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The emotional element of urban densification

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we will delve into a somewhat unexplored element of urban densification – namely, people’s emotional responses to physically and socially densified neighbourhoods. Undoubtedly, there is a vast amount of scholarship on the advantages of dense and compact environments over urban sprawl. While scholars tend to highlight the environmental benefits, few studies scrutinise how people living in areas marked for intense urban development respond emotionally to densification strategies. Interviews with residents from urban neighbourhoods in Oslo demonstrate that densification can evoke emotions like insecurity, fear, anger and sadness over lost homes or altered place identity. This gap in scholarship calls for stronger academic and political engagement with people’s *feelings* about their urban surroundings, also when discussing the *social* dimension of sustainability.

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Introduction

There is a vast amount of environmentally oriented scholarship discussing the advantages and disadvantages of constructing dense and compact cities (see, e.g. Andersen and Skrede 2017; Molotch 1976; Gordon and Richardson 1997; Burton 2000; Næss 2014). There is also a growing body of literature examining the relationship between the built environment and social well-being (Woolcock, Gleeson, and Randolph 2010). Mouratidis (2020), for instance, points out that “[s]ubjective well-being is one of the major components of social sustainability (...) and a subjective indicator of livability in cities” (Mouratidis 2020, 265). In their study of “the emotional responses of people to urban green spaces,” Roberts, Sadler, and Chapman (2019) contextualise their analysis by noting that the “potential benefits offered to human populations from natural environments are increasingly significant in an urbanised society where green spaces are under threat due to the densification of urban form” (Roberts, Sadler, and Chapman 2019, 819). Therefore, it is noteworthy that discussions of the relationship between densification and individual well-being (see Mouratidis 2018, 28) that examine individuals’ emotional states are not common within urban and housing research (but see Kerr, Gibson, and Klocker 2018; Hadi, Heath, and Oldfield 2018; Nematollahi, Tiwari, and Hedgecock 2016; von Wirth et al. 2016). In their influential paper “The social dimension of sustainable development”, Dempsey and co-authors (2011) only briefly refer to emotions following their statement that “a positive sense of attachment to a place is considered a dimension of social sustainability” (Dempsey et al. 2011, 296). Moreover, Vasudevan (2020) argues that emotions have just recently begun to achieve a position in planning research and education. Additionally, Baum (2015, 506) claims that many planning practitioners ignore emotion by emphasizing the “rationality” of planning. Thus, in this paper we attempt

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to shed light on the relationship between densification/density and emotions, arguing that for planners, policymakers and academics, this relationship, if not overlooked, can be “messy”. Even if “densification” is often understood as physical transformations (e.g. Cavicchia 2021), drawing on Wirth’s (1938) classical essay, we are also examining how the density of other people can be experienced by individuals, thereby supplementing investigations of “the subjective measures of density” (Larimian et al. 2020, 758). We want to conceptualise the dimensions of social processes that are complex, unpredictable and uncontrollable as messy and elusive (see also Askins and Pain 2011, 809). Specifically, our use of the terms messiness and elusiveness are meant to indicate first, that since people’s emotions are difficult to predict and therefore to plan for, this relationship has not been high on the agenda of policymakers and planners. Second, we want to stress the complexity of emotions associated with the experience of home-making or finding comfort in an urban neighbourhood (Miller 2008; Baker 2013; also Sandberg and Rönnblom 2016). As such, we consider emotions an interesting, but somewhat neglected researched topic for the scholarship on urban densification/density.

We draw on Massey’s (2002, 20) discussion of human evolution and his call for social scientists to “theorize emotions”. This paper contributes to understanding the significance of emotions in relation to people’s well-being in densified urban neighbourhoods by discussing a singular case study in Oslo, Norway. Thus, our paper also contributes to the literature on social sustainability by examining how people feel about “densification”. By using the concepts of home-making and comfort, we follow Baker (2013) and Miller (2008). We draw on Baker’s (2013, 267) argument that “home can be conceived as denoting interactions of geographical markers (such as places/spaces) with systems of meaning (such as attachments/beliefs/practices), that together produce sites of emotional, cultural and social significance”. From Miller (2008, 1–9), we learn how things, such as a picture taken on your family vacation or a tree in your garden, as well as places, can be comfortable when these things store memories and emotions. In this paper, we will investigate how people feel about their neighbourhood where they have made their homes.

In the rest of this paper, we will first outline some of the literature on affect and emotion in the social sciences, most pertinently the debates in cultural geography. Then, we will describe the Oslo case, before presenting our data and methods – namely the survey and interview data of the residents in densified areas in the Norwegian capital. Thereafter, after having demonstrated that emotions are an important part of densification, we will discuss the significance of emotions in urban (re)generation and conclude with some policy implications.

Affect and emotion

Cultural geography is one of the main disciplines contributing to the scholarship on affect and emotion in the social sciences. For the last two decades, scholars have argued that the cultural turn in geography privileged a discursive understanding of different social phenomena, for instance by reading landscapes as “texts” (Duncan and Duncan 2004b, 400). This contributed to the interest in the so-called non-representational, other-than-representational and more-than-representational studies of affect and emotion rather than the study of discourse, semiotics and representation (Shilon and Eizenberg 2020; Skrede 2020). One concern among the representatives of this branch of cultural geography is to describe how emotions occur in everyday life (Thrift 2008), and we may speak of an “emotionalization of culture, politics and social life” (Bondi 2005; Bille and Simonsen 2019). Affect has been viewed as non- or pre-cognitive, whilst emotion has been referred to as expressed feelings, both conscious and experienced (Pile 2010, 9). We will emphasise interaction, behaviour and statements rather than cognition or the unconscious; however, in this paper we will treat affect and emotion interchangeably and not enter into a lengthy discussion of the concepts’ potential differences (see also Padley and Gökarıksel 2021).

Although emphasising emotions in this paper, it is important to stress that there is no inherent contradiction between discursive and emotional approaches in geography because emotions are

influenced by language, and affect and emotion need to be expressed in some way, typically by means of different forms of representation, such as text, voice and images (Skrede 2020; Pile 2010; Anderson 2015). Massey notes that our “cerebral organs work together unconsciously to coordinate inputs from the senses and to generate subjective feelings and emotional states that influence subsequent cognition and behavior” (Massey 2002, 16). However, emotions do not simply fall upon us; they are socially contextualised and mediated as well as influenced by social structures, class, gender, ethnicity, age, normative expectations and so forth (Smith 2020, 59). Thus, our take is to view studies of emotions as complementary rather than opposed to the analysis of representations (Skrede 2020, 92). Our argument is simply that the study of emotions is (still) not very developed in urban planning (Buser 2014), in both the professional and the academic world (Baum 2015), and that it is warranted to delve into this elusive topic when dealing with urban densification/density, at least if *social* sustainability is to be of importance (e.g. Wessel and Lunke 2021).

In urban studies more generally, the picture is more nuanced. Jones and Evans (2011), for instance, have used emotion as a concept to study the relation between the body and the environment. They launched the concept of “rescue geography,” indicating a need to rescue urban environments from being transformed in ways that do not include people’s emotional conceptions of place identity and how people *feel* about their neighbourhoods (Jones and Evans 2011, 2321). A similar argument has been put forward by Dovey, Woodcock, and Wood (2009). Entrepreneurs and politicians’ interest in densifying urban environments may threaten citizens’ desire to keep the present character of the neighbourhood because they are perceived as part of their identity, thus eroding rather than strengthening social sustainability (Dempsey et al. 2011, 296). Correspondingly, Alawadi (2016) has criticised urban development projects that do not pay attention to people’s emotional values and sense of place identity. Indeed, there is a vast amount of scholarship, including anthropology (e.g. Gray 2000), sociology (e.g. Trentelman 2009), geography (e.g. Barcus and Brunn 2010), architecture and planning (e.g. Manzo and Perkins 2006) and psychology (e.g. Hidalgo and Hernández 2001), examining people’s place attachment or their identification with a place – that is, “the cognitive and emotional linkage of an individual to a particular setting or environment” (Low 1992, 165) or “the ways in which people and place are emotionally tied” (Cass and Walker 2009, 63).

In housing research, scholars have long been interested in the transformation of neighbourhoods (e.g. Larsen 2005; Zorbaugh 1983). However, the emotional aspect of urban densification projects has (so far) received little interest from urban studies scholars compared to topics like gentrification, segregation and culture-led urban regeneration, to mention but a few. Although little has been written on the emotional side of densification, there are several studies arguing that residents are the “real” experts on their environments, by describing experts, in the narrow sense of the term, as calculating and rational and treating the public as innocent and “emotional” (Schofield 2015, 2014). Although experts (like urban planners) may be conceived as having specialist knowledge and training, capable of deploying their “expert eye” for the benefit of the built environment or the community, Ireland, Brown, and Schofield (2020) argue that one might say that it is the local people that are the experts at living where they do. They know their place better than anybody (Ireland, Brown, and Schofield 2020, 837). Thus, the authors conclude that it is necessary to come up with a new form of consultation, not just presenting the ideas of a developer but asking the residents what they think as a first step in the process. This parallels Mouratidis (2021) recommendation to use public participation in urban planning. In environmental psychology, a distinction has been made between an “autocentric” and “allocentric” mode of perception. The first mode of perception emphasises how a person *feels*, whilst the latter is characterised by objectification and lower interest in sensory qualities and pleasant/unpleasant feelings (Ireland, Brown, and Schofield 2020, 838). We may say that developers and planners plan for and in *space*, whilst “ordinary” citizens live in *places* (e.g. Gray 2000; Andersen, Ander, and Skrede 2021). In the following discussion, by drawing on elements from anthropology (e.g. Miller 2008) and cultural geography, we will try to shed light on this elusive element of urban and housing studies: residents’ emotional responses to urban densification, both planned and finalised.

Emotional responses to a densified Oslo

The present and the previous local governments in Oslo have both implemented densification strategies in their municipal master plans (The Municipality of Oslo 2014, 2020, 2018). In 2017, a coalition consisting of the Labour Party, the Green Party and the Socialist Left Party took over the City Hall after two decades of local governance by the Conservative Party and the Progressive Party (libertarian). Despite their political disagreements, the new government and the old one shared the policy of densifying the capital to prepare for anticipated population growth. Troutman (2004) has argued that such a “smart growth” strategy (or ideology) reduces the problem of growth to a single question: where to put it. The previous government planned to densify the less affluent eastern parts of Oslo, whilst the current government has additionally designated several densification areas in the more affluent west. The policy in Oslo is generally that the municipality prepares a zoning plan, before transferring the task of constructing new buildings and infrastructure to private property developers. Since densification is an explicit goal, intensified land-use is welcomed by the municipal authorities. However, the densification strategy does not include deliberate considerations of how people *feel* about their neighbourhoods being densified. In fact, while government plans assert that several areas within the city are suitable for “densification”, there are no references to research, reports or surveys that could substantiate the claim or inform the reader about how the existing neighbours and neighbourhoods will be affected (the list of relevant documents includes only “technical” reports, The Municipality of Oslo 2018, 5). Moreover, though policymakers stress that “social sustainability,” “residential quality” and “residential stability” are something to aim for (The Municipality of Oslo 2018, 64–66), they have not considered whether densification could have a negative impact on these aims (see also Cavicchia 2021).

A common strategy among the small-scale property developers in Oslo, is to “knock on doors” and ask people if they want to sell their homes. Elderly people are often approached, and they are afforded at least twice the market value. After the developer has bought a property, they demolish it and construct apartment buildings at the premise to maximise density. In response to critical comments, many property developers say that people are selling voluntary, not forcibly. However, those that refuse to sell and eventually find themselves surrounded by (what they perceive to be) high-rises, have termed their home “hostage houses”, caught between new structures that are “out of place” (Blichfeldt 2021). Thus, many argue that they do not have a “real” choice of not selling their home and leave the neighbourhood.

Data and methods

In this part of the paper, we will present three different yet interrelated area-based emotional responses to densification projects in Oslo, two at the West End, Montebello and Vinderen, and one in the Inner East district (we have used more space to describe data on the latter as this designation contains several neighbourhoods). Montebello and Vinderen are typical white middle- and upper-class neighbourhoods, with a majority voting for conservative parties, whilst the Inner East district is more diverse and multicultural, with a majority voting for left-wing parties (Ljunggren 2017). The section on how the residents at Montebello experience the densification plans impacting their neighbourhood is based on participatory observation at a public meeting in the Oslo City Hall on 9 May 2017. The other sections are based on previous fieldwork and interview data as well as an ongoing digital survey distributed to current and past residents of the area known as Ensjø (N 9 647, survey n 418). It should be noted that none of these case studies were initially carried out to uncover residents’ emotional responses to their surroundings (see also Sandberg and Rönnblom 2016). Rather, they were parts of different projects that all had “neighbourhood preferences” as a common research topic, without any particular emphasis on emotions as such. However, after transcribing more than 100 interviews and looking at the “incoming” responses to the survey’s questions, it struck us how emotional the experience of dwelling was (see Ingold 2011, 5, 411), with emotions

being distributed independently of whether one lived on the western or the eastern side of Oslo. However, it is not our intention to generalise how density has an emotional response. Instead, we examine some individual narratives to invite other scholars as well as policymakers to engage more systematically with the links between densification/density and emotions (see also Mouratidis 2021).

Manhattan at Montebello

As part of the new city government's strategy of densifying westwards, the local politicians designated several local neighbourhoods as densification areas. Many of these areas are dominated by intergenerational single-family homes with (apple) gardens, which are now going to be replaced with apartment buildings to increase residential density. This decision has been met with grief and anger by those living in these areas, for example in Montebello. At a public meeting in the Oslo City Hall in 2017, a significant community input where the citizens could express their meaning of the new municipal master plan, a resident stated with anger, "We do not want Manhattan at Montebello!" and added (almost yelling) that if they had wanted Manhattan, they would have moved to Manhattan (Skrede and Berg 2019, 10). Another resident from Montebello, a lawyer, said that many of his colleagues lived in this neighbourhood. He reported that they were almost working "24 h a day": first, they had their daytime responsibilities, and then they had to start their "second job" fighting the municipal densification plans during their leisure time. He reported that many were exhausted by the workload and felt powerless and depressed. He also spoke on behalf of the elderly, who now feared that their homes would be lost. Some neighbours also made signboards – "Not for sale!" – to keep the property developers away. The signs were made to escape the emotional distress caused by having people at the door on a weekly basis, trying to buy (and demolish) family homes to build new, dense structures. The municipality claimed that development in areas like Montebello must be carried out with respect to the identity and existing character of such areas. This has been viewed as somewhat contradictory by the residents, considering that place attachment and place identity are closely associated with symbolic and social values and that the development strategy cannot be carried out without influencing those very same values. As such, several residents feel "misrecognised" (cf. Waterton and Smith 2010) as citizens.

A densified Vinderen

John and Eve used to live in Vinderen, the western part of Oslo. This was where they "belonged," they said. The couple had lived here for four decades in a single-family home. At one point, however, they felt they had to leave Vinderen, although not willingly. Eve said that they had no choice as their neighbourhood was changing too much. Eve started crying when telling her story, demonstrating the emotional intensity of having to move out of a densification area against one's will. Eve said that their former home was a very charming house and that it was a "tragedy that it was torn down" to provide space for an apartment complex. She explained that after the politicians had decided that parts of Vinderen should be transformed from having single-family homes to apartment buildings, it was not really an option for the residents to "choose" to sell their homes. If they had chosen to stay, they would soon have been surrounded by apartment buildings anyway. Then, you really had no choice but to sell to the developers. Their neighbour had sold their house to the developer without telling them, and their house was replaced with a three-story building, and after the remaining neighbours sold their properties, the few remaining single-family homes were trapped between taller buildings – indicating that the sensory experience of "'being at home'" (Baker 2013, 267, referring to Mee and Vaughan 2012) was altered. Thus, John and Eve finally succumbed to the pressure and sold their home as well. Eve said that nobody living in single-family homes was happy about these changes, stating that one of their best friends who lived nearby had a "terrible time" after the apartment buildings were constructed. "We have been crying for

two years ourselves,” she said, adding that she was really depressed because of these changes. Their Vinderen neighbourhood no longer existed as it used to be, other than as a memory (Miller 2008). The couple has recently moved to a new single-family house in a different part of western Oslo, trying to make a new home for themselves in an area where there were no impending and thus threatening physical transformations; however, the possibility of having to relocate in the future still troubles them emotionally, they said.

An intensified Inner East

The Gamle (Norwegian for “old”) Oslo district makes up a large part of what is considered Oslo’s Inner East. Gamle Oslo is undergoing several redevelopment processes involving both smaller infill projects and large-scale transformations. Along the waterfront, the ongoing transformation includes “the building of an iconic opera house, shopping centres, restaurants, museums, semi-public spaces, high-end residential developments and (...) “high-rise” office buildings for financial corporations and transnational producer services” (Andersen and Røe 2017, 305). Further inland, the more “traditional” and already relatively dense urban neighbourhoods of Grønland and Tøyen have new office and apartment buildings being planned or already under construction (for an illustration, see Roadworks 2017). Moreover, not far from Tøyen, a large-scale transformation of Ensjø is underway, with 7,000 new apartments about to make it into a more “compact” urban area (Hauken 2020, 48). In an ongoing survey distributed to residents and those moving out from Ensjø, we included several open-ended questions that the respondents can answer in their own words (or leave blank). As mentioned earlier, our initial intention was not to examine emotions, but neighbourhood preferences. However, when taking a closer look at the respondents’ statements, it became evident that several of the answers could be interpreted as emotional expressions. For instance, a woman in her 50s had lived in one of the new apartment buildings at Ensjø for a few years. Responding to several of the open-ended questions, she expressed a marked dissatisfaction with her own neighbourhood. Whereas the apartment was “OK,” the neighbourhood was “dominated by high-rise buildings” and “cramped” and there was “not much air” and a “lack of greenspace.” To the question “Would you say that your neighbourhood is a good place for children to grow up?” she responded that “it has been, but the city planners do not prioritise well-being. They allow high-rises and density. Thus, this area will not be attractive to many different groups.” This probably influenced the reasons why later on in the questionnaire she chose the option “Uncertain” (the two other alternatives were “Yes” and “No”) when responding to the question “Do you want to continue living at Ensjø?” and subsequently selected the option of “1–3 years” when responding to the question “How many more years to you think that do you will live here at Ensjø?” While the respondent used lowercase letters when responding to most questions until now, this changed when she came to final open-ended question, “How could we (further) improve the urban development of Oslo?” She responded as follows:

Stop building dense, cramped high-rises. Build apartments with larger bedrooms and high ceilings. Do not lie and create fake illustrations in advertisements. Make room for variety and outdoor spaces. Think about the fact that we are going to LIVE here, it is not just a place to SLEEP.

The informant was evidently not satisfied with urban development in Oslo, especially with the realisation of the compact city idea at Ensjø. In order to get her message through, she “screamed” her emotional frustration and dissatisfaction by consciously changing the conventional lowercase letters to uppercase ones at strategic parts of her last answer, stressing how her neighbourhood and residence should be a place for her family to being at home, not just an area offering an apartment with “small” rooms that provide little more than an opportunity to sleep (for a discussion of the meaning-potential of typefaces and fonts, see Ledin and Machin 2020). For her, Ensjø was hardly a comfortable place and a home – that is, a neighbourhood that was ordered the right way (Miller 2008, 267, 293–296) and thus where she felt that she belonged and a place she could control (Baker 2013, 267).

Dense physical environments also imply *social* density (see also Nematollahi, Tiwari, and Hedgecock 2016). For several years, Grønland and Tøyen, both part of the Inner East, were considered to be “working-class” and “multi-ethnic” districts (Andersen, Ander, and Skrede 2021). Emma, a Norwegian female in her thirties who lived in Tøyen from 2010 to 2016, told us that “much has changed.” A gentrification process had begun, and parts of it were positive, she told us, with young and educated “red wine-drinking” people moving in. However, there were problems related to drug abuse, crime, noise and people with mental illnesses, all of which made Emma insecure and even afraid in some situations, also making her think of the future of her almost two-year-old son. She told us about an area-based initiative at Tøyen that she found to be somewhat “narrow” in terms of its approach: there was no longer classic Christmas music at the Christmas market; now, they played “Rasta music,” which Emma found culturally and emotionally alienating, longing for the music that could take her back to the memories of her childhood (see Miller 2008). She added that she was generally positive about the area-based initiative; however, it did not “speak to all of us,” only to “some.” After considering their future at Tøyen, Emma and her husband decided to move to a neighbourhood with a less “urban” physical fabric than Tøyen, but also with a different demographic that was closer to what they were used to – that is, where their neighbours were similar, ethnically and socio-economically. Emma and her family simply did not feel that they could identify with the Tøyen neighbourhood anymore. Although feeling sad for having to leave a socially dense Tøyen, they felt that they had no choice but to relocate to regain their emotional well-being. Whereas Emma sold her apartment at Tøyen, there were other Tøyen residents who (at the time when we talked to them) had no plans of moving out but who, like Emma, expressed fond feelings regarding their childhood and the place they grew up in.

In a previous study, we asked residents in an Inner East district about how they interpreted and reacted to a marketing campaign by the property developer Block Watne that was trying to “lure” urbanites out of the city (Skrede and Andersen 2020, 2019). The campaign contrasted the dense “unpleasant” Oslo with the “calm and peaceful” suburban way of life (Block Watne 2018). Several of the informants started to laugh when they were shown the campaign’s images, while others were provoked and said that they could not take the campaign seriously. Many of the informants were irritated by Block Watne playing on Oslo’s disadvantage – dense and expensive to live in – and insisted that an urban way of life was not only possible but desirable. Emotionally, in opposition to the biased representation of urban life, one informant stated, almost in rage, that the idea that you cannot have a good life in urban environments is “fucking bullshit.” Others argued, in emotional contempt towards Block Watne, that there were now even better reasons to stay in the city because they did not accept their lifestyle being ridiculed by a property developer. However, even if the campaign triggered the interviewees during the conversation, some individuals seemed to change their emotional state when the illustrations reminded them of their own childhood, or, as Annie did, when they started to reflect on how it was to raise children in the inner city. Annie is an ethnic Norwegian middle-class mother in her thirties. Both she and her husband moved to Oslo as adults. She explained that while she “feels that I have put down roots” here in the inner city, her husband had not done so yet. She laughed at several of Block Watne’s illustrations of people out-and-about in the green spaces of the suburbs (contrasted with the “greyer” settings of the inner city). When Annie was finally given Block Watne’s illustration of a suburban housing project for single-family houses, like what she had lived in as a child, she immediately said, “I kind of have a dream of such a house,” but then explained that she was not there yet – “for now, I want the urban” – balancing between the “rational” and the emotional.

Discussion

Some scholars have been worried that the so-called non-representational theories lack notions such as class, race and gender while emphasising the “event” at the expense of theorising long-term social stability (Cresswell 2012, 102–103; 2010, 172). The politics of affect has been said to be directed

towards the individual level rather than social structures (Campbell and Smith 2016; Somdahl-Sands 2019; Skrede 2020). However, one could also say that “the body” is one site of the “political” (Tolia-Kelly 2010, 364) and that the powerful may be able to manipulate affect and emotion through consumerism techniques (Pile 2010, 15). Thus, it is not entirely correct to say that the interest in emotion is a subject-oriented approach, as emotion can be used strategically (or unintentionally) to destabilise subjects’ emotional registers. This is analogous to one of Lukes’ description of power – the power to get someone else to desire the same as you – thereby indicating the manipulative potential of power (Lukes 2005, 25–37). This is, perhaps, most visible in the last example, where Block Watne, by means of a visual marketing campaign, depicted the dense urban environment as unpleasant whilst proposing a form of emotional “relief” if the urbanities moved out of the city. Correspondingly, urban developers may construct urban imaginaries that do not always correspond to the “reality” but, nevertheless, make people buy apartments in densification projects by appealing to their emotions. Thus, emotions may be manipulated for different (economic and political) purposes and should be taken seriously. Therefore, it is somewhat paradoxical that there are so few examples of scholars talking to residents about their emotional responses to urban densification (see also Baker 2013, 267; Nematollahi, Tiwari, and Hedgecock 2016; von Wirth et al. 2016), although Mouratidis (2021, 6) noted that “suburban neighbourhoods have been associated with more positive emotional responses compared to denser, inner-city neighbourhoods”. Additionally, studies have uncovered that a substantial portion of the residents, especially households with children (e.g. Bervoets and Heynen 2013; Wessel and Lunke 2019), prefer to live in single-family houses and have a preference for low-density neighbourhoods, even if it means sacrificing other amenities (Billig, Smith, and Moyer 2020). This is particularly evident at Montebello and Vinderen, where people felt and displayed a diverse range of emotions, such as anger, despair and tears, over having “lost” their homes or that the links between “residents and the communities to which they belong” were severed (Elliott-Cooper, Hubbard, and Lees 2020, 494). When intergenerational bonds were broken the environment was not any longer ordered the right way (see Miller 2008), and people were feeling uncomfortable. Moreover, unable to be in control (Baker 2013, 267), residents felt helpless against property developers and municipal densification policies. While it might be fitting to categorise some of our interviewees’ statements as representing an “oppositional activism, often labelled as NIMBYism (from “Not In My Back Yard”)” (Cass and Walker 2009, 62), we want to stress that there is more at stake for our informants than protecting property values, even if the protection of property values and NIMBYism often go hand-in-hand according to scholarship (Dear 1992; Pendall 1999; Schively 2007). Inspired by Massey (2002), we claim that the emotional responses to densification and dense “vibrant urban surroundings” (Mouratidis 2021, 6) are of no less significance for researchers, or for planners and other city shapers, than the “rational” reports or plans (see also Rose 1993; Schofield 2015; Baum 2015). At Tøyen, Emma and her family have, voluntarily, decided to move elsewhere. They sold their apartment, although nobody “threatened” to demolish their home to construct a high-rise building on the premises, like the residents at Montebello and Vinderen felt. However, the general densification process at Tøyen, both physically and socially (see also Wirth 1938), made Emma feel a weakened social cohesion and place identity, both key dimensions of social sustainability (Dempsey et al. 2011). By feeling that her family no longer belonged here, she was no longer “at home” at Tøyen (Baker 2013, 267).

As Hadi, Heath, and Oldfield (2018) noted, “urbanisation, population growth and a general dissatisfaction with suburban sprawl” has fuelled a development whereby “city centres are growing increasingly dense” (Hadi, Heath, and Oldfield 2018, 104). This is also the case with Oslo, and among some of the key actors taking part in the development of the compact city, it is a truism that “densification is clearly a tool for making the city more attractive and valuable to live in” (quoted in Andersen and Røe 2017, 313). However, a developer explained in an interview (see Skrede and Andersen 2020) that a more densified Oslo generates new customers for their suburban housing because not everyone living in the city is capable making their home there over time. The residents who left the city for the suburbs found the urban neighbourhoods to be cramped and

wanted a different kind of environment to settle in with their families, a place where they could find comfort (Miller 2008). This hints at the significance of the relationship between densification and home-making (Baker 2013) – namely, a sense of being comfortable, content and in control where you live – or what other scholars might term “livability” (Mouratidis 2020). Discussing how “commute satisfaction, neighbourhood satisfaction, and housing satisfaction” all contribute to “subjective well-being”, Mouratidis (2020, 265) claimed that such a study contributed “to expanding previous theories on the influence of the urban environment on subjective well-being.” We concur and have particularly paid attention to how residents react emotionally to their “densified” neighbourhoods. We would like to stress that there is not a causal relationship between densification, affect and emotion. Cramped environments and lack of greenspace affect people, but how residents emotionally respond to their surroundings may vary emotionally. By investigating residents’ emotional reactions to different forms of densification in various spatial and social contexts within the city of Oslo, we have demonstrated that individuals’ feelings can differ but that emotional reactions to changes in people’s neighbourhood can nonetheless be expected. However, it is possible to simultaneously love your neighbourhood, dislike your neighbour, feel angry or depressed about densification and even have some positive anticipations about moving to a new home. Such emotional messiness may have led to planners ignoring emotional considerations. However, taking seriously this messiness may be important if environmental sustainability strategies shall not threaten the social dimension of sustainability.

Conclusion

We have indicated a somewhat messy relationship between densification and emotions. As complex, unpredictable and uncontrollable (Askins and Pain 2011, 809), emotions are elusive and have received little attention from both proponents of and researchers on urban densification. This is also valid for urban planning, which typically leans towards the economic, technical and “rational”, rather than the personal and emotional. Our study demonstrates that you cannot blur people’s emotional responses to their neighbourhoods. They are both real and felt; however, this emotional element of urban densification has still not achieved a prominent position in academic literature. Well-being, belonging and social cohesion are frequent topics in urban and housing research. Moreover, the financial aspect of “housing accessibility” has been argued to be of great importance when considering densification and social sustainability in a city like Oslo (Cavicchia 2021). We claim that it could also prove useful to include an emotional element in the research on densification and urban social sustainability. Additionally, given that “emotions and mood changes caused by the built environment can have an impact on health” (Mouratidis 2018, 33), researchers, planners and policy-makers could pay more attention to the emotional element of urban densification. Thus, to paraphrase Woolcock, Gleeson, and Randolph (2010, 179), including the emotional experiences of urban residents in the debate on compact cities is likely to produce a stronger set of ideas regarding the effects of urban change and urban policy on human well-being. Future research on urban densification and emotions may broaden our analysis through a systematic engagement with literature on social justice or the just city (e.g. Fainstein 2010). To paraphrase Avni and Fischler (2020, 1780), one may examine if it is possible to accommodate the possibly competing values of environmental sustainability, social justice and personal well-being. Moreover, asking a more normative question, what would be most “just”, to push more of the potential burdens of densification towards the spaces of the privileged or the unprivileged (see also Duncan and Duncan 2004a)?

While the hustle and bustle often associated with the city is generally claimed to be stressful (Abbot 2012; cited by Mubi Brighenti and Pavoni 2019, 138), we have attempted to draw attention to how urbanites emotionally respond to urban densification processes and density itself. If urban planners, local politicians and others do not take into account that many people will react emotionally to changes in their surroundings, such a neglect could lead to contempt towards these politicians, urban planners and other city makers. So far, there are very few examples in Oslo where

emotional reactions against densification projects have had any impact. However, we argue that emotions are important enough to be considered in policy implementation. By doing so, we could reintroduce the human emotional subject into politics and in cases involving urban densification and home-making, thereby increasing the likelihood of making our cities socially sustainable.

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