New Zealand Sociology
2024, Vol. 39, No. 1, 22–38

Generational Conflict and Middle-Class Decline in Higher-Density Housing Debates

Morgan Hamlin*

Abstract
Utilising the pragmatic sociology of critique, this article qualitatively analyses how middle-class housing activists publicly oppose or support higher-density housing or intensification in the Auckland Unitary Plan. With growing concerns about inter-generational housing inequalities and the impacts of intensification, there has been a rise in resident opposition groups and pro-development activists who clash in public debates. While these groups are often in conflict with each other, this article seeks to understand how they both invoke public justifications to go beyond their personal interests in housing and to also reveal the broader political and economic drivers of the housing crisis, which are not widely discussed by these activists. Exposing the broader issues underlying intensification and the housing crisis, such as middle-class decline, helps contribute to a less divisive public discourse that highlights the shared concerns of housing activists while going beyond polarising generational narratives.

Keywords: generational conflict; housing activism; intensification; middle class; sociology of critique

Introduction

The rising cost of housing and living has "squeezed" the middle class (Curtis et al., 2020; Mishel & Shierholz, 2013; Quart, 2018) and is contributing to inter-generational inequalities, conflict and public debate (Eaqub & Eaqub, 2015; Holleran, 2021, 2022; Hoolachan & McKee, 2019). However, when middle-class citizens publicly debate what to do about housing issues, they often avoid discussing the broader economic and political drivers behind housing, such as low wages, inequality and the financialisation of housing, which contribute to middle-class decline (Holleran, 2021, 2022). They tend to favour narrower generational explanations or urban planning arguments, which do not fully address the causes of middle-class decline and unaffordable housing (Holleran, 2021). Urban planning arguments tend to focus on housing as a technical issue (such as increasing supply through intensification) while leaving untouched the wider economic and political drivers of the housing crisis (Madden & Marcuse, 2016; Malva, 2016; Richardson, 2022; White & Nandedkar, 2021).[1] Furthermore, generational explanations, as Hoolachan and McKee (2019, p. 212) argue, emphasise the agency of Baby Boomers, which "deflects attention from the political structures underpinning these inequalities".

Intensification or urban consolidation is a recent example that has generated disagreement between middle-class citizens. Their concerns are reported in the news media and contribute to public discourses on the housing crisis in a way that avoids broader economic and political explanations (Holleran, 2021; Hoolachan & McKee, 2019). In Aotearoa New Zealand, as I will discuss, higher-density housing proposals have sparked conflicts between younger (Millennial-age) citizens who are pro-growth and older (Baby Boomer) homeowners who oppose intensification. These conflicts tend to centre on technical arguments

* **Morgan Hamlin** is a lecturer at Open Polytechnic | Te Pūkenga.
Email: morgan.hamlin@openpolytechnic.ac.nz

[1] The "housing crisis" is a contested term, especially in Aotearoa New Zealand, as some people (like investors and some homeowners) benefit from rising house prices while other people are unable to afford a house or the cost of rent (Malva, 2016). When house prices started to significantly increase in the 2010s, the conservative National-led government denied there was a crisis while the opposition parties increasingly mobilised the term to discuss unaffordable housing (White & Nandedkar, 2021).

relating to the negative impacts of intensification, the (undemocratic) planning process and generational arguments, which are used to draw attention to the challenges younger people have in buying affordable housing.

In this article, I focus on how the pragmatic sociology of critique can contribute to critical theories of middle-class housing activism that go beyond inter-generational conflicts and focus on the wider economic and political drivers of housing inequality (Cole, 2017; Holleran, 2021; Hoolachan & McKee, 2019; Madden & Marcuse, 2016). Middle-class housing activism is a relatively under-researched form of political action (Polanska et al., 2019) and is increasingly important with the growth of *YIMBY* ('yes in my backyard') social movements (Holleran, 2021, 2022) and the declining prosperity of the middle class, both in Aotearoa New Zealand (Cotterell, 2017; Curtis et al., 2020; Eaqub & Eaqub, 2015; Rashbrooke, 2013, 2021) and internationally (Davey, 2012; Derndorfer & Kranzinger, 2021; Koch et al., 2021; Mishel & Shierholz, 2013; Quart, 2018). I demonstrate how the pragmatic sociology of critique can reveal how housing activists go beyond their personal interests by invoking public justifications and how it can also be used to connect their disparate concerns to a shared, broader issue in society; namely, middle-class decline. Identifying the shared concerns of middle-class activists reveals the broader issues in housing debates, which are not often publicly debated by these activists, and contributes to a less-divisive public discourse on intensification and housing that goes beyond polarising generational arguments that blame the Baby Boomers for unaffordable housing (Cole, 2017; Holleran, 2021; Hoolachan & McKee, 2019). I also add to a growing literature that is applying justification theory and the sociology of engagements, both of which are approaches within the pragmatic sociology of critique, to urban sociology (Blok & Meilvang, 2015; Eranti, 2017; Hamlin, 2022). My research reveals how an individual interest's mode of valuation can be used strategically by supporters to gain support for intensification; that is, this mode of valuation does not always describe opponents as being self-interested or making self-interested claims, as previous research suggests (Eranti, 2017).

Empirically, I examine the claims made in the news media for and against intensification in the proposed Auckland Unitary Plan from late 2015 to early 2017. This period marked the mobilisation of generational arguments by housing activists as they engaged in debates relating to the implementation of the Unitary Plan. To analyse the housing activists' arguments, I utilise two approaches within the pragmatic sociology of critique: Eranti's (2017) modes of valuation framework, and justifications analysis (JA), a complementary methodology recently developed for analysing public justifications in disputes (Ylä-Anttila & Luhtakallio, 2016). This is an important case study because it marks the starting point of a conflict between middle-class housing activists in a city that is experiencing urban sprawl and a housing crisis.

Opponents and supporters raised awareness of intensification as a public issue that went beyond *NIMBY*ism ('not in my backyard') and their personal interest in housing: opponents of intensification focused on urban planning arguments and an undemocratic planning process while supporters focused on affordable housing and the collective benefits of intensification. Neither group questioned the underlying drivers of the housing crisis; nor did they address housing as a political and economic problem (Madden & Marcuse 2016). However, the arguments of both opponents and supporters reveal a shared concern with declining middle-class prosperity. Young people express concern based on housing affordability and difficulties they face becoming homeowners (Holleran, 2021), while homeowners are concerned with the value of their house, a focus linked to beliefs about threats to their socioeconomic status and the role of their neighbourhood as a place that aligns with their identity (Matthews et al., 2015).

I begin by reviewing the literature on middle-class housing activism as it relates to housing intensification and the generation of conflict. Next, I outline my theoretical approach, methods and case study. I then examine my findings in terms of how opponents and supporters of intensification justified their claims and how their arguments reveal a concern with middle-class decline. I conclude by discussing

how the pragmatic sociology of critique can be used to understand middle-class activism and housing issues in a way that connects their concerns with the wider political and economic forces in society.

Middle-class housing activism and intensification

Urban intensification is now a widely adopted planning strategy (Ruming, 2014), but recently it has become an issue for middle-class citizens. To understand middle-class activism over intensification, I briefly outline resident opposition to it, the meaning of middle-class activism, and the emergence of pro-development housing activists.

Resident opposition and middle-class activism

Citizens often have mixed views on intensification (Ruming, 2014), and in the anglosphere, there is still a preference for low-density standalone houses, which helps explain why residents might oppose higher-density (medium- and high-density) housing (Bryson, 2017; Doberstein & Li, 2016). There is a range of factors that influence the acceptability of intensification, such as people's understanding of community and their "aspirational norm of owning a detached dwelling and large section" (Opit et al., 2020, p. 124); citizens' policy knowledge (Ruming, 2014); class identity (Matthews et al., 2015); perceptions of affluence, safety, privacy and space (Doberstein & Li, 2016); and "social, cultural, and financial attachments to the home" (Cook et al., 2013, p. 133).

Opposition to intensification tends to come from middle-class housing activists. Like previous research on middle-class housing activism, I use the term 'middle class' in the broad sense of people who are either homeowners or live (or want to live) in wealthy suburbs, are well connected and who work in professional occupations (such as urban planner) (Holleran, 2021; Matthews et al., 2015). The *middle class* can be defined as people who are in the middle of a class structure that consists of the capitalist class who own the means of production and who have high levels of capital (economic, social and cultural) and the working class who have lower levels of capital and expertise (Ongley, 2011; Savage et al., 2013). People who are middle class do not own large businesses or the means of production, but are "materially advantaged" professionals, lower-level managers or small business owners (Ongley, 2011, p. 150) who also have moderate amounts of economic capital (such as a house or savings), and higher amounts of social and cultural capital and higher education levels than working-class people (Savage et al., 2013). I expand on the meaning of middle-class activism in the rest of this section.

Middle-class housing activists are often homeowners who are concerned about the value of their homes (Cook & Ruming, 2021) or residents who feel that a new housing development would threaten their attachments to their home or community (Cook et al., 2013). Opponents to intensification are also middle class in the sense that they are often well-connected, affluent and/or live in wealthy suburbs (Holleran, 2021; Matthews et al., 2015). In the context of financialisation, where homes are increasingly seen by investors, homeowners and potential homeowners as investments, homeowners sometimes become involved in activism against intensification or other threats to their investment, which makes them middle-class housing activists or "investor-activists" (Cook & Ruming, 2021). Matthews et al. (2015, p. 68) claim that homeowners see their homes as a reflection of their socioeconomic position, which means that they would likely oppose any development that would threaten their class identity and their neighbourhood's identity as a place for "people like them". The importance of class position means that adding conditions to a development to make it more attractive to existing residents who do not materially benefit from it (such as employment opportunities, public parks, leisure and/or educational, healthcare or transport facilities) is usually not sufficient to stop opposition or gain acceptance from homeowners (Matthews et al., 2015).

In spite of the importance of class position, opponents mobilise arguments that are not class-based, even though the homes they are protecting are a significant financial asset. One reason for the mobilisation of these arguments is that the homeowners are seeking to distance themselves from NIMBYism and arguments based on self-interest (Ruming et al., 2012). Indeed, residents and homeowners regularly argue that intensification negatively affects urban character via increased traffic and reduced privacy (Matthews et al., 2015; Ruming et al., 2012; Williamson & Ruming, 2017). In other cases, opposition groups do not oppose intensification directly, but oppose planning processes and the perceived "loss of urban democracy" (Ruming, 2014, p. 41). In other words, opponents usually invoke common good principles that are not based on class or individual self-interest (Eranti, 2017).

Pro-development housing activists

In contrast to opponents, intensification is being supported by some citizens and groups who seek more affordable, market-rate housing options close to public transport and/or the inner city where there is often easier access to employment compared with suburbs on the edges of cities (Holleran, 2021). The phrase YIMBY is often used as a self-styled term by activists who are pro-development and as a label in popular and academic discourse (Holleran, 2021; Wyly, 2022). Pro-development citizens and groups are often called YIMBYs as, according to Lake (2022, p. 331), they advocate "the removal of regulatory constraints on housing production" to help increase supply and improve affordability. The YIMBY movement tends to be middle class in the sense that it emerged in the early 2010s from Millennial renters who wanted more market-rate housing (not public housing) in wealthy suburbs (Holleran, 2021). YIMBYs appeal to middle-class groups concerned with homeownership rather than homeless people or people excluded from market-rate housing (Holleran, 2021). YIMBYs also tend to be "well-paid professionals" (Wyly, 2022, p. 319) with a university education and some have urban planning backgrounds (Holleran, 2021).

While pro-development activists advocate more market-rate (middle-class) housing to help improve affordability by increasing supply, they also tend to mobilise arguments that are not class-based. Holleran (2021) notes that homeownership is class-based, but housing debates are framed by YIMBYs as generational battles between older Baby Boomers and younger Millennials. In general, scholars agree that there are two reasons why pro-development activists do not use class-based arguments. First, Holleran (2021, p. 848) claims that YIMBYs tend to use a generational framing as a strategic move because "universal middleclass-ness is a cherished fantasy frequently drawn upon in political debates." Second, as Teresa (2022, p. 310) argues, the YIMBY "deregulatory project misrecognises NIMBYism as a cause of housing problems rather than a symptom of them". That is, a deregulatory approach aligns with "capitalist land development" (Teresa, 2022, p. 308). Such alignment means that NIMBYs and other actors seeking to restrict intensification are targets for pro-development activists rather than the underlying problems within society, like low wages, income inequality, the financialisation of housing, neoliberalism or gentrification (Malva, 2016; McLeay, 2022).

Methodology

The surfacing of generational arguments over a proposed intensification plan provides an opportunity to utilise the pragmatic sociology of critique, which refers to a broad research programme initially developed by Boltanski and Thévenot in the 1980s (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991). The *pragmatic sociology of critique* focuses on the critical capacities of ordinary people as they engage in disputes, justify their actions and critique other people (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999). Specifically, I utilise Eranti's (2017) *modes of valuation framework* (based on the sociology of engagements and justification theory) and *justifications analysis* (JA; based on justification theory) as the method of analysis (Ylä-Anttila & Luhtakallio, 2016). The *sociology of engagements* was initially developed by Thévenot (2007, 2014) and is partially based on his earlier work on justification

theory with Boltanski (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991). Urban scholars using justification theory have argued that effective arguments in urban planning disputes often involve combining justifications in strategic ways (Holden & Scerri, 2015; Holden et al., 2015). Actors often combine justifications or make justifications compatible with each other to anticipate critiques from others (Luhtakallio, 2012). For example, Holden et al. (2015, p. 464) claim that during the planning process for Melbourne's Docklands redevelopment, there were public arguments that it needed to provide community services and facilities (civic justification), take on board the views of the community (domestic justification), and to be designed in a way that was not a "soulless place" (inspired justification). As a result of these criticisms, the supporters of the project combined their market justification for the redevelopment with civic, domestic and inspired justifications to gain support for it. The sociology of engagements extends justification theory by outlining three modes of valuation (common good justifications, individual interests and familiar affinities) that actors commonly draw on when they engage in a conflict or dispute (Eranti, 2017, 2018).

To understand the modes of valuation framework and JA, I outline Boltanski and Thévenot's (1991) original justification theory as it underpins these methods of analysis. *Justification theory* has been used to examine disputes where people justify their arguments or criticisms by referring to common good principles that are relevant to the dispute (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999). Common good principles allow actors to "converge towards a common definition" of a situation and to assess the value of relevant people and objects (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999, p. 361). Boltanski and Thévenot (1999, p. 359) originally identified six commonly used justifications (from their reading of classical political philosophy texts), which they called "orders of worth". These orders of worth are "market" worth (based on price), "industrial" worth (based on productivity and/or efficiency), "civic" worth (based on collective or public interest), "domestic" worth (based on esteem and/or reputation), "opinion" worth (based on renown), and "inspired" worth (based on "grace, nonconformity, creativeness") (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999, p. 368). In later developments of the theory, they also identified a "green" order of worth, which is based on the environment or ecology (Thévenot et al., 2000, p. 241).

The sociology of engagements, including Eranti's (2017) modes of valuation framework, is underpinned by the ideas of engagement and valuation. *Engagement* can be understood in terms of how people engage with their environment or world in various ways (Thévenot, 2014). This form of engagement is understood in terms of communication—not only in the narrow sense of exchanging information, but in terms of participation in a "common matter" (Thévenot, 2007, p. 411). There are three main forms of engagement identified within the sociology of engagements: publicly justifiable action oriented to the common good; familiarity or the expression of emotions and the valuing of emotional connections to people, places and things; and individual interests (Eranti, 2018). Eranti (2017) explains that engagement is also based on a mode of valuation— a way of valuing people and things in a situationally correct way. These are not the only forms of engagement or modes of valuation (Centemeri, 2017; Thévenot, 2014), but they have been identified by Eranti (2017) as being relevant for understanding land-use disputes.

The pragmatic sociology of critique can also be used to understand processes of *politicisation*; that is, how people contest the meaning of an issue or depoliticise it by limiting opportunities for contestation (Luhtakallio, 2012; Thévenot, 2014). In justification theory, politicisation is understood in terms of arguments that raise an actor's personal concerns to a more general or abstract level—the level of the common good and the conflict between principles (Eranti, 2018). In the sociology of engagements, politicisation is understood as not only a conflict between principles, but also a conflict of interests or preferences that are articulated and contested by actors (Eranti, 2018). For example, an actor might claim to represent the interests of a local community, which is an "interest-holding actor" (Eranti, 2018, p. 59). While familiar affinities are sometimes used to politicise land-use disputes (Blok & Meilvang, 2014), they are not widely used (Eranti, 2017). In my case study, familiar affinities were not used as a mode of valuation. There could be many reasons why familiar affinities were not invoked by the actors, but one possible reason

is my focus on claims made in news items, which could, as Eranti (2017) suggests, make it difficult for actors to make claims based on their attachments.

Method of analysis

My analysis focuses on news items for several reasons. First, the news media continues to be an important part of the public sphere (Luhtakallio, 2012) and this is where the claims by opponents and supporters were primarily publicised. Secondly, news items provide a valuable source of information for examining conflicts over intensification (Raynor et al., 2017). As Ylä-Anttila and Luhtakallio (2016) note, the mass media are an important discursive field where competing claims are presented and justified based on moral principles. Finally, there is precedence in sociology for the utilisation of justification theory in the analysis of news media content (Gladarev & Lonkila, 2013; Luhtakallio, 2012; Ylä-Anttila & Kukkonen, 2014).

To analyse the arguments in the news items, I combined JA with Eranti's (2017) modes of valuation framework. My first step was to identify 'claims', the basic unit of analysis in JA (Ylä-Anttila & Luhtakallio, 2016). Ylä-Anttila and Luhtakallio define a *claim* as a public act. Such an act "can be a statement to a reporter, but also, for instance, a speech, a published report, a letter to the editor or a demonstration. Thus, a typical newspaper article contains numerous claims by different actors" (Ylä-Anttila & Luhtakallio, 2016, p. 4).

This article is primarily based on a qualitative analysis of 72 online news items on the proposed Unitary Plan from 2015 to 2017.[2] As I discuss below in the case study section, I selected 2015–2017 as this was when opponents began to publicly oppose Auckland Council's decision to allow for further intensification and it was also when supporters of the Unitary Plan began to critique the opponents. I analysed the claims made by supporters and opponents of the proposed Unitary Plan. As my focus is on middle-class citizens and housing activists, I excluded politicians who voiced a political opinion on the Unitary Plan. I identified six groups (consisting of eight representatives or individuals aligned with these groups) who opposed intensification, and 12 groups (consisting of 24 representatives or individuals aligned with these groups) who supported it. There were 31 claims made by opponents in 28 news items and 52 claims made by supporters in 44 news items. While the number of opponents is lower in the news items, many of them are representatives of large resident associations or opposition groups.

As part of a larger research project on housing opposition in Auckland, this article also draws on data collected from interviews with residents and activists who were opposed to the Unitary Plan (Hamlin, 2022). My research for this article includes interviews from 11 participants. Seven of the participants were opponents and residents who engaged with consultation processes or were part of neighbourhood associations or opposition groups; the remaining participants were residents who had opinions on the Unitary Plan/intensification but were not active members of an opposition group. Ethical approval for the research and interviews was approved by The Open Polytechnic's Ethics Committee. Using snowball sampling, interviews were used to triangulate the concerns of respondents with the claims made by opponents in the news items. The concerns in the interviews were selected by closely reading the interviews in relation to the themes identified from the media items. Additionally, I used the various public documents from the Independent Hearings Panel and legal proceedings to understand the controversies evident in the claims from supporters and opponents of intensification.

I used the modified coding framework outlined by Ylä-Anttila and Luhtakallio (2016) to analyse the claims. This involved closely reading the news items to identify the modes of valuation within each claim (Eranti, 2017). I initially coded the claims with descriptive labels and grouped them into categories and themes (Ylä-Anttila & Luhtakallio, 2016). The claim-maker (speaker) and addressee were also identified.

[2] I used Google's news search engine to create a list of news items. I then read through this list to identify the news outlets (seven in total) and to exclude any items that were from blogs or other types of websites. I then searched the individual news sites to double check for any news items I might have missed using Google's news search engine.

Then I conducted deductive coding, which is an interpretative process, by labelling a claim with a relevant mode of valuation and taking notes on it. For the public justifications, I labelled the claims with one or more of the seven predefined theoretical categories/orders of worth. Selecting a relevant order of worth involves taking notes on how the claim relates to the elements within an order of worth and making a note on whether the orders of worth are referred to in a positive (+) or negative (−) way (Ylä-Anttila & Luhtakallio, 2016). The elements within an order of worth are outlined by Thévenot et al. (2000, p. 241) and they provide a framework for understanding each order of worth and how they are used to evaluate people, things or situations. For example, the market order of worth evaluates worth based on "price", "cost" or the "economic value of goods and services" as the mode of evaluation (Thévenot et al., 2000, pp. 240–241). A relevant form of proof in the market order of worth is money and people are "qualified" within this order of worth as "customers", "consumers" or "sellers" (Thévenot et al., 2000, p. 241). The final step involved performing a quantitative overview of the claims to identify the predominant justifications and main themes from the online news items. I counted the claims within each theme from the online news items and the orders of worth I had coded. An overview of the claims (combined into themes) and orders of worth from the opponents and supporters are presented in Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

Case study

Auckland is Aotearoa New Zealand's most populous city, with a population of approximately 1.7 million. In 2012, the newly amalgamated Auckland Council released a 30-year strategy called the Auckland Plan, which predicted a need for 400,000 new houses to be built in Auckland by 2040 to accommodate an expected population increase of one million people (Auckland Council, 2012). To support the vision of the Auckland Plan, the proposed Unitary Plan, which is the long-term planning document for the amalgamated Auckland Council, was developed with public consultation. A hearings process on approximately 80 topics began in 2014 and concluded in July 2016.[3] The hearings process was carried out by the Independent Hearings Panel to make recommendations on the proposed Unitary Plan to Auckland Council and to ensure the public could provide input (*Albany North Landowners v Auckland Council*, 2017). The Independent Hearings Panel was appointed by the Minster of Conservation and the Minister for the Environment and was independent from Auckland Council (Auckland Unitary Plan Independent Hearings Panel, 2024). During a hearing on the topic of urban growth, two expert groups found that the number of dwellings in the proposed Unitary Plan was not enough to meet the projected population growth; that is, they predicted that 400,000 dwellings would be needed, not 213,000, which is what the proposed Unitary Plan had identified (*Albany North Landowners v Auckland Council*, 2017). The difference between the 400,000 dwellings identified in the Auckland Plan and the 213,000 identified in the proposed Unitary Plan appears to be based on the different methods used for estimating residential capacity. According to the Auckland Unitary Plan Independent Hearings Panel (2016a, p. 49) the proposed Unitary Plan used a method that "relied on the theoretical capacity enabled by the Unitary Plan, rather than on a measure of capacity that . . . appears commercially feasible to supply". In response, Auckland Council filed evidence to allow for greater intensification than in the proposed Unitary Plan as initially notified by Auckland Council, which would increase the number of dwellings (*Albany North Landowners v Auckland Council*, 2017).

Auckland Council's decision to allow greater intensification after the hearing on urban growth in December 2014 became an issue at the hearing on residential zones in October 2015. Resident groups argued against further intensification as "out of scope" and supporters argued that Auckland Council's decision was "in scope" (*Albany North Landowners v Auckland Council*, 2017, p. 26). Ultimately, when the

[3] The topics were based on the structure of the proposed Unitary Plan and a coding framework used by Auckland Council (Auckland Unitary Plan Independent Hearings Panel, 2024).

Independent Hearings Panel released its report in July 2016, it recommended allowing increased residential intensification as the provisions of the proposed Unitary Plan would not be sufficient for Auckland's projected population growth as outlined in the Auckland Plan (Auckland Unitary Plan Independent Hearings Panel, 2016a, 2016b). Opponents disagreed with the Panel's recommendations and engaged in legal action against Auckland Council's decision by appealing to the High Court, which released its judgement in early 2017. The High Court dismissed the appeals regarding further intensification being out of scope.

The issue of out-of-scope changes to intensification was reported in the news media. Many opponents and residents from the affected suburbs were concerned that the public were not able to voice their concerns through a consultation process on the proposal to increase intensification in their suburbs. The opposition led to supporters of intensification critiquing the opponents in the news media and publicly supporting greater intensification in the proposed Unitary Plan.

Opposition to intensification

In popular and academic discourse, opposition to intensification is often characterised in terms of NIMBYism (Ruming et al., 2012), but my analysis reveals that opponents mobilised public justifications that avoided arguments based on individual interest. They mobilised public justifications that focused on the planning process and the impacts of intensification on urban character and infrastructure. However, while they avoided using self-interested modes of valuation, the justifications reveal a concern with declining middle-class prosperity. This concern manifested through comments relating to protecting property values and perceived threats to middle-class identity and belonging.

Intensification and the planning process

When the proposed changes to increase intensification were released publicly, opponents mobilised public justifications to critique the (un)fairness of the process and the inadequacy of public consultation processes. While some opponents expressed concerns about the status of urban character, the majority of claims related to the planning process. Participant five explained that they focused on the process as they believed that community consultation was a reasonable expectation to have as the proposed changes would shift their suburbs from having a "predominantly suburban character to something that was an apartment block/urban character". This concern with the process is not unique to this case and reveals how opponents attempt to distance themselves from the NIMBY label by utilising what Ruming (2014, p. 39) calls "complex points and modes of resistance which extend beyond NIMBYism".

In the news items, opponents primarily mobilised civic justifications to critique the planning process as undemocratic. Some claims were combined with domestic (urban character) and industrial justifications that focused on whether the planners had adequately researched the impacts of intensification or overestimated their population projections (see Table 1). However, the primary focus was on what they believed was an undemocratic process. Some residents were surprised to learn about out-of-scope changes that did not allow for further public submissions; that is, only people who submitted evidence in the earlier process were able to submit on the out-of-scope changes. Claims that these out-of-scope changes were undemocratic were underpinned by civic justifications that focused on inclusivity or fairness (for example, informing or consulting residents of the changes) and the right to an official or legal challenge that was being denied to citizens through the out-of-scope changes. These claims emphasised that urban planning should be democratic or inclusive of public input.

Table 1. Justifications and denunciations in the news items

Claims coded	Justifications invoked	Denunciations invoked
Undemocratic planning process (24 claims)	Civic: 24 Domestic: 6 Industrial: 3	Market: 2
Impact of intensification (7 claims)	Industrial: 4 Domestic: 3 Civic: 2	Market: 1

The impacts of intensification

There were some claims that went beyond the planning process by primarily critiquing the impacts of intensification via domestic/heritage and industrial/infrastructure justifications (see Table 1). In the domestic order of worth, reputation and heritage are highly valued, and as such, changes to a suburb's character, especially when residents oppose the changes, can be a justification to oppose intensification. Urban heritage matters also connect with industrial or urban planning justifications in the sense that rules and regulations for protecting heritage (including design guidelines) can dovetail with domestic justifications. Opponents claimed that building multi-storey buildings in suburbs that are predominantly made up of older single-storey houses could change the character of the suburbs if it was done inappropriately or in an unplanned manner. My interviewees raised similar issues by describing how the Unitary Plan's proposal for intensification did not consider heritage and visual character concerns in certain suburbs. As visual character was perceived as a significant change for residents, some interviewees believed that it required careful planning and consultation with residents.

Beyond the heritage arguments, a small number of opponents focused on the negative impact intensification could have on infrastructure. These claims used an industrial justification to point out the constraints in the existing infrastructure and whether intensification beyond what was earlier planned for could be justified on planning grounds. There was a concern among opponents (including the participants I interviewed) that intensification would increase the number of residents in a suburb, which would increase pressure on such local infrastructure as roads, traffic and wastewater. This concern with infrastructure helped to highlight that additional intensification could either not be justified or would have a negative impact on residents.

Housing affordability is a topical issue in Auckland, but only one opponent made this claim. They claimed that intensification would not necessarily lead to more affordable housing as the supporters of intensification were claiming. As land is expensive and the building process is costly, they stated that housing would remain unaffordable for many people. This type of argument potentially opens for debate critiques of the high cost of housing and is connected to issues like the financialisation of housing and associated concerns around housing inequalities (Madden & Marcuse, 2016). However, the critique of market-based justifications for intensification and affordability was only one claim, and it was combined with a heritage/domestic-based critique of intensification. As discussed below, opponents might be reluctant to draw on affordability arguments if they are concerned about the value of their home decreasing.

Intensification and middle-class decline

Opponents mobilised public justifications that did not challenge the political and economic drivers of the housing crisis, but their arguments reveal a concern with declining middle-class prosperity, an issue based on the belief that intensification will affect property values. The objections to the planning process can be understood in the context of affected citizens wanting to protect the value of their homes through a democratic consultation process that is responsive to the concerns of residents. Homeowners are often

concerned that intensification will have a negative effect on house prices in their area due to smaller houses being built, which can attract renters or change the suburb's reputation, and the possibility of affordable or social housing being built by the government or community providers for lower-income residents (Cook et al., 2013; Ruming, 2014). If the consultation process was democratic, homeowners could potentially halt or influence intensification in their suburbs, which they believe would protect the value of their house (Cook & Ruming, 2021).

The connection between the opponents' critique of an undemocratic planning process and house values was revealed in their concern that the process favoured the government and property developers who wanted to increase intensification. For example, when the High Court revealed its judgment on the out-of-scope issue, one opponent claimed that, although they accepted the findings, they believed "the council reacted to the massive pressure it was under from the development lobby and denied 29,000 ratepayers any form of natural justice" (Hughes, cited in Collins, 2017, para. 12). There were no other claims that decision-makers were being influenced by property developers or other vested interests. Such interests can, however, be understood as a critique of commercial interests (a critique of the market order of worth) in a planning process that was perceived to be democratic (civic worth). The issue of commercial interests from institutional actors taking priority over the concerns of residents was not widely discussed publicly, but it was an issue that surfaced in my interviews with opponents and homeowners. For example, participant five believed that "vested interests, council and central government wanted to put a lot more intensification into Auckland and they were going to do it in the quickest way they possibly could." Opponents might not have had evidence to pursue this belief regarding vested interests from institutional actors, but it suggests that homeowners are concerned about the value of their homes and are advocating a consultation process that is not influenced by actors who have a commercial interest in intensification (that is, the government and property developers). Homeowners could also have a commercial interest in intensification in the sense that they could financially gain by redeveloping their land with higher-density houses or selling their property (Cook & Ruming, 2021). However, my participants wanted to continue living in their low-density homes and so their main concern appeared to be with large-scale intensification from institutional actors negatively affecting their suburbs, which could lower the value of their house.

The issue of declining middle-class prosperity is linked both to declining property values and to perceived threats to residents' middle-class identity and sense of belonging. As discussed above, some opponents claimed that intensification would have negative impacts on their neighbourhood's character and infrastructure. While identity and belonging were not explicitly discussed by opponents, these antagonists did link the negative impacts of intensification with threats to middle-class identity and belonging. Issues like increased traffic and a change in the visual character of a neighbourhood were accepted by respondents as being a disruption to a middle-class lifestyle that low-density living enables. As Cook et al. (2013) explain, privacy, sunlight, lower traffic congestion and other values associated with low-density housing are often perceived by residents as being threatened by higher-density housing. When neighbourhoods change too drastically, some residents can feel like they no longer identify with their home's location; that is, it no longer aligns with their socioeconomic position or how they see themselves (Matthews et al., 2015).

Support for intensification

Like the opponents to intensification, the supporters primarily invoked civic justifications and tended to avoid market or class-based critiques of the existing housing crisis—even though they were making housing affordability claims. The supporters were also concerned with declining middle-class prosperity, a focus expressed through concern with affordability and homeownership and not the protection of house values. Rather than focusing on the planning process, the majority of the supporters of intensification concentrated

on the benefits intensification would provide by invoking civic and industrial justifications. The supporters also mobilised generational arguments, which can be understood as an interests-based mode of valuation. The interests-based valuation was used to strengthen their claims for affordable housing and compact cities by politicising intensification as a generational conflict and by lebelling the opponents as uninformed and self-interested NIMBYs.

The benefits of intensification

I identified two primary arguments from the supporters: an affordable housing argument and an argument for compact cities. Some supporters also made claims regarding green justifications for compact cities and market justifications regarding how intensification might improve housing choice and economic growth. However, these were positioned within affordability and compact city arguments that avoided critiquing market-based justifications of the housing crisis. An outline of the justifications in the news items is provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Justifications in the news items

Claims coded	Justifications invoked
Affordable housing (13 claims)	Civic: 13
Compact city (8 claims)	Industrial: 7 Market: 2
Combined benefits of intensification (11 claims)	Civic: 9 Market: 8 Industrial: 6 Green: 3
Public participation in the planning process (2 claims)	Civic: 2

Supporters invoked a civic justification to claim that enabling intensification through the Unitary Plan would increase the number of dwellings, which would help improve affordability. The basic idea underpinning their affordability argument was supply and demand and how more housing relative to demand would help lower prices by making housing less scarce (these pro-market arguments are outlined at the end of this section). Supporters also acknowledged that intensification and the proposed zones would allow different types of houses to be built on smaller sections of land compared with the existing zones, which would also help lower prices. Underpinning these claims was a civic justification that valued housing in terms of equality and collective well-being. Supporters claimed that the proposed plans for intensification and zoning would improve equality in the housing market in the sense that more people could afford to own a house or have access to more affordable rents in the city compared with the existing zones that restricted intensification and helped keep house and rental prices high. This would also help improve the collective well-being of Aucklanders who would not have to be homeless, leave the city, or accept poor or unhealthy housing conditions. For example, as the Coalition for More Homes (2016, para. 7) put it: "Everyone deserves a safe, healthy, and affordable place to live. But housing options in Auckland are becoming too scarce and too expensive."

The second primary argument for intensification, which was underpinned by an industrial justification, focused on the benefits of Auckland becoming a compact city. Supporters claimed that intensification provided a long-term plan for Auckland that would benefit future generations by increasing the number of dwellings close to where people want to live—specifically, jobs and amenities—and transportation hubs. There were a couple of market-based claims within this compact city theme that

pointed to greater housing choice in suburbs zoned for intensification compared with low-density zones. However, the primary focus was on evaluating intensification in terms of it being suitable for long-term planning and providing houses that meet the needs of citizens in the future.

To further support their affordability and compact city arguments for intensification, some supporters incorporated market and green justifications. These justifications focused on how the housing crisis might be mitigated without addressing the market-based inequalities or wider economic drivers of unaffordable housing (such as commodification or financialisation of housing). Supporters claimed that intensification would help improve affordability by increasing supply while providing greater housing choice compared with low-density zones. Supporters also claimed that intensification would help grow Auckland's population and its economic productivity. Some other claims also included green justifications that highlight how intensification can help reduce traffic congestion and urban sprawl.

Intensification as a generational battle

To reinforce their affordability arguments, supporters politicised intensification as a generational battle, which can be understood as an interests-based mode of valuation. This generational battle theme consisted of 18 claims. It was used to construct the issue of intensification and the planning process as a conflict between the housing preferences of younger (Millennial-age) supporters who want more affordable housing in low-density areas and older (Baby Boomer) opponents who want to maintain the status quo of low-density housing. The primary argument from opponents was that the planning process was undemocratic, but supporters framed this argument in terms of individual interests by claiming that the consultation process favoured older homeowners over younger renters. Some supporters believed that opponents criticised the democratic aspects of the planning process to resist change and delay intensification. These claims, therefore, created an interests-based argument that was based on a 'generational battle' theme about housing preferences and the perceived generational conflict during the public meetings.

While invoking the generational theme, some supporters claimed that the voices of younger supporters in the planning process were drowned out by homeowners and well-resourced groups who had more time than younger people did. While this would appear to be a civic-based public justification, supporters did not critique the process per se. Rather, they criticised the older homeowners who did participate, and voiced support for young people agitating for affordable housing and compact cities. They claimed that many young people did not have the time to participate as they were trying to find additional income to pay for high rents. For the young people who did participate at the public meetings, some experienced heckling when they commented on the age issue and the issue of housing affordability for young people.

Supporters also politicised intensification as a battle between Aucklanders who support intensification and self-interested NIMBYs who oppose it. The issue of NIMBYism helped to politicise supporters' call for more affordable housing and planning for a compact city by highlighting that, fundamentally, opponents to intensification did not want Auckland to change. As one supporter claimed:

> The city they're fighting for is one that essentially remains the same. That would suit them. Many already own quarter acre museum piece villas. But it would essentially erect a NO VACANCY sign above the city, beaming directly into the eyes of the young and the poor; anyone who doesn't already own a home here. (Grieve, 2016, para. eight; capitals emphasis in original)

NIMBY arguments like this helped supporters bring attention to the affordability issue by framing it in terms of a battle between the interests of well-resourced NIMBY homeowners and non-homeowners who aspire to own a home in the city.

Opponents were not only labelled as NIMBYs who did not want change, but also as having uninformed views on urban planning. Some supporters invoked NIMBYism to criticise opponents as lacking evidence for their claims. This helped to reinforce the need for intensification by stating that the claims for conserving low-density housing were based on NIMBY self-interest and not urban planning evidence. For example, one supporter stated that "homeowners revealed themselves as significantly misinformed about the effects of zoning past, present and future" and that "it's time that the voices of the informed . . . are heard and valued" (Sayes, 2016, para. 13). While there were only two media items that explicitly claimed that opponents were not basing their arguments on evidence, they fed into the broader theme of opponents being self-interested NIMBYs who were trying to conserve their preferences for low-density housing.

Conclusion

With the rise of YIMBY housing activism, sophisticated forms of community opposition to intensification, and concerns with middle-class decline, it is important to understand how middle-class housing activists are contributing to the public discourse on intensification and the housing crisis. Middle-class decline is one shared concern faced by housing activists seeking to either protect their property's value or to advocate affordable housing. However, these groups tend to mobilise a generational framing or technical, urban planning arguments, which downplays the broader political and economic drivers of the housing crisis, such as financialisation, inequality and low wages (Madden & Marcuse, 2016; Teresa, 2022).

My research demonstrates that the pragmatic sociology of critique can help understand how middle-class activists debate intensification. My findings highlight that an individual interests mode of valuation is not always based on the self-interest of the actors making the claims (as we might expect in NIMBY conflicts) (Eranti, 2017). Rather, intensification was constructed by its supporters as a conflict over individual interests to gain support for intensification from young citizens or renters who want more affordable housing in low-density suburbs. These suburbs are perceived to be dominated by older (Baby Boomer) homeowners and NIMBYs. This finding highlights the different ways that intensification can be effectively politicised as a public issue depending on the system of valuation that is used (Centemeri, 2017; Eranti, 2017). In this case, individual interests dovetailed with civic and pro-market justifications for intensification in the sense that the people demanding affordable housing (young people and renters) were being denied this by older (Baby Boomer) homeowners, who are perceived as restricting the supply of housing.

My findings add to critical theories of middle-class housing activism by revealing that while supporters and opponents have different aims, both groups are raising public awareness of intensification in ways that do not challenge the broader political and economic drivers of the housing crisis. By avoiding broader political and economic arguments, the relationship between housing and societal issues is obscured in public discourses on intensification. For opponents to intensification, it is understandable that critiques of market-based justifications were not mobilised as these activists have an interest in protecting their middle-class identity and property values in their neighbourhood. Moreover, opponents often distance themselves from the NIMBY label and attract wider support by critiquing the planning process (Ruming, 2014). However, focusing on technical, urban planning arguments does not clearly reveal opponents' concern about potentially declining property values from intensification and wider issues associated with this, such as middle-class decline. For supporters who are concerned with affordability and an eroding middle-class (Holleran, 2021), invoking broader economic and political arguments could be more effective

for explaining their concerns. As Madden and Marcuse (2016) argue, unaffordable housing is not simply linked to the economics of supply and demand, as it relates to a range of broader issues in capitalist societies (such as financialisation and class conflict) and the politics of housing.

My findings also add to critical theories of middle-class activism by revealing how both supporters and opponents of intensification have shared concerns with declining middle-class prosperity. As urban intensification is a complex issue, arguments on middle-class decline help raise awareness about the broader political and economic drivers of unaffordable or commodified housing (Madden & Marcuse, 2016). Highlighting the connections between housing and broader societal issues helps to reveal the shared concerns between housing activists with opposing positions and contributes to a less divisive public discourse on intensification that goes beyond polarising generational debates.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Hollie Russell and Oliver Guthrie for their research assistance, the reviewers for their helpful comments, and the interviewees for participating in this research.

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