

Article

From Small to Mega: Evaluating Urban Scale

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Abstract: Scale is a significant although understudied dimension of cities. To better understand scale and flesh out the range of issues and debates involved in its conception, we conducted thirty-three in-depth interviews with a wide range of urban actors: developers, planners, policymakers, leaders of non-profit community organizations, and scholars. We wanted to know how contemporary urban actors in the U.S. conceive of scale as a factor in development? How is “small-scale” vs. “large-” or “mega-scale” differentiated, and are they inter-related? What are the pros and cons of both small- vs. large-scale projects? Four themes emerged from our interviews: scale definition, barriers to small-scale development, scale evaluation, and solutions for overcoming barriers to small-scale development. The point of this survey was to better understand possible responses and attitudes about scale among those involved in the urban development process.

Keywords: scale; urbanism; incremental development; mega development

1. Introduction

Scale is a long-debated dimension of cities. Followers of the work of Jane Jacobs (1961) promulgate the benefits of small-scale urbanism and denounce the negative impacts of large-scale form [1], while others see value in the ability to “get things done” via consolidated, large-format development [2]. The purpose of this paper is to flesh out the question of scale to better understand the nature of these debates.

While there are many definitions and approaches to the concept of scale, there are three scale concepts that are especially relevant to cities: (1) scale as a physical measure, based on building, lot, and block size; (2) scale as a function of development control, ranging from single to corporate ownership; and (3) scale as a function of pace, ranging from gradual to all-at-once change. These three scale concepts are highly intertwined, and variation of the scale of urbanism from small to large along these dimensions creates a multitude of effects and experiences.

This paper attempts to better understand these scale concepts from the perspective of people actively engaged in development practice. Research that digs into how scale differences are perceived has been limited. While scale is an essential factor in any exploration of urbanism, there is no common understanding of what scale is or how it should be measured. While some research has critiqued mega-projects and their failure to produce the initial public benefits promised [3,4], and there has been some appraisal of the benefits of smaller-scale, more incremental development approaches [1,5], missing from the literature is a more in-depth review of competing perspectives about scale.

There are three main reasons why a better understanding of scale is important. First, although scale is an essential factor in urban development, current understanding of it is improvised at best. If researchers want to translate scale from ad hoc understanding to meaningful empirical research, common parameters need to be advanced. Second, if planners are going to advocate for a particular side in the scale debates—and most city planners seem to be advocates of small-scale development—they need a more developed set of arguments about why a particular scale matters. Third, if planners are going to address the problems that a small scale encounters, or address the drawbacks of mega-scale



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development, they need well-honed arguments. Listening closely to those with a keen understanding and interest in scale is a first step toward meeting all of these challenges.

To better understand scale perceptions and flesh out the range of issues and debates involved, thirty-three in-depth interviews were conducted with a wide range of urban actors, all of whom have a specific interest in scale: developers, planners, policymakers, leaders of non-profit community organizations, and scholars. Focusing on the private development side of these debates (as opposed to publicly financed infrastructure), the survey asked the following: how do contemporary urban actors in the U.S. conceive of scale as a factor in development? What are the pros and cons of small- vs. large-scale projects? Is there a perceived bias toward large-scale or small-scale development on the part of urban officials and financiers? Insights gained from these interviews were used to offer a framework for scale debate: definition, evaluation, barriers, and solutions.

2. Literature Review

The literature on scale is focused primarily on critiques of large- vs. small-scale development (with much less research on the barriers to small-scale development and the ways those barriers might be overcome). The paragraphs below summarize the key points.

Large-scale development has been interpreted as an expression of political power, of absolutism, or of the centralizing force of an authoritarian regime [6]. In the U.S., Daniel Burnham famously advised “Make no little plans, for they fail to stir the hearts of men” [7], advising that large-scale planning and development was the scale at which jobs are created, infrastructure financed, and city revenues enhanced. Since the mid-20th century, large-scale development has been nurtured by powerful groups like the National Association of Home Builders, a topic explored in Marc Weiss’ *The Rise of the Community Builders*, a study that showed how development became vertically integrated—i.e., large-scale development companies controlled all facets of development.

In contrast, Jane Jacobs, among others, favored the advantages of “gradual money”, small and incremental, over the detrimental impacts of “cataclysmic money” often present in large-scale development [8] (p. 291). In the decades following Jacobs’ seminal work, many urbanists strengthened the critique of large-scale development and their support of small-scale incrementalism. There was the “Small is Beautiful” [9] movement of the 1970s, alongside recommendations that informal incremental growth could be a remedy for housing in poor countries [10]. In the 1980s and 1990s, scale debates involved preservationists acting as small-scale revitalizers fighting against outsized suburban expansion and large-format “public-private” development projects [11,12]. Heid [13] showed the consequential distinction between institutional capital and its tie to large-scale development vs. local capital and its support of small-scale development. Urban designers argued that small-scale urbanism was more aesthetically pleasing, more experientially fulfilling, and better suited to accommodate a variety of social and economic activities [14–17]. In opposition to large-scale development, which they saw as an enabling car-based urban form, the New Urbanist movement positioned itself as a defender of small-scale urbanism (although many of their projects might be considered large scale). At the individual home-owner level, small-scale development in the form of single-family teardown and replacement continues to be a common feature of American housing development [18].

But from a different set of urban actors, support for large-scale development continued past the urban renewal phase. Starting in the 1990s, commitment to the economic return of central urban cores stimulated large-scale public-private development partnerships, and these took the form of large-scale projects [19,20]. As larger-scale private investment again became interested in inner-city sites, suburban Big Box retailers, often enticed by municipal subsidies, built stores in central urban locations [21]. Some communities, like Vancouver, British Columbia, made an effort to incorporate smaller-scale urban placemaking principles into these new, expansive developments [22]. However, the vast scale—both in terms of the physical form and the accumulation of finance and capital—was criticized as leading

to an affordability problem and for producing a universally homogenized urban aesthetic that ignored local conditions [4,23,24].

The phrase “mega-project” entered the city planning lexicon and was used to represent a variety of urban phenomena, broadly defined by Flyvbjerg, Bruzelius, and Rothengatter [3] as infrastructure-focused initiatives that cost more than USD 1 billion. According to Fainstein [4,25] (p. 768), mega-projects are “very big, mixed-use developments [that cities use] as attractors of multinational business and sites for new housing”. Mega-projects are viewed as antithetical to Jane Jacobs’ brand of incremental change and often detrimental to urban sustainability [1]. However, others note that in contrast to the residential evictions associated with urban renewal in the middle of the 20th century, mega-projects are frequently constructed on abandoned or underutilized industrial land [26,27].

Some urbanists and developers have been focusing on small-scale incremental development in response to the perception that mega-projects are “lacking the layering of old and new, small and big, that gives central cities their ambiance and opportunities” [4], p. 783. Small-scale urbanism is frequently positioned as a neglected co-contributor of urban life, significantly burdened by regulations and finances that impact incremental developers disproportionately [1]. A number of non-profit organizations devoted to aiding small-scale development via developer networks and training programs have emerged in the last decade, notably the Incremental Development Alliance (mentorship for “aspiring developers”), Lean Urbanism (“leveling the playing field for small-scale economic development”), and Strong Towns, a 3700-member non-profit whose motto is “a bottom-up revolution to rebuild American prosperity” (more information is available on the organization websites: incrementaldevelopment.org; leanurbanism.org, and strongtowns.org; see also smalldevelopmentcounts.org and recastcity.com; URLs accessed on 4 July 2024). Incremental approaches include the integration of small-scale main street retail with small manufacturing as a means of creating more dynamic, equitable communities [13].

A recent focus of community engagement critique is that the process hurts small developers in particular. The blocking of development, especially multi-family housing, by well-organized but unrepresentative groups has been well documented [28–30]. Protracted engagement processes add cost to any size of development, but because big developers can more readily absorb costs, the engagement process is thought to hurt small developers more. The *Strong Towns* organization argued that the public engagement process is causing more harm than good by asking people to weigh in on minutia without encouraging them to see the bigger picture [31].

But according to proponents, large-scale development generates jobs, tax revenue, and infrastructure investments that could never be produced incrementally. This is one reason why American municipal governments are often considerably more interested in supporting expansive private development than small and incremental development, as the former is explained as being necessary to raise the significant sums of money required for capital improvements. Such development can readily be subsidized by local governments via Tax Increment Financing (TIF), although TIF and the large-scale projects it is linked to are criticized as a form of corporate subsidy utilized in places that do not actually need public funding [32].

In sum, the literature on scale has been largely focused on, first, critique of large-scale development and its association with political power and authoritarian regimes, although there is also recognition that large-scale development can create jobs, finance for infrastructure, and revenues. Second, research has focused on the benefits of small-scale development, especially its connection to sustainability, diversity, and pedestrian quality. Third, there is some writing on the challenges of small-scale development, especially regulatory and financial burdens, and how large-scale development is better able to absorb costs.

While the debates briefly reviewed here are familiar, the range and variation of perspectives focused on scale as a specific phenomenon have not been treated in any kind of formalized way. The objective of this research is to better understand how the variation of development scale—from small to mega—is understood from the perspective of those

engaged in the urban development process. The hope is to provide a more nuanced understanding of scale, how it is perceived, and what the outcomes of scale variation are believed to be.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Questions

The primary research questions were as follows: how do contemporary urban actors in the American context define and utilize scale as a factor in development? What do they see as the pros and cons of small-scale vs. large-scale projects? How do urban actors believe the scale of projects relates to social, financial, or aesthetic issues? The goal was to help clarify and frame the nature of the scale debate via in-depth conversations with those directly involved in scale considerations.

3.2. Study Participants

Semi-structured interviews with thirty-three urban practitioners and scholars were conducted from around the U.S. between December 2020 and June 2021. The sample was purposive. First, individuals aligned with small-scale development advocacy groups were contacted. Since the goal was to include participants with a diversity of perspectives and backgrounds who had knowledge of all scales of development, not just small-scale, developers, scholars, and practitioners unaffiliated with the “small developer” cause were also contacted. From these initial contacts, interviews were secured from a variety of developers working at various scales of development. On the government side, planning directors and economic development specialists were interviewed. Other interviewees included transportation planners, architects, planners, consultants, real estate attorneys, and a journalist. Participants were from the following cities: Chicago (7), Portland, OR (4), Atlanta (4), Boston (2), New York (2), South Bend, IN (2), Washington, DC (2), Albuquerque (1), St. Louis (1), Dallas (1), Detroit (1), Denver (1), Toronto (1), Rochester, NY (1), Chapel Hill, NC (1), Buffalo (1), and Miami (1). Table 1 summarizes the professional make-up of the participants.

Table 1. Professions of respondents.

	No.
Partner/employee in a real estate development firm working at all scales	9
Architect and urban planner working at all scales	5
Small-scale developer	4
City planner working in a consulting firm	3
Urban planning professor	2
Former planning director for a large city	2
Transportation and land use planner	2
Real estate attorney	2
Former economic development director	2
Journalist covering land use policy	1

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The semi-structured, in-depth interviews were based on a topic guide, provided in Appendix A. The topic guide was intended to motivate a detailed exploration of views and experiences about scale while also allowing a flexible and responsive approach. Respondents were free to interject, and the questions were used as more of a checklist for the interviewer to cover rather than a strict ordering. Interviews were video-recorded over zoom, with participant permission, and lasted between 45 and 55 min. The identity of respondents was hidden and respondents were encouraged to speak freely.

Data analysis was undertaken using a framework approach to manage and explore the original data in relation to the topic guide. The thirty-three interviews were audio- and video-recorded and transcribed via an automated transcription platform. The transcripts were indexed and mapped on the basis of recurring themes. The primary interviewer first listened to each transcript to create an overall schema that identified broad themes and subthemes that emerged from the interviews. A second researcher then coded the transcripts according to these themes and subthemes. Both members of the research team read the interviews and agreed on the coding framework. The second interviewer also listened to all transcripts a third time to simultaneously edit the automated transcription and double-check coding.

4. Summary of Findings

Data analysis of the transcripts identified four themes that emerged from the interviews: scale definition, barriers to small-scale development, scale evaluation, and solutions for overcoming barriers to small-scale development.

4.1. Scale Definition

The interviews began with a prompt: “we define small scale as projects undertaken by a single owner or small company, involving a single building with fewer than eight units or under 50,000 square feet. Would you define things differently, and if so, why?” An immediate discovery was that there was wide variation in definitions of scale (and no respondent agreed completely with the definition offered). While respondents uniformly considered scale to be fundamental, they always quickly noted that there were a lot of complexities involved in trying to define it, and that there were many different uses and interpretations. Respondents regularly mentioned how the lines between small-scale and large-scale development are often blurred.

Participants broadly endorsed the idea that scale definition was relative: “If you’re talking to a large-scale developer, [a] 28-unit project would probably be small-scale in their eyes”. Another noted that the small-scale definition is “misunderstood” and a “misnomer”, and depends on the audience: “if I’m talking to the community [and] I say small scale, they’re thinking about a two-flat, four-flat, six-flat. If I’m talking to my commercial real estate peers, they understand that I mean a \$20 million project”.

There was a common sentiment that scale is locationally dependent. For example, in “Gateway cities” like Miami, New York, San Francisco, or Los Angeles, “what would be considered a [small] project. . . is a much higher bar”. Thus, the size of the city was thought to be largely responsible for defining scale: “Chicago versus Birmingham are night and day. And so, [you] have to have a different scale for small town, medium town, small city, medium city, big city, metropolis. Those are all different contexts”. Other context factors involved in scale definition included market characteristics (such as “hot” vs. “cold” markets) as well as community demographics. However, despite the frequent discussion of the relative nature of scale and the context dependency, interviewees did offer specific definitions. A selection of the definitions of scale that respondents used is provided in Table 2.

More than half of respondents thought that timing and financing considerations were important in the definition of scale. For example, projects might be built in phases, and each phase might be considered small, but when combined, they create a project that would be considered large scale. This relates to a financially driven definition of scale, where total development cost distinguishes small from large with varying implications. “Form really does tend to follow finance, [and] scale follows finance too”. One respondent noted that the financial means of the developer dictated the scale of development: “I think scale is incredibly important with capital [because] that’s what makes capital efficient. Scaling buildings is not as important as scaling capital”. One aspect of being “small”, one person noted, is that “a smaller-scale developer will just go to the bank. The bank is their only investor”.

Table 2. Sample respondent definitions of “small scale”.

“An 80-to-100-unit development, whether that’s single family housing, or a multifamily development. . . everything below that is considered small. [For] commercial. . . everything below [50,000 square feet] is small—5000 square feet, 10,000 square feet, even 50,000 square feet”.
“I would say there is certainly a unit count threshold. . . in my mind, that’s probably [about] 20-ish units”.
“I would say the micro would be single unit, obviously, to four units. And then your small scale would go from anything from. . . five units [up] to seven stories or something less than 100,000 square feet”.
“Small projects top out at three stories and typically top out when you have to put in an elevator. You can do fire sprinklers, but once you bring an elevator into a building, you’re going from Double A ball to Triple A”.
“In Chicago, under 100,000 square feet will probably still be considered small scale. Under, I would say, maybe 24 units when it comes to housing would be small scale”.
“Four units is the tipping point. Because once you get beyond four units, you have to change type of construction, fire, sprinkler. It changes your pro forma dramatically when you move from four units to five units”.

4.2. Evaluation

Scale definition frequently led to scale evaluation. Some noted the practical benefits of working at a large scale, often making the point that scale leads to cost-effectiveness: “developers want to do larger projects, because doing an 8-unit project is kind of the same amount of work as doing a 25-unit project”. This was noted particularly in the case of building affordable housing, where “you have to add a tremendous amount of density in order for things to pencil when you factor in whatever the affordable housing requirement is”, and that there is a need to “take on a larger building” even if “out of the scale of incremental” because it “helps pay for our existence”. Another argued, “underwriting one project takes the same amount of time, whether it is 10 units, or 1000 units, [so] with limited public resources, if our overarching goal is more housing, I’ll do the one with 1000. And that’s just like cutthroat reality” (This point is verified in California’s Affordable Housing Cost Study, 2014, available here: https://www.treasurer.ca.gov/ctcac/affordable_housing.pdf; URL accessed on 4 July 2024).

Participants also argued that “very large projects” create “tons of jobs, tons of economic activity”, and that “there are certain kinds of development that you simply can’t do if you don’t do a mega-project. . .and nobody’s going to build over railroad yards incrementally”. One respondent cautioned that communities need to be realistic about how to achieve their growth and density goals: “If you’re going to contain development and allow density, then you can’t say, well, you don’t want anything bigger than eight units”.

There was also recognition of the importance of working at multiple, inter-connected scales: “I don’t think it’s about working at one scale. I think it’s about linking the scales wherever you’re working”. This required using the right tool at the right scale and in the right market. Many interviewees thought that small- and large-scale development could complement each other, for example, that large-scale development could be “locally driven”, or that large amounts of combined small-scale development could be just as transformational as large-scale development. But another view was that the blurred lines between small- and large-scale development—for example, where small-format buildings are combined, or large-scale buildings are designed to look small and incremental—contributed to the “disappearance”, exclusion, and prevention of a middle tier of development.

Some participants expressed negative views about small-scale development. The argument was that smaller projects “don’t have the scale that enables you to do anything creative” (and in fact small-scale development can often rely on “cookie cutter” models as a cost-saving strategy). Small projects also fail to attract investment, some argued, since “the bigger a project is, the more likely somebody is to invest in it”. Another interviewee argued that the power of an “investment display” was especially the case in a “bad neighborhood”, where a large-scale project “can disproportionately change the perception or the narrative”. A small project, on the other hand, is “like a needle in a haystack [and] is going to get

lost, nobody's going to care about it". Thus, more effort is required with small projects to overcome negative perceptions.

On the other hand, respondents argued that large-scale development translated to boiler-plate projects and that there was an unfortunate trend whereby "a small handful of global development and consulting firms [replicate] the same large-scale development schema across the world". In turn, "this results in cities chasing the big, shiny silver bullet-type assets". While it is true that big projects can sometimes be more transformational, small-scale projects exert a "domino" effect that just relies on "having the first domino drop". Small-scale development was also thought necessary "to both seed larger-scale development and/or to complement larger-scale development". The "complement" translates to small-scale infill around large-scale development which "makes development stick".

Some study participants viewed small-scale development as the key to improving affordability: "When you're doing parcel aggregation, you're just driving the price up, and then only institutional investors can afford it. But when you break it up, you bring down the price point of each one, and it democratizes the development process". This not only "allows more entities to be doing development at the same time", but it allows "more development to happen". Small-scale advocates insisted that smaller developments have larger returns "because they're affecting a market and a demographic of people that are not being addressed in terms of the supply and demand chains of housing and rental properties". Some participants made a further connection between scale and gentrification: "I really think real estate for regular people—incremental development—is a way to combat gentrification [because it gets] more of [housing development] in the hands of people".

4.3. Barriers

Interviewees were asked to identify what they believed were barriers to small-scale development. Two main barriers were identified: access to capital and zoning. In communities that have experienced systemic disinvestment—particularly those with a high percentage of people of color—respondents noted that both factors have operated as tools of oppression that continue to disproportionately impact those communities. Participants argued that lack of "access to low-cost money to small entities, especially those that don't have a long track record", amounted to a significant disadvantage. Together these barriers painted a picture of "too many forces conspiring against successful small-scale development in this country".

In conversations about access to capital, many interviewees discussed the differences in financing opportunities between "hot" and "cold" markets, and that the usefulness of incremental development toward social equity goals depended on market conditions. In areas where appraisal or market values facilitate private financing, respondents noted that very little incremental development would be considered "affordable". But for areas where appraisal/market values are low and there is an underserved rental market, then there is a potential for incremental development to increase affordability.

Interviewees were especially cognizant that lack of access to capital disproportionately excludes people of color from small-scale development efforts. Lenders were often cited as a significant barrier: "There are some lenders I've talked to who don't do anything under \$50 million. It's kind of their low end". If a builder needs these "basic thresholds" in order "to get in the game", this means that "you have to build big". One participant wondered how it would even be possible to finance a \$10 million project, and that "if you can't get a formal lender involved", loans would need to be obtained from "informal sources".

Small-scale development was thus seen as being thwarted by an inability to be competitive and working at larger scales allows certain economies to be realized: "the smaller-scale projects have the permitting and engineering drawings and process requirements of 300-unit projects" and without "economies of scale, there's no way to make it happen". Participants argued that the costs of small- and large-scale developments can be quite similar, which indirectly incentivizes the expansion of a development project. When the cost of adding additional units is just a matter of materials and labor but does not re-

quire additional permitting or other regulatory processes, developers are incentivized to maximize their investments as much as possible by expanding their projects.

Comments about access to capital were frequently tied to the issue of appraisals—both in terms of low appraisals that make it hard for small-scale developments to receive financing and in terms of neighborhood property values increasing rapidly alongside new development. Appraisals were said to follow dominant “narratives” about a particular neighborhood, which were sometimes racially coded and operated as key determinants of whether a market was considered “hot” or “cold”. One respondent lamented that “the appraisal process doesn’t look at what the person can afford, it only looks at the value of what’s around it” and that this amounted to “modern-day redlining”. Some interviewees saw the potential of small-scale development to reverse the trend, that although “Black and brown communities are being squeezed even more on appraisals than communities that are of a different color”, there was also some hope that “if you have enough people operating and developing one-to-four unit properties [on] the same block, we’re fighting that [trend]”.

Respondents discussed the extra level of effort that small-scale development takes, and that “if you wanted to do small scale, how much more effort that is” since “sometimes it’s easier to do it in large batches than to try and cut things down”. One respondent added, “if you’re going to develop 40 acres, it may as well be 4000 because the litigation will cost you about the same. And the environmental process will take about the same amount of time”. In the end, the required “responses to local regulation, habits, and culture” has the effect of “tilting people toward larger enterprises”.

The pressing need for zoning and regulatory change was cited by almost all respondents. Participants stressed the importance of small-scale developers being able to develop by right, since “as a small developer. . . we don’t have an unlimited number of personnel and resources at our disposal to throw at problems”. Instead, “we have to figure this stuff out within a relatively small team” and “we constantly are hitting up against the limits of, unfortunately, exclusionary zoning laws”. This amounts to “just all of this stuff that doesn’t allow the type of housing choice and the type of development that as a small developer, I want to include”. The “development review cycle” is “skewed towards favoring large developers”, support that is inherently oppositional to small development and obscures how communities might collectively enhance the built environment through coordinated development efforts.

Further, these regulatory burdens disproportionately impact “lower income tiers” and people of color, “which is exactly the population that we need to take advantage of development opportunities”. Many also complained about minimum parking requirements, that “the biggest impingement on development is the requirement to store vehicles on private property”, and that changing those rules would “go the furthest to changing development potential outcomes to do better things”. Parking requirements translate to driveways and other space needs that can make projects larger.

4.4. Solutions

Respondents were asked to offer advice on how to make small-scale development easier and how barriers to small-scale development could be overcome. In addition to changing the zoning rules discussed above, a recurring idea was that there is a need to educate the general public about how development works, and that this would help change the narrative that “all developers are evil” and that “they’re coming to take all your land”. In part, this was seen as a matter of training a new brand of developer, creating “a significant new cohort of developers that don’t have the habits of conventional development”. One participant said that if more people were educated about how project finance works, whereby knowledge of development finance extended beyond “just taking out a mortgage”, then there would be “a change of mindset about what development is, and who it’s for, and what it can do for all of us”.

While the need to reform zoning was often cited, there was also a common sentiment that anyone interested in small-scale development should not wait for regulatory reform to occur. One respondent argued the importance of “just getting started”, and the need to start small and “build your following”, such that, “like moths coming to a light”, people will “just show up” because they “want to be part of something good”. This self-activation sentiment was often tied to some iteration of the phrase “no one is coming to save you”, meaning that neighborhood change cannot wait for policymakers and/or large-scale developers to “swoop in”, that people need to “reclaim their own neighborhoods” and “work at the fine-grain level of [one] building at a time”.

There were varied opinions on the use of subsidy to support small-scale development. One small-scale developer cautioned to “avoid needing to use grants and other subsidy things” because “it’s going to be a headache, it’s going to double the time it takes you to complete a project” and that there is value in “seeing what is able to be accomplished at market rates”. But other respondents thought that small-scale developers ought to be given the tools and support they need to undertake small-scale projects. They noted that incremental development works best when small developers work in coalition with one another and are connected to a larger network of people completing the same task, and that there should be support for creating such networks. Some saw the need for “some subsidy to help [create] a mentor—mentee scenario” that puts “some type of coaching mechanism in place”. The building of “an economic cluster of people in the building trades” and creating a “small developer network” was seen as a “way to solve the wealth gap”. The emphasis should be on fostering a long-term, community-oriented commitment to neighborhood stewardship.

5. Conclusions

Scale is a significant although understudied dimension of cities. The purpose of this research was to probe what scale-related differences are and what they mean from the point of view of urban actors involved in the development process. The findings are not meant to be generalizable—they are meant to flesh out a range of possible opinions and insights. The goal was to uncover the perspectives of a wide range of stakeholders, some “pro” small-scale development and critical of large projects and others less involved in the promotion of small-scale development.

The main take aways from this study are as follows. First, there is a wide range of scale definition and frequent emphasis on the relative and contextual nature of scale, such as city size, market condition, and type of use. Respondent conceptions of scale included not only building characteristics like square footage and height but financial considerations and project timing. However, despite the complexities reported by respondents, the conversations continued in a way that seemed to indicate that there was an implicit understanding of what “small scale” vs. “large scale” meant.

Second, respondent views supported the prevailing writing on small-scale development, especially that it should be valued for its positive neighborhood impacts, affordability, and ability to counterbalance the homogenized nature of large projects. On the other hand, many respondents also recognized the value of large-scale development as practical, cost-effective, and beneficial for job creation and economic growth. Countervailing ideas were also expressed, i.e., that small-scale development is sometimes ineffective for meeting revitalization goals, and that large projects are boiler-plate in comparison. There was also the view that small- and large-scale development could be complementary.

Third, small-scale development faces significant barriers that mostly revolve around problems with access to capital, which includes the appraisal process, and zoning regulations. Here our survey adds to an existing body of research identifying the financial and regulatory challenges of small-scale development. In both of these types of barriers, the effects are thought to disproportionately impact people of color. Interviewees pointed to failures on the part of the government to understand what small developers require and that there is a need to educate planners and elected leaders. Participants argued that

small-scale developers need to be able to realize their projects “by right” because, in comparison to large-scale developers who have more resources, they are less able to overcome regulatory hurdles. Small-scale development that is “by right” and tied to a comprehensive plan with a broader vision might help give small development the city-wide support it needs to withstand microscale democracy.

Fourth, two main solutions to the problem faced by small-scale developers include increasing public awareness of the value of small-scale development and providing direct support to small-scale developers. On the first point, a recurring idea was that the public needs to be educated about the value of small-scale development. This would not only build advocacy for systemic reform but help the public see developers in a more positive light. On the second solution, some respondents argued that small-scale developers ought to be given direct support for undertaking small-scale development projects and building local networks. A countervailing view was also expressed: that direct subsidy can be harmful because small-scale developers need to learn how to navigate the market on their own.

Given the wide range of perspectives involved, further investigation is needed to determine how scale might support planning goals like sustainability, livability, affordability, and social diversity. What is the connection between scale and local investment, support for small businesses, and community cohesion? Residents, designers, and policymakers should be better able to comprehend the effects of suggested scale modifications.

Following Jane Jacobs’ seminal work, urbanists have long promoted the advantages of small-scale urbanism, criticizing the drawbacks of large-format “mega” development and suggesting that the most resilient and sustainable neighborhoods are those that grow or regenerate on a small scale. Large-scale developments—well-capitalized mixed-use projects and other large-format urban schemes—are viewed as the antithesis of Jane Jacobs’ philosophy of incremental change, and misaligned with the goals of resilience and sustainability. It is easy to agree, but it is important to understand that there is a significant amount of complexity and nuance involved in the question of scale.

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Appendix A. Interview Protocol and Topic Guide

Preamble

We are investigating issues surrounding scale and urban development: the pros and cons of large-scale versus small-scale projects. We are interviewing developers, city planners and policymakers, community organizations, scholars, and other urban stakeholders to better understand the social, economic/financial, and aesthetic implications of both incremental and large-scale development.

Please interject with any questions you may have during the interview, and you are free to end the interview at any time.

Please state your name and describe your position or role and how long you have been working in this field.

- Scale definition and preference

For Developers:

Would you describe the projects you work on as generally small scale, large scale, or a mix?

Prompts: Can you describe these projects in more detail, such as in the average number of units, number of lots, the usual square footage, or other metrics? Do you prefer working at a particular scale, and if so, why?

For Everyone:

In very broad terms, compared to historic patterns, urban development projects appear to be increasing in scale, with large-scale projects becoming more and more the norm.

As we are just beginning this study, we are currently defining small scale as projects undertaken by a single owner or small company, involving a single building with fewer than eight units or under 50K square feet. Would you define things differently, and if so, why?

(If asked, a definition of 'large scale' can be 10+ stories or multiple buildings.)

Do you have any general thoughts on the pros and cons of the trend toward larger-scale development? *(the order of the following questions can be based upon the interviewee's initial response here).*

Prompts: Are there projects you have worked on or cases you are familiar with that have led you to this opinion?

- Financial issues

Proponents of large-scale projects claim they provide an economic boon to cities. Critics argue that mega-projects often perform poorly in economic terms and consistently occur major cost overruns, and therefore are risky for both the public and private sector. What are your thoughts or experience with this?

Prompts: How have large-scale projects you've been involved with performed in economic terms?

- Was their economic performance above or below expectations?
- Were there cost overrun issues on these projects? If so, to what degree?

Part of the economic argument for mega-projects is job creation, both for short-term construction jobs and longer-term office and retail positions. What are your thoughts or experiences with this?

Prompts: In the large-scale projects where you've been involved:

- Have the promised construction jobs been delivered?
 - Were promises made to "hire local"? If so, were these promises followed or were developers held accountable?
- Were the office and retail jobs created on par with what was projected?
 - In terms of numbers?
 - In terms of (living) wages?
 - Were promises made to "hire local" or set aside space for locally owned businesses? If so, were these promises followed or were developers held accountable?

Concerning large-scale developments, some argue that they are currently necessary to coordinate the large amounts of capital needed for public infrastructure (gray/green/social/etc.) investments. What does your experience tell you about that claim?

Prompts: Have large-scale projects you've been involved with delivered on their promised infrastructure improvements?

Some argue that the requirements of private-sector financing inhibit small-scale and encourage large-scale development. What role do you see financing play in terms of the general scale at which developments get built?

Prompt: *do you feel current financiers and lenders facilitate developments at one scale while making projects at a different scale more difficult to realize?*

- *[If financing is named as a hinderance to smaller-scale development] what do you believe can be done, if anything, to change the current situation?*
- Housing and equity

Proponents argue large-scale luxury development directly and indirectly increases the production of new affordable units. Critics claim that the affordable housing produced by mega-projects is usually scaled back after initial promises, or only provided for a limited duration (Atlantic Yards in Brooklyn, for example).

What are your thoughts or experience with this?

Prompts: In the large-scale projects where you've been involved:

- What are the direct and indirect relations to affordable units?
- Have the promised affordable housing components been fully delivered?
- Of the affordable units delivered, for how long will the units remain affordable?
- Design issues

In terms of design, critics allege that mega-projects tend to be “dominated by bulky buildings” and produce a global “Generic City” in contrast to buildings of various ages and sizes that provide “central cities their ambiance and opportunities”.

What are your thoughts or experience with this?

- Policy

Some researchers and urbanists have argued that smaller and mezzo-scale development should be more of a priority and focus of subsidies for city governments. What are your general thoughts on the matter given your experience in the field?

Many argue that regulation in zoning and building codes make small-scale development and renovation prohibitively expensive, which encourages both the deterioration of older buildings and large-scale new development. What role do you see regulation playing in terms of the general scale at which developments get built?

What are ways you believe policies or plans can better support development at various scales?

- Ways to support small scale? (or to support better outcomes for small scale?)
- Ways to support large scale? (or to support better outcomes for large scale?)

What role do you believe the public visibility of larger-scale projects plays in politicians and policymakers attitudes towards them? What about for developers? For non-profit and community organizations?

Do you have any other experience relating to promoting, funding or building public infrastructure (broadly defined)?

Are there any important questions concerning this topic that I have not asked, or important aspects we have not discussed?

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