concept of density. It provides aerial photos and street pattern maps for the entire range of housing density in America from 0.2 units per

acre in Beverly Hills to nearly 300 units per acre in New York City. In this book version of the 2007 Planetizen Top Website: Visualizing Density, Campoli presents accurate descriptions of density and land use patterns in the United States, and offers the stepping stones to planning and designing for a society of greater density. MacLean's beautiful and varied aerial photography gives an impressive view of hundreds of parts of the country and, at the same time, a disturbing look at the wasteful development pattern that has persevered in the U.S. for decades.

•Planetizen Top 10 Books for 2008

The book aims to link perceived density to measured density by providing a catalogue of 250 neighbourhoods from the US, each example illustrated with four aerial images, a street pattern diagram and a dwelling density measure in units per acre. This is not an uncommon attempt to provide a tool helping the understanding of the relationship between urban density measures and built form outcomes, several such catalogues having been published in the last decades internationally. The strength of this particular density catalogue is the extensive high quality aerial imagery. However, there are many limitations to its usefulness. Firstly, we normally perceive neighbourhoods from ground level, not from the air, but no eye level imagery is provided. The second key problem is that scale, a key aspect of any density measure, is not consistently used. While the book refers to neighbourhoods, the provided density measure of units per acres has been often calculated for a single block only, and is not clear whether is net or gross. For homogeneous suburban neighbourhoods this is not a major problem, but for the diverse inner urban areas the density of a single block can widely differ from that of the neighbourhood. Thirdly, it would have been fair to warn the reader of the multiple limitations of the used density measure of units per acre, such as that the presence or absence of non-residential uses is ignored, that the actual size of a unit is ignored, or that family size can largely vary from one neighbourhood to another, and thus the density of people might compare differently than the density of units. Finally, the street pattern diagrams provide only limited information, as street widths -a key aspect of neighbourhood density- are not accurately represented, a scale bar is not provided, and there are inconsistencies between the scales (such as between New York and Seattle). In the end is not surprising that all key books and research papers about density are missing from the list of references. Overall the book is an interesting attempt to help a better understanding of density, with many impressive images, but falls well short of seriously documenting the chosen neighbourhoods, and risks confusing the reader.

The most interesting part of this book is the pictures that comprise the second half of the book. For

dozens of different density levels (ranging from less than one dwelling unit per acre to over 200 units per acre) the book shows photographs of several examples. Usually, the book shows both attractive and less attractive examples of a given density. These pictures reveal a variety of surprises. For example, when one thinks of houses looking as if they are packed together, one might think of high density- but where big houses are next to each other instead of being separated by trees or grass, they can appear unpleasantly crammed even at one or two units per acre. On the other hand, a tree canopy can make a neighborhood with a dozen houses per acre look fairly spacious. Another surprise is that high density doesn't necessarily have to mean apartments or high rises- there are small-house and row-house neighborhoods with 20-50 dwelling units per acre, while some high-rise areas are not tremendously dense (due to the presence of plazas and parking lots where buildings could be). Though much of the text reiterates well-worn arguments for more compact development, some of it addresses a genuinely interesting question: why do neighborhoods of identical densities vary in attractiveness? The book suggests that less attractive neighborhoods tend to (1) have fewer shade trees, (2) have less variety in housing types, and/or (3) are less walkable (because streets are not interconnected enough for people to walk to neighbors' houses, or because commercial areas are not within walking distance).

I like the book. It does have a scattering of examples and could have more numerous examples, but this would be a different book. As is, it provides a concise look at American building form unbiased toward a specific style (Such as books that only showcase new urbanist designs). In addition, it is an easy read.

This book is far more useful than many textbooks. It very clearly describes its eponymous objective. HIGHLY recommended for anyone interested in alternatives to the sprawling status quo.

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