[Mansoor Raza](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/mansoor-raza)

December 12, 2020

**Covid 19 and housing**

It has been observed that some think tanks, international donors and planners are of the view that the densification of cities and increasing Floor Area Ratio (FAR) is helpful in optimization of land use and a coping mechanism against fast increasing land prices in urban centers.

The viral spread of Covid 19, primarily in urban centers, requires a rethink of this unchecked flirtation with density. Market forces’ proponents claim that housing density has no correlation with the pandemic. Taking a position on correlation between density and Covid-19, however, is too early as we don’t know enough about the virus and its mode of spread.

In such a scenario, data could be interpreted in either direction and when data is challenged what remains there is by and large anecdotes and consolidation of one’s own perspective.

So far, the housing preference in major urban centers of Pakistan is dictated by a number of factors, which include proximity with workplaces, educational institutions and health facilities, changes in family structures and neighborhood securities. Karachi exhibits another additional preference of clan and faith-based living to consolidate social capital.

The evidence of the sprawl not being ignored, this has resulted in vertical growth of Karachi – primarily across major corridors of movement and densification along the center of the city. Further, the housing density in the city, besides other factors, is a result of naked aggression on land use and land value by the elite and the powerful and an alternative to social securities, both social and cultural.

In Karachi Division, population density is not a homogenous entity either. According to noted architect and town planner Arif Hasan, in the year 2016 Karachi had a density of 2,280 persons per hectare against an allowable density of 1,625 persons per hectare. The reason for this difference is the inequitable manner in which land is used in the city. For instance, 62 percent (about 13 million) of Karachi residents live in informal settlements on 23 percent of the city’s residential lands. Densities in these settlements are between 1,500 and 4,500 persons per hectare, and continue to increase.

Meanwhile, 36 percent (about 7.5 million) of Karachi residents live in ‘planned’ settlements on 77 percent of the city’s residential lands. Densities can be as low as 80 persons per hectare and continue to decrease in new settlements. It is obvious from these figures that population density and the resulting density of dwelling cannot be treated in a uniform manner.

It is further observed that the prescribed SOPs of social distancing and hand sanitization with water or sanitizer has little contextual relevance. Water for the majority of the people of Karachi is too valuable a commodity to be ‘wasted’ for 20 seconds on each member of an average family size of seven and that too quite a number of times in a day.

The fact is that our context of socialization, culture, social bondages and eating habits is not in synchronization with the SOPs of social distancing and could not be practised as prescribed. Further, the six-foot rule is hard to pursue in Karachi while for instance traveling in public transport, walking on footpaths and buying stuff from a mohallah small shop.

The proponents of high density hinge their argument on augmented city efficiency in terms of service provision and resource utilization. In any case, cities are destined and designed for the coming together of people. However, in this part of the world there are increasingly fewer resources and services available to the public, so that argument does not hold ground. Moreover, due to inequality of residential architecture and resources, cities are not comparable. Wuhan cannot be compared with Karachi as far as density is concerned. And, before that, density needs to be defined: internal or external?

The need of the times is for detailed data collection and profound analysis of the Covid-19 affected. This should be supplemented with socio-economic and dwelling information to infer results for acceptance or rejection of the correlation of the pandemic with housing density and its differential impact on gender, class and age. This is necessary as conceptually crowding is different to density and hence needs to be treated differently in discourse on Coovid 19. Such in-depth studies will be helpful in future urban design and safe architecture for planners and decision-makers.

It is a reality that real estate steered housing density is economically lucrative. Covid-19 has busted the entire myth of the traditional notion of density and demands new parameters for densification, taking into account health imperatives and not just the Floor Area Ratio. Till when the new preference of employers for telemarketing, work-from-home and reduced number of staff at workplaces lasts and how that affects the housing demand and resulting density are questions that need academic investigations.

Health is a broader issue and this pandemic, like all other catastrophic incidents, needs to be seen in a larger social and economic context. Thoughtless pushing of densification, thus, would be perceived as making an important aspect of urban planning a chambermaid to ruthless profiteers whose five senses, besides conscience, are often suffocated by an insatiable appetite for money and profit.

The writer is a lecturer at in the Department of Architecture and Planning at NED, Karachi.

Email: mansooraza@gmail.com