



The Language and Meaning of Density

Introduction

One of the enduring themes behind the search for more sustainable urban forms is that of the density of development. Whether the debate has been about urban forms in general, or more particular arguments about the compact city, higher densities are seen as a significant component in achieving sustainable development (Jenks *et al.*, 1996; Urban Task Force, 1999; Williams *et al.*, 2000). While, in the UK at least, the idea is embodied in policy (DETR, 2000a, b; 2001), and in practice for new development (ODPM, 2003), the idea is not as straightforward, or new, as the many proponents would have us believe. Breheny (1997) noted rightly that while density is now top of the list, it is somewhat of a 'lost art'. There are certainly many questions to resolve. If sustainable development is so dependent on higher densities, then the question is higher than what, and what does it mean? Is there any link between the different physical forms implied by higher densities and what is claimed to be its benefits? Indeed, is density a meaningful concept when it comes to suggesting standards for development, and the form it may take?

This chapter concentrates on the density of housing in the UK, and the attempts through time to set and maintain density