

# Towards soft public densification and intensification policies

## Benefits, limitations and opportunities:

### A research and experimentation programme of the PUCA

For several years now, some specialists have viewed densification as one of the solutions to build a "sustainable", less space- and resource-hungry city that will generate savings in utilities and help to cut down on travel-related energy consumption. That is why urban densification is now frequently regarded as one of the cornerstones of sustainable planning and development. Moreover, it may hold massive housing opportunities at especially affordable costs in areas already well served with all types of public utilities, thereby contributing to grant greater access to the city for all.

In France particularly, to address the residential housing crisis, a battery of legislative measures have been proposed to boost the densification of urban spaces, ranging from the recently adopted SRU (urban solidarity and renewal) legislation to the ALUR (access to housing and urban renovation) legislation, not leaving out the Grenelle laws.

Meantime, several research findings have shown that peripheral suburban spaces remain an immense challenge in this regard owing to the vast urbanized areas at stake (estimated at 20 000km<sup>2</sup> in France) and the fact that they

constitute untapped sources of land due to low residential densities.

Amongst the different forms identified, several stakeholders presently consider the so-called "soft" densification as an innovative solution in the production of housing.

#### What is the meaning of "soft densification" of individual housing fabrics?

At the Ministry of Territorial Equality and Housing, the Planning, Construction and Architecture Programme (PUCA) has opted for a broad definition of the soft densification concept, which encompasses different types of formal and information mechanisms and practices involving a vast array of stakeholders.

The soft densification of peripheral suburban spaces thus consists in densifying the present urban fabric. This gives rise especially to the incorporation or development of new houses that do not significantly change the urban landscapes.

## Forms of soft densification

### 1st form: Land subdivision and building on detached plots

The first form of soft densification is land subdivision and building on detached plots. Very often, this involves private individuals who have decided to dispose of part of their land by selling it as a building plot that can accommodate a new individual house.

### 2nd form: Building of accessory apartments

The second form of soft densification is embodied in the building of accessory apartments that are additional houses built on the premises of individual houses, by partitioning from the main building or by a completely separate construction on the same plot.

In North America, an accessory apartment is construed as a self-contained house, separate from the main house and equipped with its own kitchen, bathroom as well as a separate entrance.

It may be built within the main house or outside on the same plot.

In the United States and Canada, there are specific soft densification policies hinged on accessory apartments. In the Canadian province of Ontario, for instance, accessory apartments have been integrated into a fully-fledged regional policy to control urban growth.

The public authorities are leading the drive to make this mechanism a public policy tool for the production of affordable housing in suburban municipalities.

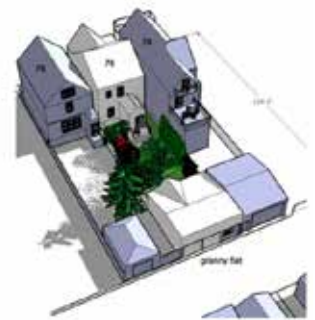
The purpose of this policy is not only to provide new and affordable rental housing, while guaranteeing an additional source of income to the owner-occupant, but also to help optimise the utilisation of the current facilities and utilities by increasing the residential density of neighbourhoods with diminishing and/or ageing populations.

The same practices can be found in France, be it due to building on undivided plots or due to the development of one or several additional houses on the same building by an internal partitioning system. Very often, these lead to the creation of rental housing and may take place within the framework of the urban planning regulations. These practices may equally exist informally. The current property market trends marked by a renewed housing crisis may partly account for this phenomenon. Although informal, this specific form of residential production presently responds to a need that remains unmet on the main housing market.



*Le dispositif des appartements accessoires*

*Les « Granny Flats »*



*Source: Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing*

*Source : Reading Toronto*



### 3rd form: Internal and/or external restructuring of large individual houses

Finally, a third form of densification is an internal restructuring of large individual houses that may incorporate raised structures and extensions with or without any re-parcelling plan.

These operations help to produce several housing units. For instance, it is with this form that micro-landlords operate to produce diffuse social housing, i.e. using the current housing fabric and for small transactions of 1 to 12 units.

This is the case for Solidarités Nouvelles pour le Logement (SNL), an association that produces and manages social housing for the most disadvantaged. As a social housing production method, it prefers to convert existing individual houses into several rental houses. As illustrated, it is an eco-rehabilitation operation with extension of an individual housing unit located in downtown Saint-Rémy-les-Chevreuse in the Yvelines.

#### Other soft densification practices

Finally, other soft densification practices can be observed: For instance, private individuals may come together and give rise to re-parcelling operations. These may be initiated under urban property associations (Associations foncières urbaines) or collective interest cooperatives (Sociétés Coopératives d'Intérêt Collectif), or following participatory housing operations. In the latter case, a group of inhabitants is involved, under a joint project, in designing, building and managing their own housing.

As seen in the examples, soft densification can be distinguished from another form of densification, which may be considered as "hard", as it brings about a more radical change in the urban landscape and may destroy its current configuration. A vast array of players may be involved, namely private individuals, builders of individual houses or mixed housing, surveyors, micro-landlords, small development companies, associations of inhabitants involved in participatory housing operations.

#### Conclusion: So what are the prospects for soft densification of peripheral suburban spaces?

Today, soft densification seems to constitute a promising supplement to conventional housing production methods with no urban sprawl.

Its proponents claim that it can address several issues raised by today's suburb management systems, namely land shortages within the building lines of the different municipalities, optimisation of community utilities and facilities, maintenance of transportation facilities, etc. It may equally help to revive certain semi-urban or rural neighbourhoods with diminishing populations.

The current enthusiasm for soft densification calls for a deeper



exploration of this form of densification to examine its benefits, opportunities and limitations.

This was PUCA's goal when it undertook a research and experimentation programme on these issues in 2014.

Under the Medellín Urban Forum, France, via its Ministry of Territorial Equality and Housing, will hold a networking event on the topic "Building the sustainable city: papers and discussions on innovative international experiences in the sustainable and participatory urban production sector". The event will take place on Tuesday, 8 April from 4.30 pm to 6.30 pm at the "pavillon jaune".

#### To find out more:

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