

the horse. Discussions of densification often implicitly assume that people must be cajoled into higher-density housing. Though there is an element of truth to that, the cajoling that must take place is in the form of creating great neighborhoods.

People are quite willing, even extremely willing, to live in high density if the amenity value of the surrounding environment is also great. Condominiums and apartments on the waterfront, any waterfront, attract people. So do views. People will clamor to live in an interesting, walkable, human-scaled neighborhood.

One of the trade-offs (and benefits) of purchasing in a multifamily structure in a dense neighborhood should be that one can walk in safety and comfort to stores, restaurants, theaters, and so forth along pleasant public sidewalks. Such pedestrian-friendly environments are called for by the public policy of many jurisdictions, but we are lagging in actually creating them. Moreover, and even more troubling, we seem to be incapable of managing the public spaces of the pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods that already exist.

A decline in the quality of life in higher-density neighborhoods exacerbates the preference for the single-family house. The detached dwelling offers the home buyer the opportunity to create a private zone of comfort. Even if the public space of the immediate block or neighborhood declines, the house owner has his/her lot on which to buffer the world.

The buyer in a multifamily environment must deal with the high “transaction costs” of condominium association decision-making: many committees and many rules. There is limited opportunity to enrich the environment because the open space of most multifamily structures is limited and held in common.

Multifamily dwellers are thus forced to take on the task of improving their neighborhood environment in the public space of the sidewalks and streets. They are ill equipped for this task and face enormous institutional resistance from local municipal bureaucracies, most of which are still rooted in the task of moving automobiles. It is not uncommon for fifty percent of an American city’s land area to be in public right-of-way, but most of that is devoted to cars. But in that public space is the greatest possibility of small (and relatively inexpensive) improvements that can increase neighborhood comfort. These small city comforts have the potential to benefit a neighborhood well beyond their cost. But they are very difficult for homeowners to carry out.

Over the past twenty years, and in general, the rate of increase in value of multifamily condominiums has lagged behind single-family houses. I believe that is because people are aware (unconsciously and not) that they will have less control over their neighborhood. Since the basic lesson of home buying is to “buy neighborhood,” this is a bad portent for the future of sustainable cities in which multifamily housing is expected to play a large part.

The way to densification is indirect. It is to propel local government (or to allow private property owners the ability) to create public environments that can compete