"Of all the arguments, perhaps the least explored and most ambiguous is the claim that the compact city is a socially equitable city" (Burton, 2000, 1970). Density has become a mantra in planning and development in recent decades. Motivation stems from environmental concerns, but now advocates claim density can heal many ills, reducing social inequities and increasing supplies of affordable housing. Developers often argue the more units they can fit into a lot, the cheaper they can sell or rent units (Margalit, 2012). If density increases affordability, then why are Canadian housing costs highest in some of the densest cities? Vancouver has the most dense and compact housing in Canada: tiny units rent for high rates (CBC News, 2011). Similar trends are seen across most Canadian cities. Does density have as positive an impact on housing affordability as it claims to? My research examines the history of urban density, claimed benefits and shortfalls of density, followed by an in-depth analysis of whether planning practitioners are buying into the idea that density leads to housing affordability and if they are aware of the negative effect density can have on housing affordability. There is mounting research that density has many negative effects on affordability, but the popularity of density as a policy tool in planning demonstrates a growing disconnect between theory and practice.

EFFECTS OF DENSIFICATION ON AFFORDABILITY

HISTORY OF DENSITY

Cities developed with increasing average densities until the end of the nineteenth century with advances in public transportation, such as ferries, horse trolleys, cable cars, electric street cars, and commuter trains, and later, automobiles (Margalit, 2012). The ability for people to travel more easily allowed residents to move further from the centre of the city, often with the intention of separating uses and classes of people (Margalit, 2012). Over time, the development pattern occurred where communities of lesser density had the highest average income (Angel et al., 2010). Low density and suburban living became the dominant choice for home owners.

By the 1960s and 1970s, environmental movements raised concerns about carbon emissions due to single-occupancy vehicles and the degradation of nature (Bramley & Power, 2009). People were aware of the detrimental impact pollution on the environment, influencing their settlement and travel patterns to lessen their individual ecological impacts.

While claims are made that the world is now more urban than rural (Shaw, 2015), density has decreased due to suburban sprawl of urban centres (Margalit, 2012, 4). By the 1990s, environmental sustainability in planning was marketed, politicized, and made mainstream through the campaigns of Smart Growth and New Urbanism, which advocates European style compact city design principles, walkability, transit-oriented development, diversity in housing and population, environmentally friendly design, and urban growth boundaries that inhibit sprawl (Kushner, 2002). Increasing acceptance of the effects of development and emissions were also reflected in international campaigns such as the United Nations Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, signed by 150 countries (Jenks et al., 1998). Planning has been used as one tool for politicians to deal with increasing demand for sustainability through policies pushing for compaction and urban containment boundaries, which will minimize environmental impact and reduce building and transportation footprints (Margalit, 2012, 3).

In recent years, density has become what governments consider a fix to many urban spatial concerns and social ills. Kern calls this popular ideology "Intensify or Die" (Kern, 2013, 664). Cities facing deindustrialization in the urban cores see vacant industrial lands as "non-vital and non-vibrant, and full of decaying, struggling spaces" (Kern, 2013, 664). The rise of condominium development in urban cores once occupied by industries was meant to revitalize those areas by attracting the middle class.

SUPPORT FOR DENSITY
While the original intent for increased density was environmental sustainability and urban vitality, many other social benefits are touted by density advocates. Burton (2001) attempted to quantify the commonly claimed social benefits associated with density. She argued that the most important categories to examine were housing affordability, access to facilities, access to green space, job accessibility and increased job opportunities for less skilled workers, better public transportation, opportunities for walking and cycling, reduced crime, lower levels of social segregation, and increased wealth. She found positive relationships with density and better public transportation, reduced social segregation, more walking and cycling opportunities, better job opportunities for the lower skilled, and better access to facilities.

Several other researchers also argue there are social benefits associated with density. Bramley and Power (2009) argue density leads to better access to services and facilities, increased interaction with neighbours and a better sense of community, and less segregation of income and race. Kushner (2002, 46) argues density cuts down on "extraordinary transportation costs for families, higher costs to deliver municipal services"; he claims density is better for lower incomes residents, since it increases opportunities for employment, social services, and the ability to walk to essential services while reducing racial and class segregation. Jenks et al. (1998) argue high density development makes government provision for facilities and amenities more cost effective, thus more viable, which improves social sustainability. Several authors (Addison, 2012; Cullen, 2005) argue that density can lead to an increase in affordable housing stock. Density proponents often assume an increase in the intensity of land use reduces the value of land and the cost of housing (Burton, 2000, 1976).

SHORTFALLS OF DENSITY: Density and housing affordability

The negative impacts associated with high density development on social justice are well documented. While density correlates with access to services and public transportation, the argument that density will facilitate the development of more affordable housing options is contested by many planning theorists. Even the cheapest housing options in dense cities are more expensive than housing in less densely populated areas: "the higher the proportion of lower-density dwellings—detached and semi-detached houses—the lower the cost of the cheapest houses (to buy)" (Burton, 2000, 1986). Burton's statistical analysis of the impact density has on social equity indicators used a vast quantity of data from sources like censuses and property market reports. She found evidence that density does not lead to affordable housing (Burton, 2001). Instead, density is promoted to facilitate demand for housing in an area or to inhibit the development of greenfield areas, and scarcity of land leads to higher housing costs (Burton, 2000).

Transit-oriented development (TOD) is the concept of developing high density housing around heavily used transit hubs to reduce car dependency. Jones (2015) found in Burnaby, British Columbia, that the City's facilitation of TOD led to a loss of affordable housing. Those most greatly affected by the redevelopment of major transit areas are often the most vulnerable

populations, such as new immigrants, people from minority groups, and those on low-incomes (Jones, 2015; Quastel et al., 2012).

SHORTFALLS OF DENSITY: Implications for race and class

Densification may exacerbate inequities for racial minorities, the working and low-income class, and those who want children, while overwhelmingly supporting free-market and corporate interests. In public housing projects in the United States, for instance, African American residents in Chicago faced inequities due to the density of housing structures built in black neighbourhoods. Between 1954 and 1967 the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) built 10,300 high rise public housing units: all but sixty-three in poor areas where African American populations dominated (Rosenfeld, n.d.). In 1966, the American Civil Liberties Union filed a class action law suit against the Chicago Housing Authority and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) on behalf of Dorothy Gautreaux and other residents of public housing (Gallagher, 1994). The suit argued that high-rise public housing was not suitable or safe for family needs, and constituted discrimination because CHA built detached houses for families in white neighbourhoods (BPI, n.d.). The residents won their case and the CHA was ordered remedy conditions (Gallagher, 1994).

Over the last decade, urban living has become popular. The interest of middle and upper class households in living downtown has increased demand, and thus the value of density. Ehrenhalt (2012) called the phenomenon "the great inversion". Free market forces that have facilitated rising housing prices in urban cores mean those who originally lived in downtown cores (such as lower and working classes, cultural workers, and racial minorities) are being forced to move to the suburbs. The areas of a city that give households the space and privacy of suburbia but within walking distance to downtowns are the most desired areas in almost every modern city (Margalit, 2012). Lower income households in many parts of the world have compromised by living in the suburbs: close enough to amenities offered in urban areas while also having enough space to raise a family.

> If you are poor and carless in an upstairs flat in a neighbourhood without much open
> space – and especially if you are a child, or bring up children – you can do a good
> deal less for yourself than you can do with a house and garden and shed in a suburb,

> with parks and playgrounds and school grounds that Australian densities allow
> (Stretton, 1998, 49)

What does this mean for the demographics of who lives in dense urban cores? Will individuals have fewer children in these conditions? Studies find that on average, families with higher incomes have fewer children; thus, Margalit (2012) suggests, it may be appropriate for wealthier but smaller families to live in dense urban cores while low-income large families find suitable housing in suburbs. Single residents on low incomes also face compromises. Instead of giving up amenities for space, they may prioritize access to amenities and sacrifice space. Thus, some single people live in tiny units (CBC News, 2011), or double-up with friends. Affordable accommodations have become scarce in dense urban cores.

Staunch environmentalists and governments with the moral imperative to mandate increased density may not consider the lack of choice vulnerable populations have regarding where they can live. When decent housing for families is only affordable at the city fringes, low-income families are forced to own cars: they have no choice (Margalit, 2012). The lack of agency vulnerable citizens have is overlooked and the values of suburbia (close enough to amenities, an appropriate housing size for families, more affordable, and having the ability to make home improvements and increase home value) are judged as "nothing but a site of late-capitalist consumption, whose form cannot be redeemed" (Margalit, 2012, 10).

SHORTFALLS OF DENSITY: Shift in housing tenure & class implications
Due to the trend of intensifying urban cores with condominium developments, housing tenure in downtowns has shifted from more renters to more owners. This shift occurred in Toronto in 2001, with fifty-one per cent of dwellers being home-owners and forty-nine per cent renters (Kern, 2013). Home-ownership requires more personal equity up front that many in rental situations do not have. Dense development was typical in Toronto in the 1960s and 1970s, but because rental apartments and subsidized housing dominated, it was relatively affordable. Current densification in Toronto is led by the private market and the culture that home ownership is a crucial part of success for the North American life. Downtown condominium owners have different priorities than renters who used to make up most residents in the urban core:

> Condominium owners are assumed to have an economic interest in keeping property taxes and interest rates low, and little interest in maintaining rent control, affordable housing, housing quality, or housing assistance. Rather, condominium owners' interests may lie in maintaining their property values by practicing urban NIMBY-ism, creating segregated and securitized spaces in the city's core (Kern, 2013, 61).

Increasing homeownership opportunities inherently draws the middle class to those areas, leading to the displacement of lower-income residents with time (Kern, 2013).

SHORTFALLS OF DENSITY: Density as environmentalism or capitalism?

Not only has it become fashionable to live densely, but the positive effects density has on consumerism are hidden under the guise of environmentalism. One of the appeals of density is walkability, but as Quastel et al. (2012) find, while walkability is thought of as a way of protecting the environment by decreasing car use, middle and upper class gentrifiers see it as a consumer good that gives urban areas a rural quality. Sustainability policies assist with local economic growth by attracting and retaining the middle and creative classes, leading to rising housing costs and a new community culture that displaces working-class residents. As Kern puts it: "The 'greenwashing' of intensification means that critical questions about the process and outcomes of urban redevelopment are effectively evaded" (2013, 663), thus intensification is rarely questioned.

RESEARCH AIM

With a theoretical understanding of the negative impacts of density on social justice, and more specifically affordable housing, I now examine to what extent professionals in the planning field are aware of the negative impacts or if planners are buying into the moral imperative that densification is necessary for sustainable development. Do planners assume density increases housing affordability? Do planners recognize the negative impacts of density on housing affordability? This next section uncovers the dominant discourse practicing planners from five city-regions across Canada share regarding density generally and its connection to housing affordability.

METHODS

My research used qualitative data analysis. I analyzed the content of twenty-five planning documents from five Canadian city-regions: Vancouver (VAN), Edmonton (EDM), Toronto (GTA), Halifax (HFX), and St John's in Newfoundland (STJ). These plans include comprehensive plans, economic development plans, and affordable housing plans. Comprehensive plans cover the array of planning responsibilities for a community, whether for a town, city, municipality, or region. These plans are most relevant to the policy objectives (densification and affordable housing) being analyzed.

As Table 1 demonstrates, the largest number of plans came from the Edmonton city-region. Edmonton has several housing plans and several overarching comprehensive plans for the city and municipalities within the region. The existing regional plan for the St. John's region is from 1976: the St. John's Urban Region Regional Plan. St. John's is currently creating a new regional plan (the Northeast Avalon Regional Plan) that is not yet completed. Halifax Regional Municipality does not have a housing plan, but a housing needs assessment was produced in 2015 to understand the context of affordable housing in the area and potential future strategies for addressing affordable housing. While the housing needs assessment may show the future direction of affordable housing policy in the Halifax Regional Municipality, it cannot be compared to other city-regions' affordable housing plans because there are no housing policies in the document. However, it is useful to note the dominant discourses arising from the housing needs assessment regarding density and housing affordability.

Table 1: Number of plans per city-region					
	VAN	**EDM**	**GTA**	**HRM**	**SJ**
Comprehensive	1	3	2	3	2
Housing	3	3	1	0*	1
Economic Development	1	2	1	1	1
Total	5	8	4	4	4
*HRM has no affordable housing plan but does have a housing needs assessment.					

Transcripts of semi-structured interviews with ninety-two practicing planners and related professionals from the five city-regions were analyzed to explore how planners talk about densification and affordable housing. Researchers from Dalhousie University and the University

of Waterloo conducted the interviews in 2014. The questions asked in the interviews were not specifically about density and affordable housing. Instead, planners were asked about their experiences in trying to coordinate planning objectives, to what extent they do coordinate plans, and the challenges they face in coordinating plans. The topics of densification and affordable housing are so prominent in planning discourse that they arose frequently in the interview data and hence warranted analysis.

The interviews were semi-structured and conducted in person, by telephone, or by video chat. They lasted from twenty minutes to an hour and a half. All but one participant consented to be audio recorded; comments were transcribed verbatim. Respondent confidentiality was protected. Responses presented here are coded by city-region, interview sequence, and respondent gender.

Table 2: Type of Planner					
	VAN	**EDM**	**GTA**	**HRM**	**SJ**
City/Municipal	7	16	26	7	5
Regional	4	1	0	2	0
Provincial	0	0	0	2	5
Private	2	0	0	2	3
Other*	2	1	5	2	0
Total	15	18	31	15	13

* Other included staff such as town clerks who may fulfil some planning functions in small towns.

Thematic analysis identified common themes and contrasting differences in the interview transcripts and plans. I analyzed how often densification and housing affordability came up in the data. I coded transcripts and plans for any time the objectives arose. I found the extent to which densification and housing affordability were spoken about in tandem and whether they were coordinated, complementary, or contradictory using interpretive analysis of the interview transcripts and plans. I used interpretive analysis to examine if the planners and planning documents acknowledge and address the negative impacts densification can have on housing affordability as well as how concrete the policies for densification and affordable housing are. Comparative analysis was used to identify any similar themes or differences from across the five city-regions being explored.

Table 3: Plans analyzed from five city-regions	
City-Region	**Plan**
Vancouver	Metro Vancouver 2040: Shaping Our Future (2010)
	Regional Affordable Housing Strategy (2016)
	City of Vancouver Housing and Homelessness Strategy: 2012-2021 (2011)
	Vancouver Economic Action Strategy (2011)
Edmonton	Growing Forward: The Capital Region Growth Plan (2009)
	Working Together: Report of the Capital Region Integrated Growth Management Team (2007)
	Capital Region Housing Plan (2009)
	The Way We Grow: Municipal Development Plan (2010)
	The Way We Prosper: The City of Edmonton's Economic Development Plan (A New Direction for Economic Development) (2013)
	The Way Ahead: City of Edmonton Strategy Plan: 2009-2018 (updated 2014)
	The Way We Live (2010)
	City of Edmonton Affordable Housing Strategy: 2016-2025 (2016)
	Edmonton Area Community Plan on Housing and Supports: 2011-2015 (2011)
GTA	Places to Grow: Better Choices. Brighter Future. Greater Golden Horseshoe (2006)
	Toronto Official Plan (2015)
	City of Toronto Strategic Actions 2013-2018 (2013)
	An Affordable Housing Action Plan (2010-2020)
Halifax	Regional Municipal Planning Strategy (2014)
	A Greater Halifax: Economic Strategy (2011-2016)
	Halifax Economic Growth Plan (2016-2021): Action Plan: Years 1 & 2 (2016)
	Halifax Municipal Planning Strategy (2016)
	Downtown Halifax Municipal Planning Strategy (2014)
	Halifax Housing Needs Assessment (2015)
St. John's	St. John's Urban Region Regional Plan (1976, last amended 1983)
	City of St. John's: St. John's Municipal Plan (2003)
	Roadmap 2021: A Strategic Economic Plan for St. John's (2015)
	Affordable Housing Business Plan: City of St. John's (2014)

PLANNERS DISCUSS DENSITY MORE THAN AFFORDABILITY

Planners from four city-regions (Edmonton, Greater Toronto Area, Halifax, and St. John's) spoke about objectives to increase density far more frequently than they discussed objectives to promote or protect housing affordability (see Table 4). Planners from Vancouver spoke about housing affordability more than densification. Metro Vancouver is facing extreme population growth pressures and experiencing challenges in accommodating that growth. Metro Vancouver is committed to growing without sprawling, but growth puts high demand on housing in the urban core, pushing up the cost of housing (Metro Vancouver, 2010). Housing affordability is a more severe crisis in Vancouver than in the other city-regions.

Table 4: Occurrence of objectives in interview transcripts					
	VAN	**EDM**	**GTA**	**HRM**	**SJ**
Density	20	25	38	26	22
Housing affordability	26	6	11	3	7

FAITH & CONSENSUS IN DENSIFICATION

Many planners interviewed spoke positively about density without offering any rationale for why they perceived it as a better form of development. Edmonton planners often noted that the city is struggling to implement density targets in the plans, because Council often rejects implementing targets for fear of public reaction. As one planner explained, "we want to encourage smart growth. And that's in our strategic plan. And our strategic plan has been approved by council. But whenever we bring higher density residential to council, they always reject it" (EDM01f). A planner from the GTA spoke about how the regional growth plan has given her community the "strength to challenge standards and push densities well beyond what people were interested in doing" (GTA22f). A planner from St. John's said, "We have an interest from the planning side of thing for increased density in the city" (SJ12f). A planner from Halifax spoke about his experience trying to change the *Regional Plan* to encourage more density. The plan currently encourages twenty-five per cent of new growth to occur in the regional centre, fifty per cent growth in suburban areas, and twenty-five per cent in rural areas:

> Interestingly, during RP +5 [Regional Plan's five-year review], there was an opportunity to adjust those numbers. And that was the opening premise of RP +5, was we need to go to instead of 25 urban, 50 suburban, 25 rural, we really need to go to 40 urban or even 50 urban, 25 suburban, 25 rural. Something like that. Some more urban and therefore more sustainable split. And it looked really good for a while. Then there were some staff changes at the city. Some of the staff leadership was no longer present. The city manager, as I've mentioned, was lukewarm on championing innovation and new big ideas. He liked to keep the waters smooth. So, the whole idea of shifting those numbers, those targets, was sort of quietly shelved. And instead, staff began to double down or continue to hold out the original targets, growth targets, as being okay. So, that was a significant disappointment. (HRM09m)

Table 5: Faith in density (without reason) in interviews				
VAN	**EDM**	**GTA**	**HRM**	**SJ**
4	5	4	12	12

Interviews with ninety-two practicing planners and twenty-four relevant planning documents reveal a heavily entrenched discourse and faith that densification is the best form of urban design for environmental, economic, and social reasons. The arguments in the interview transcripts and the planning documents are not grounded in critical evidence, but are often anecdotal. The following uncovers the common arguments planners make regarding densification and its impacts on the environment, the economy, and most debatably, social issues, including housing affordability.

ARGUMENT: DENSITY FOR "SUSTAINABILITY"

Table 6: Density for sustainability in interviews				
VAN	**EDM**	**GTA**	**HRM**	**SJ**
3	3	2	5	1

Fourteen of the planners interviewed argued density is needed in city-regions for environmental sustainability. When a planner from Vancouver spoke about density positively, he stated: "from an ecological footprint perspective, like that's kind of what we want, right?" (VAN06m). A planner from Halifax explained that density requirements laid out by the *Regional Plan* are not enough. Currently, the *Regional Plan* states that twenty-five per cent of all new development should occur in the regional centre: the planner thinks this policy does not push for enough density and is "not sustainable" (HRM09m). A planner from Edmonton spoke about an educational forum with members of the public that demonstrated what compact living would do to mitigate environmental impacts. She explained that the educational model allowed members of the public to see what their preference for low density development would look like: "So if everyone in the consultation group says, 'Well, yeah, we want big houses and big yards,' then you can adjust that factor and you can immediately see the impact on the model to how your community looks from an environmental perspective" (EDM08f). Most of the plans from each city-region spoke about the importance of density for protecting the environment. Roadmap 2021 from St. John's explains that density "reduces sprawl" and "lessens environmental impacts" (City of St. John's, 2015, 14). This argument was shared in the other city-regions.

ARGUMENT: DENSITY FOR "VIBRANCY"

Table 7: Density for vibrancy in interviews				
VAN	**EDM**	**GTA**	**HRM**	**SJ**
2	2	1	1	3

Nine planners interviewed equated increased density with vibrancy and a healthy economy. The planners did not, however, explain why they thought that density is better for vibrancy or for the economy. They treated the benefits of density as obvious, even though much of what they said was subjective. A planner from Halifax stated: "The densification of developments, I mean that's important if we're going to have a vibrant city" (HRM12m). The economic development plan for Halifax argues density makes the city "more attractive" (Halifax Partnership, 2011, 17). Planners from Vancouver spoke about density and liveability (VAN01m) and density and a "strong downtown" (VAN13m) in the same breath. Similarly, *The Way We Prosper* (Edmonton's economic development plan) linked dense redevelopment and resulting vibrancy (Capital Region Board, 2013, 19). One planner from St. John's said decreasing sprawl and increasing density and walkability creates "good, sound neighbourhoods and vibrant downtowns" (SJ07m). The Strategic Economic Plan for St. John's, known as *Roadmap 2021,* argues density makes a city more vibrant, attractive, and liveable (City of St. John's, 2015, 14). Planners' opinions on density as good development practice reflect faith unchallenged by critical research on the impacts of densification.

ARGUMENT: DENSITY FOR COST EFFICIENCY

Table 8: Density for cost efficiency in interviews				
VAN	**EDM**	**GTA**	**HRM**	**SJ**
5	8	15	2	1

Thirty-one planners argued that density increased efficiency in land-use and transportation and led to cost saving for all levels of governments and taxpayers. Transit-oriented development was advocated by many planners interviewed. A planner from Vancouver spoke with frustration about why the City would allow a single-storey commercial space at an intersection next to rapid transit. She suggested anything built around a rapid transit hub should be mixed-use and higher density (VAN08f). Another Vancouver planner echoed this argument, using rhetorical strategies to reinforce his points:

> I think the other issue that we see really relates to the fit between transportation and planning. I mean we've got Sky Train stations in Vancouver surrounded by single-family housing in this day and age! I mean that's preposterous when you think about it. But the politicians and the planners are not prepared to go in and upset a community by saying "we're going to increase the density within the immediate vicinity of this Sky Train station"… But it is - the fact that we do have expensive Sky Train stations surrounded by single-family houses, I think is an example of failure. (VAN09m)

Fifteen planners from the GTA argued for increased density around transit centres because the infrastructure for transit already exists. They believed that density around transit would increase ridership.

> We had to redesign and reorient, realign some of the public streets in the neighbourhood. And we had to try to work with the TTC to also improve the conditions around some of the subway stations to make them more inviting and make people feel a bit safer around them. Which was one of the reasons why people weren't using them. And also to increase the density around some of them to make better use of that infrastructure, the subway infrastructure from a ridership perspective. (GTA06m)

> So our strategy is basically, yes, since we've invested a lot of money in that in the centres and the corridors, why not focus and concentrate the development there? So our strategies have been guided somewhat by the need to prioritize where growth should be based on our investment at this point. (GTA09m)

As a GTA planner argued, increasing density around expensive infrastructure is a good cost saving measure. This argument permeates *Places to Grow*, the provincial act directing planning and growth in the Greater Golden Horseshoe. The plan says, "It is estimated that over 20 per cent of infrastructure capital costs could be saved by moving from lower density development to more efficient and compact urban form" (Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs, 2006, 22).

ARGUMENT: DENSITY IMPROVES HOUSING AFFORDABILITY

Table 9: Density for housing affordability in interviews				
VAN	EDM	GTA	HRM	SJ
1	2	0	0	1

The argument that density will improve housing affordability was brought up a few times in the interview transcripts (as shown in Table 9). A planner from Edmonton argued promoting infill development means increased housing diversity for a range of income streams and family unit

types (EDM09m). A planner from Vancouver demonstrated agreement with a developer wanting

more density to allow for affordable housing options, saying:

> But yes, if there's a lot of people coming and the development community feels, well, we
> don't have anywhere to build, affordability is becoming an issue, hey, maybe you need to
> update that OCP or allow for a bit more density somewhere. (VAN04m2)

A planner from St. John's argued that developing unused institutional lands intensely would

allow addressing social needs:

> Because there's a lot of surplus institutional lands in St. John's that I've said, you know,
> you need to talk to the province about. As we've identified most of those areas as areas
> for intensification. So the lands are owned by the province. But if they were developed,
> they could be developed very comprehensively and help achieve a whole range of
> provincial and municipal objectives: so affordable housing, poverty reduction, health and
> wellness. (SJ01m)

While not many planners argued that density provides affordable housing options, this is a

popular argument in the plans from the five-city regions. Eight of the twenty-four plans from the

five city-regions examined plus the *Housing Needs Assessment* from Halifax claim that density

will increase housing affordability. The pervasive assumption that density leads to more

affordable housing can be seen in planning documents from all five city-regions across Canada.

Table 10: Plans claiming density improves and increases affordability					
	VAN	**EDM**	**GTA**	**HRM**	**SJ**
Total plans making claim	2	2	2	1 (+1)*	1
+1 for Housing Needs Assessment (not a plan)					

Metro Vancouver 2040: Shaping Our Future mandates that all municipalities prepare Housing

Action Plans that support "higher densities and intensification which provide a diversity (more

affordable) housing options" (Metro Vancouver, 2010, 5). Vancouver's *Regional Affordable*

Housing Strategy encourages incentives for making new purpose-built market rental housing

financially viable through increased density (Metro Vancouver, 2016, 23). The same plan then

says it will "work with municipal partners to identify suitable Metro Vancouver Housing

Corporation sites for redevelopment at high density to increase the supply of mixed income non-

profit rental housing" (25).

Edmonton's plans speak most frequently about density as a means for achieving housing affordability. The plans demonstrate a broad consensus among planners that density is the best form of development for achieving housing demands and sustainability and that the public can be educated to understand and accept this. Edmonton's *Capital Region Housing Plan* states:

> A consensus seems to be forming around the fact that industry needs to start building more efficiently and accepting smaller units in higher density developments that emphasizes innovation and affordability. (Capital Region Board, 2009a, 33)

> Higher density housing, with smaller units, is one opportunity to increase affordable housing. There is an important role for all stakeholders to educate and inform the public about accepting higher density housing in their neighborhoods and smaller, higher density housing as a choice. (Capital Region Board, 2009a, 45).

The use of "the fact" as a rhetorical device is used to claim the so-called benefits of density and small units as "fact," but no research is referenced to back that statement. Language used to argue that the public and industry "need" to "accept" density in these two quotes demonstrates planners' steadfast faith in the crusade for density.

Smart Growth is another pervasive concept used to encourage greater density in Edmonton. Two of Edmonton's plans argue Smart Growth, which values density, will help achieve housing affordability (Capital Region Board, 2009a, 10). *Growing Forward* (The Capital Region Growth Plan) argues Smart Growth principles will better accommodate the changing housing needs and population growth occurring in Edmonton, as it notes the city-region is dealing with "escalating housing prices which have impacted the availability and affordability of housing" (Capital Region Board, 2009b, 13). The growth plan states:

> The primary goal of the Housing Plan is to facilitate a change in development patterns to accommodate changing demographics and population growth. The emphasis is on adopting Smart Growth principles as a basis for achieving long term sustainability and specific housing goals for affordability, density and diversity in built forms, within the Capital Region (Capital Region Board, 2009b, 103)

The Greater Toronto Area speaks less about using density as a way of providing housing affordability and more about redevelopment and revitalization of existing public housing projects as a way of improving the quality of life for those in highly concentrated low-income neighbourhoods. However, some of the language in the plans from the GTA recommends

maintaining existing housing stock and encouraging new rental supply through intensification and infill (City of Toronto, 2015, 3.2.1). Similarly, the regional plan (*Places to Grow*) argues affordable housing needs can be dealt with through intensification, especially through the development of secondary suites in already built-up areas (Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs, 2006, 2.2.3).

While the plans for the GTA do not directly explain that the redevelopment of public housing projects, such as Regent Park, are facing major intensification, examining what is happening in Regent Park demonstrates this clearly. *Regent Park Planning Report: Phases 3, 4 and 5*, prepared by the City of Toronto, states that intensification "greatly improves the urban environment – through careful design of the public realm, the addition of public amenities, and excellence in architectural design" (Gladki Planning Associated, 2013, 16). Prior to revitalization, Regent Park housed approximately 10,000 residents in public housing (City of Toronto, 2014). According to the developer of Regent Park (Daniels Corporation), when completed, Regent Park will house 12,500 people (Daniels, n.d.). Only thirty per cent of the revitalized Regent Park will be non-market or social housing units, while seventy per cent will be sold or rented at market cost (Augsten et al., 2014, 5).

Halifax has no affordable housing plan, but affordable housing is mentioned is in tandem with density a few times in comprehensive plans. Halifax's *Regional Municipal Planning Strategy* claims dense forms of development (permitting auxiliary dwelling units and secondary suites, and reducing lot frontage and lot size) will increase housing affordability (Halifax Regional Municipality, 2015, 57). The *Housing Needs Assessment* argues barriers to create density through secondary suites is halting the opportunity to develop affordable housing (SHS Consulting, 2015, 92).

Only one plan in St. John's argues density is a way of increasing housing affordability. The *Affordable Housing Business Plan* in St. John's addresses many ways affordable housing should be dealt with and improved, but specifically argues density is a way of increasing affordable housing options, stating: "higher density housing promotes affordability" (City of St. John's, 2014, 8).

Only two of the ninety-two planners interviewed from Vancouver, Edmonton, the GTA, Halifax, and St. John's spontaneously spoke about the potential negative impacts of increased densification on affordable housing. A planner from Edmonton explained her opposition to high-density redevelopment, especially in areas that are currently affordable. She noted concern about affordability from residents: "It's an area that perhaps caters to lower income housing, and that redevelopment will bring higher prices and the people that will live there will displace the people that are currently living there" (EDM05f). A planner from the GTA argued that trends in high-density redevelopment are causing an increase in the cost of low-density housing because the supply of ground-oriented housing is reduced but the demand is still high (GTA11m).

Only one of twenty-four plans addressed concerns about the effects of high density redevelopment on housing affordability. Vancouver's *Regional Affordable Housing Strategy* speaks about the vulnerabilities of older but perfectly good-condition rental supply being replaced by higher-density condominiums (Metro Vancouver, 2016, 22).

POLICY LANGUAGE

The language used to encourage or enforce goals for increased density sounds more compulsory and specific than the language used to address a lack of affordable housing. British Columbia's provincial government enforces an urban containment boundary, not allowing sprawling development beyond the built-up areas (Metro Vancouver, 2010, 13). The GTA is subject to the Greater Golden Horseshoe's *Places to Grow* (provincial growth plan), which sets a minimum target of how much residential development should occur within the already developed areas. It states: "By the year 2015 and for each year thereafter, a minimum of 40 per cent of all residential development occurring annually within each upper- and single-tier municipality will be within the built-up area" (Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs, 2006, 2.2.3).

Even cities without enforced growth boundaries use more forceful language about density in their planning documents than the language used to discuss housing affordability objectives. In Edmonton, the language used to discuss density demonstrates a strong faith in the concept, as seen in language such as: "consensus formed" around density (Capital Region Board, 2009a, 33)

and the need to "educate and inform the public" to accept density (Capital Region Board, 2009a, 45). Plans in Halifax support densification, stating it makes the city "more attractive" (Halifax Partnership, 2011, 17), and that it mitigates environmental degradation. The plans say that planning policy needs to be more flexible to allow for "soft density" through infill housing, auxiliary units, granny suites, and small-scale development. The Halifax Regional Municipal Plan, however, promotes high-density in the form of high-rise buildings. It supports "incentives for growth through streamlined development approval processes, tax policies, density bonusing, capital investments and other strategies to attract new development" (2014, 8). The plans for the St. John's city-region promote higher density development. *Roadmap 2021* discusses how density reduces sprawl, reduces environmental impacts, and makes a city more vibrant, attractive and liveable (City of St. John's, 2015). The *Municipal Plan* also promotes density and minimizing sprawl, but encourages density to develop through "large-scale integrated developments in all expansion areas" (City of St. John's, 2003, 1.2.3).

By contrast, the language used to discuss how to plan for housing affordability is vague, visionary, and non-committal in all five city-regions. Such terms as "encourage," "support," "should be planned," "leverage opportunities," "research," and "develop plans" are used to describe goals for increasing and improving affordable housing. The language seldom suggests implementable actions. An example of the vague language used to plan for affordable housing is seen in the GTA's *Affordable Housing Action Plan*:

> Private sector developers seeking increased density on individual large residential sites of five hectares or more will continue to be expected to incorporate affordable housing as a condition of the City's planning approvals. But most residential development in Toronto is on sites of less than five hectares. Such applicants are not required by the Official Plan to include affordable housing when they apply for zoning changes to permit an increase in the new housing to be built. (City of Toronto, 2010, 29)

The term "partnership" is commonly used in plans when discussing goals for affordable housing. *The Way We Grow* (Municipal Development Plan) uses the term "partnership" with almost every strategy for achieving more affordable housing (2010). The plan talks about forming partnerships throughout the region, with different levels of government, with developers, housing agencies, and sometimes simply with "others". The language demonstrates that Edmonton does not want to take ownership of affordable housing: use of the term "partnerships" makes it difficult to hold

one party accountable for a lack of action. In Halifax's *Regional Municipal Planning Strategy*, language like "HRM can also play an important role," "opportunities," and "partnerships" (Halifax Regional Municipality, 2014, 57) make it unclear who is responsible for affordable housing: no one can be held accountable for a lack of action on affordable housing.

Some plans demonstrate that planners have low standards for successful affordable housing policy. The GTA's *Affordable Housing Action Plan* describes a policy implemented in 2002 to protect the demolition or conversion of affordable rental housing: the policy prevents demolition of buildings with six or more affordable units. The plan then goes on to state: "In 2007, Council confirmed this goal by adopting an enhanced bylaw that extends the range of housing to be protected. As a result, only 600 rental homes have been lost between 2002 and 2008, much less than in other large Ontario cities" (City of Toronto, 2010, 24). In a context where few affordable units are being built even as demand increases, the loss of 600 affordable units is still a great loss.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR PLANNING?

The argument for density has become entrenched in planning discourse as a solution to many environmental, social, and economic ills. However, the original intent of density may be forgotten, as policies and planners argue for density without supportive evidence, or even contrary to research findings. The argument that density will lead to housing affordability is still dogma, even though the quantity of research finding the opposite is increasing (Troy, 1996). As Margalit puts it, density has become a fetish. The planning community lauds density as a tool for progress in cities and criticizes those who choose suburban options. Sustainable development in the form of compact living has been "founded on conviction rather than rationality" (Jenks et al., 1998, 12) while density has become a "moral imperative" (Margalit, 2012, 3).

The fetish of density is based on the dominant forces that collect benefits from it: landowners, financiers, developers, investors, builders, and the "middle class and elites to whom the redeveloped city caters" (Kern, 2013, 664). Luckily for those beneficiaries, density has become fashionable. However, the argument for density has morphed into a moral trope. Critics of densification are now considered "radical" (Margalit, 2012, 3) or reactionary.

The fetish of density may be due to the pervasive forces of neoliberalism and may be the one tool planners feel they can cling on to for potential positive impacts. In a climate where governments have rolled back support for public housing, planners may feel they have no direction to turn except for the contested economic argument that greater density (thus more supply of housing) will lead to more affordable housing prices.

If major plans and planners from city-regions across Canada assert that density increases housing affordability, there is a widespread disconnect between theory and practice pervasive in the discipline. This paper demonstrates that critical and self-reflective analysis and the continuation of theoretical studies are important for the planning profession. Other more influential factors contribute to lacking housing affordability, such as race, class, gender, employment options, housing tenure changes, and neoliberal economic policies. Pragmatic planners should resist the claim that density is a silver bullet for environmental, economic, and social ills.

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