How Sociotropic Aesthetic Judgments Drive Opposition to Dense Housing Development

David E. Broockman* Christopher S. Elmendorf† Joshua L. Kalla‡

January 12, 2026

Abstract

Voter opposition to dense housing development contributes to America's housing shortage. Prevailing explanations emphasize homeowner self-interest and "NIMBYism." We argue that sociotropic aesthetic judgments powerfully shape housing policy preferences. First, as motivation, we show that homeowners in already-dense areas largely support dense development in their neighborhoods, contrary to prevailing theoretical predictions, and that their distinctive aesthetic tastes likely contribute. Second, our evidence suggests that many voters oppose development due to *sociotropic aesthetic concerns*: for example, most voters think dense development doesn't aesthetically "fit" in less-dense neighborhoods, even other than their own; likewise, people in dense neighborhoods are *more* supportive of dense development *on their own block* than in low-density neighborhoods. Finally, descriptively and with experiments, we show that aesthetic concerns are widespread, not pretextual, and causally affect support for development. Our findings offer a new lens for understanding housing policy preferences and suggest novel solutions for addressing America's housing shortage.

*Associate Professor, Travers Department of Political Science, University of California, Berkeley. dbroockman@berkeley.edu, https://polisci.berkeley.edu/people/person/david-broockman.

†Martin Luther King Jr. Professor of Law, University of California, Davis. cselmendorf@ucdavis.edu, https://law.ucdavis.edu/people/christopher-elmendorf.

‡Associate Professor, Department of Political Science and Department of Statistics and Data Science, Yale University. josh.kalla@yale.edu, https://joshuakalla.com.

"We must act to prevent an ugly America." - President Lyndon B. Johnson[1]

America's housing crisis is one of Americans' top concerns: Americans consistently rank living expenses as their top concern, and housing costs represent families' largest financial obligation.[2] The high cost of housing traces its roots in large part to restrictions that local and state governments place on new housing supply—particularly on high-density development such as apartment buildings in high-demand cities and neighborhoods. Research demonstrates that such restrictions have led housing prices to more than double in many areas (Glaeser and Gyourko 2018; Phillips, Manville and Lens 2021), intensified residential segregation (Trounstine 2020), and constrained economic opportunity (Schleicher 2017).

Politicians may support restrictions on high-density development in part because their constituents demand them (Hankinson and Magazinnik 2023; Sahn 2025). But why do so many Americans oppose new housing development, particularly dense development in existing neighborhoods? Two explanations predominate. First, homeowning "homevoters" are thought to oppose new housing supply in order to preserve or increase their property values (Einstein, Glick and Palmer 2019; Fischel 2001; Marble and Nall 2021).[3] Second, homeowners and renters alike are thought to oppose new housing in their homes' immediate vicinity—a phenomenon known as NIMBYism (Not In My BackYard) (Einstein, Glick and Palmer 2019; Hankinson and Magazinnik 2023; Larsen and Nyholt 2024*b*; Marble and Nall 2021; Mast 2024; Sahn 2025). "NIMBYs" may worry about nuisances from construction, crowding of schools or streets, or, more darkly, about the racial or economic backgrounds of new residents (Trounstine 2020).

However, recent research suggests that these "homevoter" and NIMBYism explanations are incomplete. Several papers find small differences between homeowners' and renters' attitudes

[1]See https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-university-michigan.

[2]E.g., https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/10/03/most-americans-continue-to-rate-the-us-economy-negatively-as-partisan-gap-widens/.

[3]As we discuss below, which housing policies would be most in homeowners' true financial self-interest is sometimes unclear, but existing literature broadly assumes homeowner self-interest is anti-development.

towards development (Larsen and Nyholt 2024*b*), or even that homeowners are *more* supportive of development than renters (Elmendorf, Nall and Oklobdzija 2024*b*). And while NIMBYism is certainly a real phenomenon, there are also many instances of voters supporting new housing near them, opposing new housing far from them, and being sensitive to other features of proposed developments (Larsen and Nyholt 2024*b*; Sahn 2025), suggesting it is not the whole story.

In this paper, we argue that *sociotropic aesthetic judgments* also powerfully shape the public's housing policy preferences. People form aesthetic judgments regarding potential new developments, such as whether they think it will be visually appealing in the context of existing buildings nearby. We argue that these aesthetic judgments inform voters' preferences about development. Moreover, we argue that these aesthetic judgments are meaningfully sociotropic: voters' aesthetic tastes shape their support for development both in their own neighborhoods and elsewhere. Understanding these tastes is important for understanding housing politics, especially as the locus of political conflict over housing shifts from one-off, discretionary decisions about whether to approve specific proposed developments, to citywide and statewide policies that apply prospectively across broad geographic areas (e.g., broad-based upzonings), and which voters (through ballot measures) and their representatives in legislatures increasingly weigh in on.

We support this argument with a variety of evidence. First, motivating our analysis, we show that homeowners in dense areas are highly supportive of new apartments in their neighborhoods. "Homevoter" and "NIMBYism" theories would predict the opposite: that homeowners in dense areas should be the *most* opposed to new development in dense areas, as this creates new supply in these voters' "own backyard." But we show that owning a home in a dense area reveals a taste for density that may drive these voters to support further increases in density. On the other hand, they and other voters largely oppose new apartment buildings in single-family neighborhoods, where apartment buildings would not visually "fit in." Indeed, people who live in dense areas are *more* supportive of dense development *on their own block* than in low-density neighborhoods.

We replicate these findings in an experimental vignette, and show that sociotropic aesthetic

concerns are a likely mechanism. Consistent with NIMBYism, this vignette finds that respondents support development more when it takes place in other neighborhoods than in their own. However, the effect of information about the existing density of those other neighborhoods is even larger than this "NIMBY" effect: respondents are generally not supportive of apartment development in less-dense neighborhoods, which we show may be because they think it is aesthetically displeasing for tall buildings to be built in low-density contexts, where they do not visually "fit." This suggests that some patterns previously attributed to NIMBY concerns from voters in low-density neighborhoods may at least partly reflect sociotropic judgments: voters generally think high-density development does not "look right" in low-density neighborhoods, regardless of whether that neighborhood is their own. Further consistent with sociotropic reasoning, respondents also often oppose proposals that would reduce local negative externalities from new housing when these would harm new residents.

We then present a variety of descriptive and experimental evidence that aesthetic concerns are widespread, not pretextual, and causally affect support for dense development. First, the same experimental vignette shows that cues about the likely aesthetic quality of a new development heavily influence support for it, with the magnitude of this effect being generally far larger than manipulations that tie into alternative explanations for opposition to development. A second vignette finds similar results using photographs of apartment buildings of varying aesthetic quality. Second, descriptively, we show that a meaningful share of people state an aesthetic dislike for tall buildings in cities and that they perceive apartment buildings as ugly; in both bivariate and multivariate analyses, these aesthetic tastes are typically far more predictive of support for developing new apartment buildings than measures of other beliefs, attitudes, and preferences, such as beliefs about the relationship between development and prices or racial attitudes. Next, an experimental manipulation shows that opposition to development is actually stronger for similarly-sized office developments, suggesting that a broad class of explanations for opposition to development that are specific to housing—such as the demographics of its residents—are likely insufficient to explain

opposition to new housing. Finally, we show that a video which depicts new apartments as ugly reduces support for upzoning cities for new apartments, while videos cueing other reasons to oppose housing generally have more limited effects.

We close by discussing the potential political and policy implications of our results. Most notably, in recent years, state and federal policymakers have often sought to increase density in "exclusionary" low-density residential neighborhoods as a way to increase housing supply. Our results suggest that creating pro-supply policies in a manner sensitive to voters' aesthetic judgments, including voters' distaste for anomalously tall buildings in neighborhoods of single-family homes, could make a pro-housing agenda easier to enact and more politically sustainable.

Sociotropic Aesthetics and Opposition to Dense Development

A burgeoning literature considers why voters so often oppose new housing development. This literature largely centers two explanations: homeowner self-interest ("homevoters") and opposition to housing nearby ("NIMBYism"). However, recent research suggests that these explanations are likely incomplete. Homeownership often does not meaningfully predict housing policy preferences, or even predict them in the expected direction (e.g., Broockman, Elmendorf and Kalla 2025; Elmendorf, Nall and Oklobdzija 2024*b*; Larsen and Nyholt 2024*b*). NIMBYism is certainly a real phenomenon, as demonstrated in studies that carefully track public participation (Sahn 2025) and that manipulate the location of a proposed project (Hankinson 2018; Hankinson and de Benedictis-Kessner 2024; Larsen and Nyholt 2024*b*). But there are still many voters who do not behave consistently with the theory's predictions, such as voters who voice support for housing near them. Moreover, to find that many voters have NIMBY tendencies still leaves open questions regarding the source of their concern about new housing and, relatedly, how these concerns may be mitigated.

We argue that *sociotropic aesthetic judgments* also powerfully influence support for housing development and housing policy. There are multiple reasons to expect *aesthetic judgments* to influence housing policy preferences. First, aesthetic judgments are *easy*. Whereas understanding the

implications of housing policy for one's financial self-interest almost certainly requires effortful System 2 thinking, humans form judgments about whether they find visual stimuli aesthetically appealing automatically (Leder et al. 2004). Even broadly applicable state housing policies often make it easy for voters to envision the kinds of projects that may result, as they target specific kinds of neighborhoods and set dimensional limits on construction. For example, it is easy to imagine what it would look like to construct an 8-story building next to a subway stop or in a neighborhood of single-family homes. Consistent with psychological theories of attribute substitution (Kahneman and Frederick 2002), a voter considering a policy to allow 8-story buildings near transit stops or near single-family homes might thus mentally "substitute" complex calculations about the costs and benefits of this policy with a simpler question: do I like how that would look?

Second, manifold evidence suggests that people care a great deal about aesthetics both in general and in the context of housing specifically in their role as consumers. Psychology research finds that people derive pleasure from viewing aesthetically pleasing stimuli (Berlyne 1971), a fact that manifests in housing markets in the premium buyers are willing to pay for homes with better views or superior architecture (Ahlfeldt 2013; Ahlfeldt and Holman 2018; Carlino and Saiz 2019). The ease with which people form aesthetic judgments and the obvious importance of these judgments when people act as consumers of housing suggests that aesthetic judgments may also powerfully affect their housing policy preferences in their role as voters.[4] And cities certainly act as if voters care about the aesthetics of new development: Scheer (1995) finds that more than 95% of large cities (population $> 100,000$) and 80% of all cities have enacted design-review procedures and standards.

Of particular relevance to housing policy, homebuyers have also been shown to value *aesthetic homogeneity*: they are willing to pay more for houses on blocks with dwellings more similar to each other in terms of style, size, and height (Lindenthal 2020, see also Stamps 1994; 2000; 2011).

[4]To be clear, we do not see these two reasons as exhaustive: there may be other reasons why people value aesthetics, too.

Indeed, the Federal Housing Administration's (1936) infamous underwriting manual instructed underwriters that homes which visually "conform[] to other houses in the neighborhood" and in neighborhoods where there is a "harmonious relationship between properties" are more valuable. The preference for aesthetic homogeneity people exhibit when they act as consumers may create a barrier to dense development in high-demand neighborhoods when they act as voters: if people like aesthetic homogeneity, this may lead them to object to the construction of an 8-story apartment building in a neighborhood of single-family homes.

Finally, we argue that voters not only care about the aesthetics of new housing in their neighborhoods, but also enforce their aesthetic judgments *sociotropically*. That is, we expect voters to universalize their aesthetic judgments and enforce them through policies that affect housing policy outcomes elsewhere. While this expectation is at odds with much of the housing politics literature's focus on voters' concerns with housing's impact on their own self-interest and neighborhoods, it is consistent with a long tradition of political behavior research regarding the importance of other-regarding, sociotropic considerations in voters' judgments (Kinder and Kiewiet 1981) and the often limited influence of self-interest on public opinion (Citrin and Green 1990).[5] If voters think a housing policy would produce aesthetically displeasing outcomes, we thus expect them to oppose that policy both "in their own backyard" and elsewhere. For example, voters who find tall buildings ugly may not only oppose them being built in their neighborhood, but anywhere. Put differently, just as many voters think others should be granted economic redistribution, they may also think others should live in neighborhoods that voters themselves think are aesthetically pleasing. Such preferences would matter when voting on ballot measures or in elections where broad-based housing policies are at stake, such as whether to upzone commercial corridors or single-family neighborhoods for buildings of certain heights city-wide or state-wide. The trouble, of course, is

[5]Research does find that decisions to take political action are more dependent on whether the policy at stake affects one's self-interest (Green and Cowden 1992), which could help account for why decisions to attend public hearings regarding development are more strongly associated with measures of self-interest (Einstein, Glick and Palmer 2019; Sahn 2025).

that voters may seek to impose their aesthetic tastes through policies (e.g., for low density housing) that they think are proper or good for society writ large but that create significant costs for others.

These lines of reasoning suggest that sociotropic aesthetic judgments could powerfully shape voters' housing policy preferences. While this sociotropic aesthetic judgment argument is novel to the best of our knowledge, several empirical observations support its plausibility. First, recent descriptive research finds that "aesthetics" are the most commonly voiced objection from people who speak against development in public hearings (Martin and Venugopal 2025).[6] Second, anti-development environmental activists of the 1960s and 1970s who successfully downzoned Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York City saw concerns about the environment as intrinsically linked to aesthetics and historic preservation (Anbinder 2023). This linkage is also evident in laws such as the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1970 and its state counterparts such as the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).[7]

Our argument suggests several stylized facts about support for new development with novel implications for housing politics. In this paper, we focus on testing three such stylized facts and corresponding implications.

First, aesthetic tastes vary across individuals—as the old saying goes, "there's no accounting for taste." We argue that *varying aesthetic tastes meaningfully contribute to individual differences in support for development*. Such differences in taste may be far from randomly dispersed across demographics and space. For example, individuals who find density aesthetically pleasing may select into living in dense areas, creating a feedback loop where already-dense areas feature the

[6]Of course, people may *say* that a project is ugly because that's more polite than saying they don't want poor people or Black people as neighbors. Later, we present evidence suggesting that aesthetic concerns are not entirely pretextual. For example, we show that opposition to office buildings is even greater, suggesting that opposition to tall apartment buildings is mostly about the physical structure, not the race of its residents.

[7]The National Environmental Policy Act of 1970 declared a congressional policy to "assure for all Americans safe, healthful, productive, and *esthetically and culturally pleasing* surroundings" (42 U.S.C. § 4331; Pub.L. 91-190, Title I, § 101, Jan. 1, 1970, 83 Stat. 852.). California's Environmental Quality Act likewise determined to "[t]ake all action necessary to provide [Californians] with clean air and water, enjoyment of aesthetic, natural, scenic, and historic environmental qualities, and freedom from excessive noise" (Cal. Pub. Res. Code § 21001(b); Stats.1970, c. 1433, p. 2781, § 1).

highest voter support for further increasing density in their neighborhoods and low-density areas feature the greatest opposition (see also Gyourko and McCulloch 2024; Ternullo 2024; Wicki and Kaufmann 2022). In a motivating example, we show exactly this. More generally, we show that individual differences in aesthetic tastes are highly predictive of support for dense development.

Second, though human beings differ in their taste for tall buildings, we argue that there are some *common features of human aesthetic judgment that create systematic patterns in what kinds of development voters support and where*. We focus in particular on *interactions* between development types and built-environment context in informing people's support for new development. As reviewed above, surrounding context affects how people perceive an object's aesthetics, and the same holds with judgments about new housing—an expectation borne out in studies of home values and non-political consumer aesthetic preferences (Lindenthal 2020; Stamps 1994; 2000; 2011). In particular, we expect voters to be more likely to support new development that "fits in" with its surroundings aesthetically by being similar in height and style to existing nearby development. Such voter preferences, together with the greater taste for density among those who live in already-dense areas, may account for why several recent state laws concentrate upzoning for dense development in already-dense areas.[8]

Several pieces of recent research support this expectation. Pietrzak and Mendelberg (2025) show in a survey experiment that people are more supportive of hypothetical developments that match the height and style of nearby buildings. They also find widespread support for "rules that require new apartments to fit into the existing neighborhood height and style" and historic districting. Stamps (2000; 2014) also finds a strong aesthetic preference for buildings that match others on their block stylistically and are not more than 50% taller, though he does not investigate whether this aesthetic shapes support for development. Relatedly, Larsen and Nyholt (2024*a*;*b*) find that a proposed building's height has a very large effect on support for it being built in one's neighbor-

[8]For example, California's AB 2011 overrides local zoning to allow 5-story apartment buildings, but the project site must be located on a major street and zoned for commercial rather than residential use. Similar commercial-corridor upzoning laws have been passed in Montana, Texas, and Florida.

hood, but that objections to tall buildings attenuate when the respondent lives (and thus the building is being proposed) near existing 5-story buildings. These findings are consistent with our expectations, although they leave several questions open we explore in our work.[9] Most importantly, in addition to replicating these patterns with more precise experimental control and situating them in broader theoretical context, we also provide evidence that geographic sorting by aesthetic tastes contribute to these patterns, evidence on the relative importance of aesthetics versus other considerations, evidence that aesthetic concerns are not pretextual, and evidence that these aesthetic judgments are meaningfully sociotropic in character.

Third, our argument suggests a different lens for understanding the character of much opposition to dense development. We have no doubt that "NIMBY" opposition to dense development in one's neighborhood is important, nor that concerns about the race or class of new residents may play a role in motivating these concerns. However, our argument suggests that an important driver of ostensibly NIMBY concerns is sincere, non-pretextual opposition to dense development that does not "fit in" with its surroundings. That is, part of why people in low-density neighborhoods oppose dense development in their neighborhoods may be because they oppose dense developments in all low-density neighborhoods as a matter of aesthetic principle. This insight is important because it suggests opportunities for increasing support for dense development by locating it in areas where voters expect it to visually "fit in" or by improving its aesthetic quality and fit with surrounding structures. In two experimental vignettes, we show that information about the neigh-

[9] In particular, Pietrzak and Mendelberg asked respondents to "[i]magine you lived in the neighborhood where this proposal is." Some respondents may have imagined themselves as different kinds of people—the kind who would live *in that kind of neighborhood*—depending on the condition to which they were assigned. If so, the estimated effect may not capture the average effect of building design or context on respondent's *own* preferences. Pietrzak and Mendelberg's design also fixes the non-aesthetic attributes of the project, which leaves the relative importance of aesthetic and non-aesthetic project attributes an open question. Larsen and Nyholt (2024*a*;*b*) leave unclear whether the attenuated effect of building height in areas where there are already five-story apartment buildings is due to selection of tall-building-lovers into neighborhoods with tall buildings, or to a general preference of all people that new buildings be similar in height to neighboring buildings. (The authors attempt to examine this question, but lack the statistical power to do so.) Our argument also differs from Larsen and Nyholt's (2024*b*), who interpret their findings as reflecting "a general aversion to changes in the physical character of their neighborhoods" rather than sociotropic aesthetic judgments; in footnote 15, we discuss patterns in our data that distinguish our predictions from Larsen and Nyholt's (2024*b*).

borhood context of a proposed apartment building and its aesthetic quality have a very large impact on support for it, exceeding the effects of nearly all other manipulations we examine. There may also be opportunities to increase support for dense development by improving its aesthetics: providing further causal evidence with a different approach, we show that a video which criticizes the aesthetics of new housing reduces support for development.

In summary, our theory of sociotropic aesthetics argues that voters oppose new development not just out of self-interest or NIMBYism, but because they find certain types of development aesthetically unappealing and seek to broadly enforce these aesthetic preferences through policy. People likely form these aesthetic judgments easily and automatically, making such judgments often more influential than complex calculations about housing's economic impacts, and people apply these judgments both to their own neighborhoods and elsewhere. This theory helps reconcile several puzzling findings in the literature: why even homeowners in dense areas often support new housing in their areas ("YIMBYism"), why voters are sensitive to the existing density surrounding new development, why homeowner status often doesn't predict opposition to housing to the extent expected, why building aesthetically pleasing new affordable housing might increase support for further affordable housing funding (Hankinson, Magazinnik and Sands 2026), and why aesthetic concerns are so commonly voiced in public meetings. In the discussion section, we discuss how understanding the role of aesthetics opens new possibilities for politically feasible housing policies that are sensitive to these aesthetic concerns while still addressing housing shortages.

We next describe our data.

Data

Most of our data is drawn from a survey of $N = 5,999$ respondents recruited from the Prolific platform in summer 2025. For ease of reading, we describe the exact text of survey questions and experimental designs in the results section immediately preceding our use of the relevant data. Briefly, survey respondents first completed an attention check and a series of demographic ques-

tions. We then asked a series of questions about support for new development, described in more detail in the results section. Finally, participants saw two experimental vignettes, also described below. Table A1 shows the demographics of the survey respondents. While the online survey respondents unsurprisingly slightly overrepresent educated voters and Democrats, the sample is diverse and broadly representative of the American population.

Our last set of results is drawn from a second survey conducted on Prolific in summer 2025 ($N = 12,595$). In this survey, respondents completed an attention check, watched one of several randomized video treatments, and then completed several dependent variables and manipulation checks. We provide more detail below, immediately preceding the results from this experiment.

All the studies reported in this paper were IRB approved and pre-registered.[10] All statistical tests we report were pre-registered unless otherwise noted.

Results

Opposition to Dense Development in Less-Dense Neighborhoods: NIMBYism or Sociotropic Aesthetic Judgments?

We begin by demonstrating the importance of voters' and development proposals' neighborhood context for understanding support for dense development, and with preliminary evidence that sociotropic aesthetic concerns—not only NIMBYism—may help explain the relationship between these contextual variables and support for development.

Motivating Example: Who Supports Apartment Buildings In Their Neighborhood? We begin with a simple motivating example inspired by California's recently-passed AB 2011, which allows 5-story housing developments to be built along major commercial streets in urbanized areas. To investigate patterns of support for such a policy, we asked respondents to rate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following statement:

[10] See `https://osf.io/b4gfc/overview?view_only=085110662d274ffba44566e99a64b00b` and `https://osf.io/67eua/overview?view_only=5dfe2518e85d4360a40df6e1c17c49e0`.

> "In cities, 5-story apartment buildings should be allowed to be built along all major streets and in every commercial area."

There were five response options, ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree, which we rescale to 0-1.

On the next page, we also asked respondents whether they thought this policy would apply on their block, based on where they live: "On the previous page, we asked you if you thought cities should allow 5-story apartment buildings along major streets and in commercial areas. Would this policy allow 5-story apartment buildings on the block where you live?" The response options were "Yes," "Not sure" and "No." We also asked whether respondents were homeowners.[11]

Prevailing theories offer two clear predictions: homeowners should be more opposed to the policy than renters ("homevoters") and those who live in affected areas should be more opposed to the policy than those who do not ("NIMBYism").

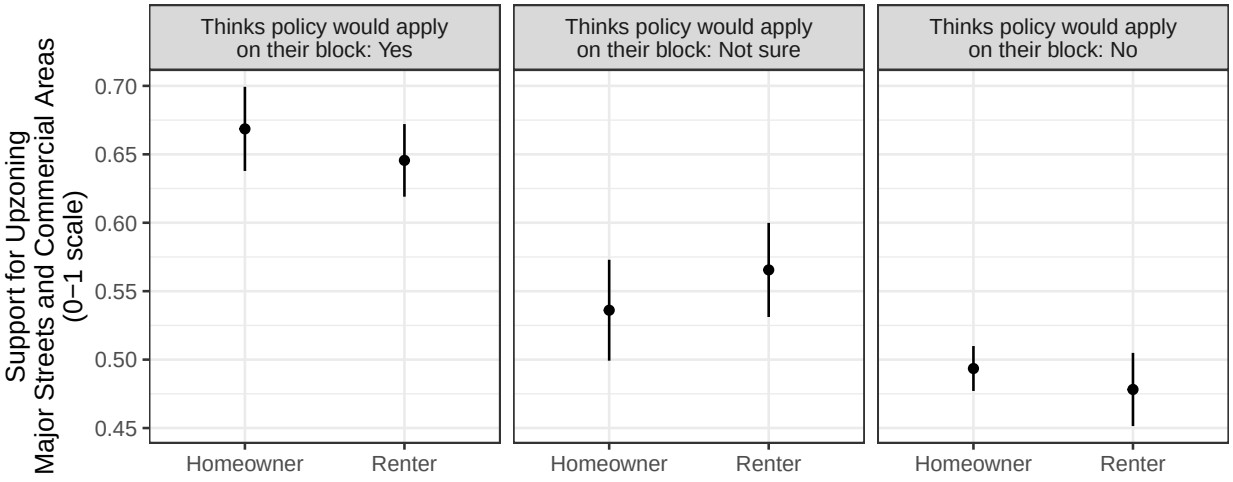
Figure 1 shows support for the upzoning policy broken up by whether respondents thought the policy would allow new 5-story apartment buildings on their block, as well as homeownership status. The patterns of support and opposition defy prevailing predictions. First, respondents who thought the policy would allow new apartment buildings on their block were *more* supportive of the policy than those who did not. Second, homeowners and renters were similarly supportive, with homeowners who thought the policy would apply on their block being, if anything, the most supportive group.[12]

What accounts for these surprising patterns? Our theory suggests two forces may be at work. First, people who choose to live in the already-dense areas where the policy applies may have a

[11]To determine whether someone is an owner or renter, we asked "Which of the following most closely describes your current home?" with answer choices "I own it," "I rent it," "I live as a guest or dependent of friends or family (don't pay rent)," and "Other." For simplicity the Figure uses data only from the former two response options, which represents the vast majority of the data.

[12]These patterns are not driven by correlations between misunderstanding of the question and support for the policy: Appendix Figure A1 shows the results when split by a pre-treatment measure of in which kind of neighborhood the respondent lives (e.g., "Along a major street or in a commercial area" versus other neighborhood types). The results are similar.

Figure 1: Motivating Example: Support for Upzoning Major Streets and Commercial Areas, by Respondent Perception of Whether Policy Would Apply on Their Block and Homeownership



Notes: The Figure shows agreement with the statement "In cities, 5-story apartment buildings should be allowed to be built along all major streets and in every commercial area," split by whether respondents thought this policy would apply on their block (panels) and homeownership status (x-axis). 95% confidence intervals surround means. Appendix Figure A1 shows similar results when split by a pre-treatment measure of in which kind of neighborhood the respondent lives. Appendix Table A2 reports numerical values.

greater aesthetic taste for density, making them more supportive of density anywhere, including on their block (see also Ternullo 2024). Second, all respondents may see 5-story apartments as aesthetically "fitting" well in already-dense areas—regardless of whether they are owners or renters or where they themselves live.

As a preliminary test of our theory's ability to make sense of these patterns, we therefore asked a second question which varied the context in which such a policy would apply:

> "Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: 5-story apartment buildings should be allowed `context`."

`context` was sometimes randomized to read "in cities along major streets and in commercial areas," consistent with AB 2011-style policies. However, `context` also sometimes took on the

values "on blocks like yours, including on your block" or "in every residential neighborhood, including neighborhoods of single-family homes." As in the last question, there were 5 response options ranging from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree," which we rescale to a 0-1 scale for interpretability.

We also asked respondents, "Which of the following best describes where you live?" The answer choices were "Along a major street or in a commercial area," "A short walk from the nearest major street or commercial area," or "Driving distance from the nearest major street or commercial area."

Figure 2 shows mean support for the policy by where respondents themselves said they lived (panels) and the `context` where we told them the policy would apply (x-axis). The patterns are consistent with both of our theory's explanations for Figure 1's surprising findings.[13]

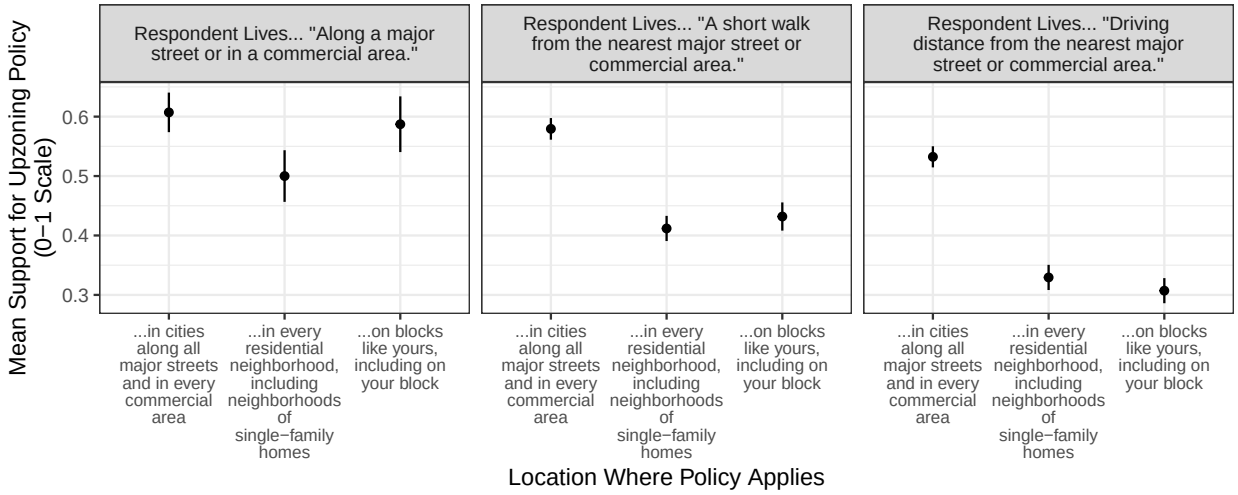
First, respondents who live in the densest areas (left panel) are the most supportive of development, both in their areas and elsewhere. This can be seen by comparing the first two points in the first panel with the first two points in the second and third panels: those who live in the densest areas are the most supportive of development in the densest areas (first point in each panel) and the most supportive of development in less-dense areas (second point in each panel).

Consistent with there being differences in aesthetic tastes between those who live in dense areas, respondents who said they lived "along a major street or in a commercial area" were significantly less likely to agree that "Cities look nicer when they have fewer tall apartment buildings" ($b = -0.07$, $p < 0.001$)—a view we later show is highly correlated with support for development. Figure A3 visualizes this.

Second, though, respondents in every neighborhood type were also more supportive of dense development in already-dense areas: in each panel, the mean for the first point ("in cities along major streets and in every commercial area") is higher than the mean for the second point ("every

[13] Appendix Figure A2 shows similar results when asking about support for developing 4 to 6-unit apartment buildings.

Figure 2: Support for Upzoning, by Respondent Location and Policy Location



Notes: The Figure shows agreement with the statement "5-story apartment buildings should be allowed `context`*.", with responses recoded to range from 0-1. Panels split respondents by their own neighborhood context. Values of* `context` *are shown on the x-axis. 95% confidence intervals surround means. Appendix Table A3 reports numerical values.*

residential neighborhood"). Most strikingly, this includes people who live in dense areas themselves: they were *more* supportive of dense development *on their own block* than in neighborhoods of single-family homes. Later in the paper, we present further results that such patterns may emerge due to aesthetic judgments about buildings "fitting in" with their surroundings.

The third point in each panel reveals how these two forces add up to produce Figure 1's surprising finding: respondents who themselves live "along a major street or in a commercial area" appear to especially support development on their blocks both because they have a taste for greater density and because people generally are more supportive of development in already-dense locations. By contrast, respondents who live in less-dense areas largely oppose dense development on their blocks—not just due to NIMBYism, but also because a) they dislike dense development in general, no matter where it takes place, and b) they, like other people, think dense development does not belong in less-dense areas.

These results highlight how sociotropic aesthetic judgments may help explain previously no-

ticed patterns. In particular, consider findings that American voters (most of whom live in low-density neighborhoods) oppose dense development "in their backyards" (e.g., Marble and Nall 2021; Wicki and Kaufmann 2022). Our results suggest that such opposition might not only reflect NIMBYism (i.e., concern over the hyperlocal negative externalities of new development on traffic, etc.), but also a) that their tastes for density differ and b) that they share other voters' sociotropic aesthetic judgment that high-density development should not take place in low-density neighborhoods (including theirs).

To be sure, these preliminary findings do not definitively establish our account of how sociotropic aesthetic judgments affect housing policy preferences. However, they help establish its initial plausibility and motivate our subsequent analyses.

Experimental Evidence: Vignette 1. We next present our first experimental vignette, which helps further pin down causality regarding the importance of neighborhood context in driving support for dense development, as well as the role of sociotropic aesthetic judgments in driving this finding and support for dense development more generally.

In the first experimental vignette, we asked respondents:

> Imagine there is a large vacant house `Area`. The owner wants to tear it down and replace it with a new 5-story apartment building.

We followed with five bullets describing the proposed apartment building in a randomized order, varying the randomized attributes `Design`, `Tax`, `Parking`, `New Residents`, and `Environment`.

Finally, we asked "Would you support or oppose allowing this apartment building to be built `Area`?" Response options ranged from "Strongly oppose" to "Strongly support," which we rescale to range from 0-1.

The exact text of the randomized attributes is shown in Figure 3. For brevity, we discuss the manipulations and results of each randomized attributes sequentially. Appendix Table A9 presents

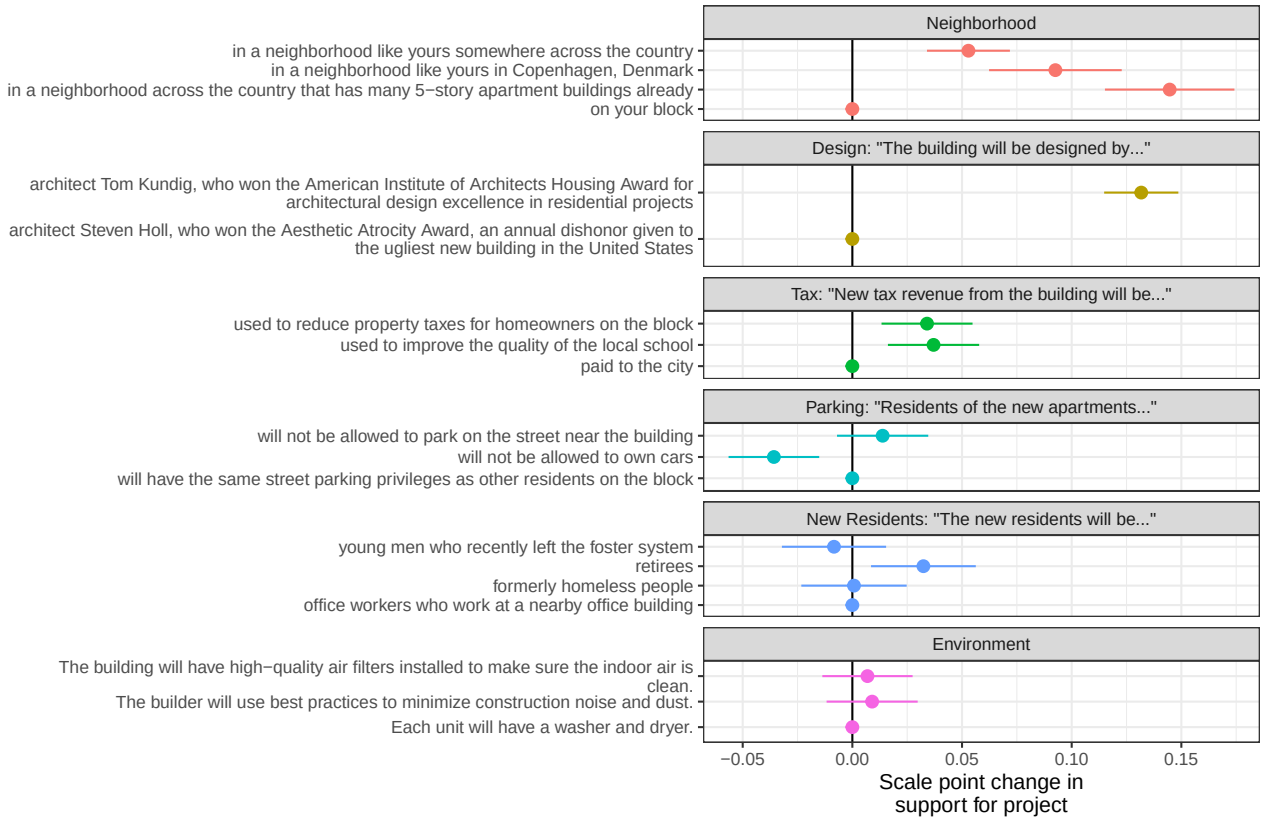
results on mechanism and manipulation check measures.

First, the `Area` manipulation varied the project's location. Consistent with NIMBYism, respondents were 0.05 scale points less likely to support the project on their block than in a neighborhood like theirs across the country. Importantly, though, this difference is around half the size of the 0.09 scale point difference between support for the project in a neighborhood across the country *like theirs* versus one across the country *that already has many 5-story apartment buildings*. The latter difference captures the importance respondents attach to the aesthetic "fit" of the project with its surroundings; it is striking, and consistent with our argument about sociotropic aesthetics, that these spatial fit considerations affect respondent's judgments so meaningfully even when the neighborhoods in question are "across the country." This pattern of results also underscores our point that residents of low-density areas who oppose dense housing in their neighborhoods may do so not only out of NIMBYism, but also out of a genuine opposition to high-density development in low-density neighborhoods like theirs. In other words, previous research has sometimes compared people's reactions to housing proposals on their block or in dense neighborhoods elsewhere and assumed any differences are due to NIMBYism; but these results suggest that fully two-thirds of this difference may actually be due to the differing density of their block and dense blocks elsewhere, not the fact that it is their own block.

Table A9's first row bolsters our interpretation of this result as likely informed by aesthetic considerations: respondents were more likely to say that they "would find the new building attractive" when it was located in a neighborhood that already had many 5-story apartment buildings.[14] Table A10 further shows that these results do not appear to be driven by neighborhood preservationist sentiment (Larsen and Nyholt 2024*a*).[15]

[14]It is possible that voters may oppose new housing in certain neighborhoods other than their own out of fear that it will become a precedent for new housing in their area. Table A9 provides some evidence of this, although we still find that we successfully manipulated perceptions that the proposal would affect one's own block. But it also documents a curious result that many respondents claim that allowing this building in Copenhagen, Denmark would "make it more likely that similar buildings will be built in [their] neighborhood." This suggests that respondents are not so much reasoning about precedent and politics as they are responding expressively to our mechanisms question about

Figure 3: Vignette 1 Results: Effect on Support for Allowing Project



Notes: Each panel corresponds with one bulleted sentence shown in a description of the project, each of which corresponds with one experimentally manipulated factor. The panel titles show the common beginning of the sentence for each experimentally manipulated factor, with the end of each bulleted sentence shown at left. Coefficients are from a multivariate regression predicting responses to the question "Would you support or oppose allowing this apartment building to be built `Area?`*", rescaled to 0-1. The reference categories are shown at the bottom of each panel. 95% confidence intervals surround point estimates. Appendix Table A5 has numerical results.*

Aesthetic Concerns are Widespread and Meaningfully Affect Support for Development

Our previous evidence showed that voters oppose high density development in low-density areas—both their own neighborhoods and others—and say they would find the resulting lack of "fit" between existing and new development aesthetically displeasing. We also found that voters' own aesthetic tastes, as revealed by where they personally choose to live, also predict support for dense development.

Our next set of results seeks to further pinpoint the role of sociotropic aesthetic concerns in affecting opposition to development, demonstrating that such concerns are widespread and meaningfully affect support for development. In other words, they demonstrate that the mechanism of aesthetic objections both has large effects on the outcome of support for development, and is

precedent.

[15]In particular, Larsen and Nyholt (2024*a*) show that respondents are very sensitive to the height of proposed apartment buildings within 10km of their homes. They also find that respondents are more accepting of tall buildings in areas where tall buildings already exist and thus would "fit in" to the build environment, a finding similar to ours. They attribute this tendency to neighborhood preservationism, "a general aversion to changes in the physical character of *their* neighborhoods" (emphasis added). We have proposed that a different mechanism also contributes to this finding: that voters believe public policy should produce neighborhoods that have good aesthetics regardless of where they are. Consistent with our interpretation, Table A10 shows that Larsen and Nyholt's (2024*a*) preservationism index correlates equally strongly with opposition to the proposed project in Vignette 1 regardless of whether it is located on the respondent's own block or in a neighborhood like theirs across the country. Moreover, examining the particular items in Larsen and Nyholt's (2024*a*) preservationism index that generate this relationship, we find null or weak relationships with items that tap attachment to one's neighborhood ("My neighborhood is truly unique"; "I can't imagine living anywhere other than where I do now"; and "I mostly live where I do for practical reasons" (reverse coded)). Among the strongest relationships are instead with items that reference aesthetics ("I don't have strong feelings about how my neighborhood looks" (reverse coded); "I want my neighborhood to retain its special character"), suggesting the relationship between preservationism and support for construction we document in Table A10 may reflect individual differences in general sensitivity to aesthetic concerns. It is possible that the relationship Larsen and Nyholt (2024*a*) find between proximity to a respondent's home and support for a project, and how preservationism mediates this relationship, could partly reflect aesthetic concerns—in particular respondents' relative lack of familiarity with the built environment in a project's vicinity when that project is 10 km from their home, rather than 1 km away. Looking at the subsets of housing proposals that do / do not fit in with their surroundings per the author's objective definition of fitting in, Larsen & Nyholt (2024*b*, fig. 8) find that respondents easily distinguish the two classes if the project is proposed within 1 km of the respondent's home, yet regard the two classes as about equally likely to fit in if the project is 10 km away. If respondents have a proximity-independent opposition to "out of scale" new buildings, but are less certain about whether a given proposal is actually out of scale with respect to its neighbors when it is 10 km away than when it is 1 km away, their stated preferences could appear "NIMBY" without actually being (entirely) "NIMBY."

so widely expressed that it plausibly helps explain significant variation in support for real-world developments. They also provide further evidence that voters think about housing policy sociotropically.

Aesthetics' Large Causal Effects: Evidence from Vignette 1 We first turn to the remaining findings of Vignette 1. To provide more direct evidence of the role of aesthetic considerations, Vignette 1 also manipulated the project's `Design` by varying whether its architect received accolades for aesthetically attractive or atrocious residential design in the past. As Figure 3 shows, respondents were approximately 0.13 scale points less likely to support allowing the project to be built by an architect with a poor aesthetic track record. Strikingly, this effect is essentially tied for being the largest effect we find, rivaled only by the difference in support for a project on respondent's own block versus a high-density neighborhood elsewhere. The large relative magnitude of this effect underscores the importance of aesthetic considerations.

A further result underscores that these aesthetic considerations are sociotropic in nature: there is no interaction between this `Design` manipulation and whether the project was proposed on a respondent's block or a similar block across the country. Respondents were less likely to think that architects with a poor aesthetic track record should be allowed to build the project in either place—consistent with sociotropic aesthetics (interaction $\beta = 0.014$, $p = 0.47$).

The remaining manipulations had small or no effects, but these small or null effects are instructive. The `Tax` manipulation sought to allay concerns about impacts on neighbors' finances or school finances by diverting property taxes from the new building to local homeowners or local schools, but these manipulations only had small effects, despite respondents reporting in manipulation checks that these policies would improve neighborhood schools and lower property taxes (see Table A9).

Next, the `Parking` manipulation sought to address concerns over parking and traffic, which we found earlier were among the most common concerns about new development and were also meaningfully correlated with support for upzoning. To address these concerns, we sometimes told

respondents that new residents would not be allowed to park on the street, or own cars at all. The results are consistent with sociotropic concerns often overriding self-interest. Telling respondents that new residents would not be allowed to own cars *decreased* support for allowing the project, even though Table A9 shows this manipulation has a dramatic effect on perceptions of whether the building would "increase parking problems in the neighborhood." We interpret the negative effect as representing respondents' concerns for the new resident's inability to access cars themselves, a sociotropic consideration. Furthermore, interactions between this manipulation and whether the project was proposed on respondent's own block versus a similar block across the country were also null.

Inconsistent with concerns about new residents driving opposition to new housing, the `New Residents` manipulation reveals that respondents have only a mild preference for retirees over office workers or formerly homeless people. We return to this issue, and whether aesthetic concerns are merely pretextual, in great detail later.

The `Environment` manipulations also had minimal effects, suggesting concerns over the health effects of new construction also do not seem to be driving opposition.

In summary, Vignette 1 finds that respondents heavily weigh aesthetic concerns relative to other concerns, that these aesthetic concerns weigh on their judgments even about developments outside their neighborhoods, and that even some of what is often interpreted as NIMBYism may reflect these more-generally-applied aesthetic judgments. Of course, it is possible that the large effect of the architectural-award manipulation in Vignette 1 could be due to the extremity of the reference condition (a building designed by the winner of "an annual dishonor given to the [architect of the] ugliest new building in the United States"). Vignette 2 helps address this concern.

Vignette 2. Vignette 2 replicates and extends these findings. Vignette 2 asked respondents:

> Imagine there is a neighborhood across the country where the buildings are mostly `context`, in good condition.

The owner of an empty lot wants to build a new 5-story apartment building.

The new building will use this design: `photo`

The new apartments will be `affordability`.

The rest of the block will remain `context`.

Would you support or oppose allowing this apartment building to be built?

The response options ranged from "Strongly support" to "Strongly oppose," which we rescale to 0-1. As with Vignette 1, we describe the manipulations and their results sequentially.

We underscore that, in this vignette, the new building was always located in "a neighborhood across the country" (although we changed how we described the neighborhood).

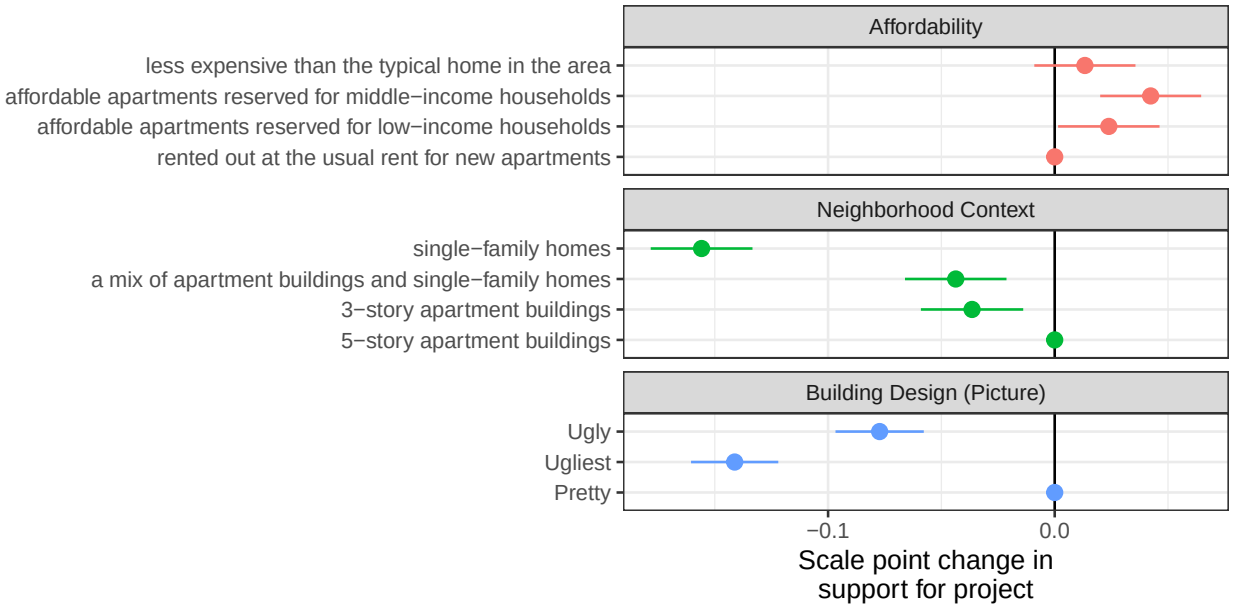
Figure 4 gives the manipulations and results on the main outcome, whether respondents would support allowing the apartment building to be built. Appendix Table A11 shows the estimated effects on posited mechanisms.

Figure 4's first panel shows that manipulating whether the apartments would be rented out at usual rents or would be rented out for lower rents, or affordable for middle- or low-income households, had a modest effect on support for allowing the project.[16]

Figure 4's second panel replicates our prior results that respondents are highly sensitive to the context in which a new building is being proposed. Support for allowing the building drops by around 0.15 scale points if it will be built in a neighborhood of single-family homes, rather than near other buildings of the same height. Table A11's last two rows again find that aesthetic concerns may play a role in generating these effects: when the proposed building is located in a neighborhood of single-family homes, respondents were far less likely to say that they would "find the new building attractive" or that the "new building would make the block more attractive." Figure A5 visualizes this result. This result, as well as the related results from Vignette 1 and that

[16]Table A11 shows that these modest effects may be because respondents' recognition that the building would be more affordable may have been offset by small increases in concerns that the project would increase crime in the neighborhood, a way we sought to measure concerns about the new residents.

Figure 4: Vignette 2 Results: Effect on Building Support



Notes: Each panel corresponds with one variable manipulated in a description of the project. The panel titles show the common beginning of the sentence for each experimentally manipulated factor. Coefficients are from a multivariate regression predicting responses to the question "Would you support or oppose allowing this apartment building to be built?", rescaled to 0-1. The reference categories are shown at the bottom of each panel. 95% confidence intervals surround point estimates. Appendix Table A6 has numerical results.

we discuss in footnote 15, reinforce our hypothesis at the beginning of the paper that sociotropic aesthetics contribute to voters' general tendency to lend greater support to AB 2011-style upzoning in already-dense areas, rather than low-density areas.

Finally, as another direct test of to what extent voters care about such aesthetic concerns, we showed a photo of three hypothetical building designs. We selected designs that were rated as very ugly, somewhat ugly, or pretty in a pre-test and were perceived as similarly sized.[17] Figure 5 shows

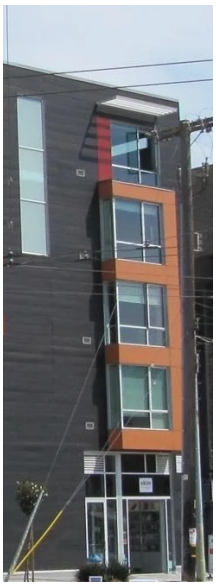
[17]In the pre-test, we showed a separate sample of respondents several building images and asked "How would you rate this apartment building?" with responses on a 1-5 scale ranging from very ugly to very beautiful. We also asked "How many apartments do you think are in this building?" with responses ranging from 1 to 10 or more. The buildings in Figure 5 were rated as a 2.0, 2.6, and 4.3, respectively, on the attractiveness item. That the "ugly" and "pretty" buildings were only rated as 1.7 scale points different on a 5-point scale suggests that the manipulation is not unrealistic. Second, respondents saw all three buildings as similarly sized: they thought that the buildings contained 5.2, 5.3, and 6.3 units, respectively. In other words, if anything, respondents thought the "pretty" building would contain more apartments.

the buildings.

Figure 5: Buildings Used in Vignette 2

(a) Ugliest Building

(b) Ugly Building



(c) Pretty Building

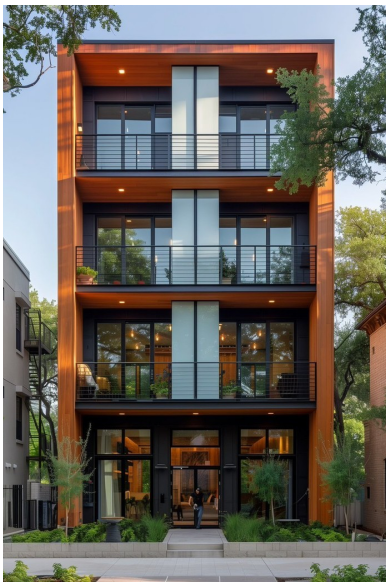


Figure 4's last panel shows the results. Respondents were extremely sensitive to the aesthetic manipulation, being far less likely to support allowing the building if the design appeared ugly rather than pretty. (We emphasize, though, that we see this manipulation of a facade's aesthetic quality as a test for the importance of aesthetics as a mechanism in affecting support for development, not as the primary or only way in which attributes of a building and its context can trigger an aesthetic response that affects support for development.)

We acknowledge that treatments manipulating a proposed building's architect (Vignette 1) or facade (Vignette 2) may lead respondents to draw positive or negative inferences about the building's future residents, the price at which units in the building would be offered for sale or rent, the building effect on nearby home values or rents, or even crime. Tables A12 and A13 show that these manipulations did have such effects, though the size of these effects is no more than 1/4 as large as the effect on perceived attractiveness. On average, respondents thought units in a less attractive building would be less expensive and that the building would tend to reduce home prices

and rents nearby. One might therefore expect renters to be much more supportive of ugly buildings than homeowners. However, Figure A6 shows that renters reacted just as negatively to the "ugliness" manipulation as homeowners did, though renters were less sensitive to the placement of the apartment buildings in neighborhoods of single-family homes.

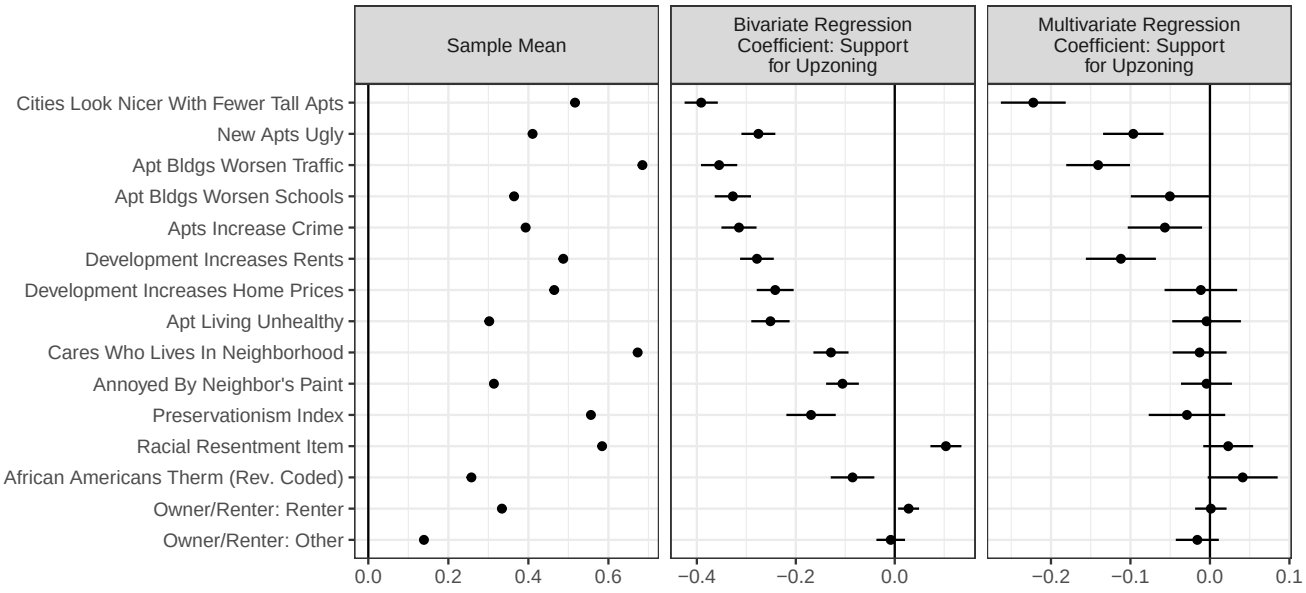
Aesthetic Concerns are Widespread, and Predict Support for Dense Development To further triangulate the importance of aesthetic concerns in driving voter opposition to dense development, we next document how often voters explicitly express such concerns and how well they predict support for development.

In our survey, we asked respondents two questions intended to capture their aesthetic tastes for new multifamily housing development: "Cities look nicer when they have fewer tall apartment buildings" and "New apartment buildings are ugly." We also measured a wide variety of other beliefs and attitudes that have been posited to reduce support for development, including racial attitudes and concerns about new housing's effects on prices and rents, traffic, schools, crime and more. Appendix B provides the full item wordings.

Figure 6's first panel shows the sample means for all these items. It shows that, descriptively, aesthetic distaste for dense development is among the most widely-endorsed objections to development. Concerns about traffic are most widely endorsed (as is endorsement of the general principle that people care about who lives in their neighborhood). However, aesthetic concerns are more widely endorsed than concerns about crime and health, and rival oft-studied concerns with the effects of development on rents and home prices.

To descriptively explore the potential relevance of these concerns to support for dense development, we ran a series of bivariate regressions predicting answers to the AB 2011-inspired survey question we presented earlier, "In cities, 5-story apartment buildings should be allowed to be built along all major streets and in every commercial area." Figure 6's second panel shows the bivariate relationship between this measure of support for AB 2011-style upzoning of commercial corridors and each of the variables described earlier. Aesthetic distaste emerges as the single strongest

Figure 6: Descriptive Results: Potential Explanations for Opposition to Dense Development



Notes: The dependent variable of the regressions in the second and third panels is: "In cities, 5-story apartment buildings should be allowed to be built along all major streets and in every commercial area." All variables are rescaled to range from 0-1, where higher values reflect greater agreement. 95% confidence intervals surround point estimates; in the first panel, the confidence intervals for the sample means are too small to be visible. See Appendix Table A4 for numerical results. Appendix B provides the full item wordings.

predictor, closely rivaled by concerns about traffic, schools, and prices.

Finally, Figure 6's last panel shows the coefficients from a multivariate regression of our measure of support for upzoning on all of the aforementioned variables. In a multivariate context, aesthetic tastes emerge as the most powerful predictor.[18] Indeed, the single item capturing aesthetic distaste for cities that have fewer tall buildings alone explains fully two-thirds of the variation in support for upzoning as do all of the variables listed in Figure 6.

While not definitive, these descriptive results help further establish how pervasive aesthetic judgments appear to be in voters' views about housing. Together with our previous results that aesthetic concerns have powerful effects on support for new development, these results further

[18]Results are similar when interacting concerns about rent increases and home price increases with homeownership versus renter status.

support our arguments that aesthetic concerns vary across people and drive important real-world variation in support for dense development.

Are aesthetic concerns pretextual?

The most worrisome alternative explanations for these patterns are that aesthetic objections to development are ex post justifications for less socially acceptable objections to dense development, such as a desire to exclude new residents of a certain race or class from one's neighborhood. We already presented several findings suggesting aesthetic objections are not entirely pretextual: Figure 2 found that people who live in dense areas are *more* supportive of dense development on their block than elsewhere, and vignette 1 found that aesthetic improvements increased support for proposed projects to a similar extent when the projects were on one's block and elsewhere. We next present several additional findings inconsistent with the alternative explanation that aesthetic objections are entirely pretextual.

Support for small-scale and office development. First, we randomized some respondents to see a version of the upzoning question used in Figure 2 that asked about support for building "4 to 6-unit apartment buildings (up to 3 stories tall)" rather than 5-story apartment buildings. Appendix A4 shows that, when the upzoning proposal no longer involves taller apartment buildings, respondents' stated aesthetic distaste for tall buildings is no longer an especially strong predictor of opposition. This suggests that stated distaste for tall buildings is genuine and not a pretext for opposition to all multifamily housing.[19]

Second, we also randomized whether some respondents saw a version of the AB 2011-style question that asked about allowing office development: "In cities, 5-story office buildings should be allowed to be built along all major streets and in every commercial area." (We previously analyzed data only for respondents who were asked about "apartment" rather than "office" buildings.) A number of objections to new housing development are specific to housing: racial minorities and

[19]When tested formally using an interaction term in a linear regression, the interactions between the two measures of aesthetic taste and the manipulation of the height of the project have p-values < 0.05. This analysis was not pre-registered.

working class people do not live in office buildings; office buildings do not create additional demand for schools; and they do not increase housing supply in a manner that might reduce property values. Were this class of concerns to be driving opposition to multifamily housing development, we would expect to see support for development increase when similarly-sized offices are at issue. Likewise, we would expect to see potentially pretextual aesthetic objections to 5-story apartments disappear in importance.

Supporting aesthetic concerns being genuine, Table 1 shows that neither prediction holds in the data. First, Column (1) shows that support for upzoning is actually *lower* for similarly tall office buildings than for apartment buildings. Second, Columns (2) and (3) interact our two measures of aesthetic tastes with the office manipulation. Were these aesthetic objections entirely pretextual and specific to housing, we should see their predictive power all but disappear when asking about offices. But while there is some evidence in Column (2) that the coefficient declines, this decline is only a small share of the overall coefficient. Moreover, in Column (3), we find that the view that apartment buildings are ugly is just as correlated with opposition to office development. These results suggest that stated aesthetic distaste for dense housing development are not pretextual stand-ins for underlying objections that apply only to housing, such as animus towards the race or class of those who may live there.

We do not doubt that attitudes toward new housing's residents may also contribute to opposition to multifamily housing development; indeed, exploiting our office vs. apartment randomization, Appendix Table A8 finds evidence that they may. However, the nature of this effect may not be what many assume. In particular, the results in Table A8's Column 4 for how the office treatment interacts with attitudes towards African Americans are more consistent with a "second side of racialization" (Tesler and Sears 2010) phenomenon: those with the most negative views towards African-Americans are similarly supportive of office and apartment development, but those with positive views towards African-Americans are *more* supportive of apartment than office develop-

Table 1: Comparing Support for New Apartment Buildings vs. Offices

	Dependent variable:		
	Support for Upzoning Cities for 5-Story Apartment/Office Buildings (0-1)		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Building Type = Office	-0.047^{***}	-0.088^{***}	-0.050^{***}
	(0.007)	(0.014)	(0.012)
Cities Look Nicer With Fewer Tall Apt Bldgs		-0.391^{***}	
		(0.016)	
Office X Cities Look Nicer With Fewer Tall Apt Bldgs		0.089^{***}	
		(0.024)	
Apt Bldgs Ugly			-0.276^{***}
			(0.016)
Office X Apt Bldgs Ugly			0.014
			(0.023)
Constant	0.542^{***}	0.741^{***}	0.654^{***}
	(0.005)	(0.010)	(0.008)
Observations	5,999	5,999	5,999
R^2	0.007	0.136	0.088
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

ment.[20] Figure 3's result that participants in vignette 1 were not particularly sensitive to the background of residents of a new building is further consistent with objections to new development's residents likely not playing nearly as large of a role as aesthetic considerations.

In summary, that people are similarly if not more opposed to similarly-tall office buildings

[20]In addition, the interactions in Table A8 show that the respondents most concerned about the impacts of new apartments on schools, crime, rents, and home prices may be less opposed to office buildings than apartment buildings (for more direct causal evidence on the effects of beliefs about the relationship between development and prices on support for development, see Elmendorf, Nall and Oklobdzija 2024*a*). Column 5-8's results finding that both owners and renters who believe apartments increase rents are more opposed to housing than office development is likewise consistent with our argument around the partially sociotropic nature of housing policy preferences (see also Elmendorf, Nall and Oklobdzija 2025).

provides evidence that aesthetic distaste for dense housing development itself cannot be dismissed as a pretextual stand-in for other objections that apply only to housing.

Heightening Aesthetic Concerns Can Undermine Support for Development Our final results show that aesthetic concerns can also be primed to undermine support for development. This provides further evidence that aesthetic concerns are not entirely pretextual.

In the second survey dataset described earlier, we showed respondents several videos priming various reasons to support or oppose development. Table 2 gives an overview of the videos. The "Modern Buildings Ugly" video showed photos of ugly buildings and complained that modern apartment buildings were ugly in comparison to historic buildings. For comparison purposes and to examine the effects of priming other explanations for opposition to development, we also included videos priming urban unrest, the health benefits of cities, and homelessness issues. Appendix C gives the full scripts and descriptions of what appeared on screen. The control group saw an unrelated video about college affordability for undocumented immigrants who graduated from American high schools.

We measure the effects of viewing these videos on the same AB 2011-inspired question analyzed at the beginning of the paper: "Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: In cities, 5-story apartment buildings should be allowed to be built along major streets and in commercial areas." (To reiterate, though, this was in a separate sample.) As previously, there were five answer choices ranging from Strongly agree to Strongly disagree, which we rescale to 0-1.

Figure 7 shows the main results, and Table A14 shows estimated effects on potential mechanisms. The first coefficient in Figure 7 shows that priming aesthetic concerns about new apartment buildings reduced support for upzoning cities ($p < 0.01$). Consistent with our theoretical predictions, Table A14 shows that this may have been because the video increased agreement that "Cities look better with fewer tall apartments" and "New apartment buildings are ugly"—the very same questions we showed earlier were strongly associated with support for upzoning. Now, we show that a video that shocks these attitudes also has downstream effects on support for upzoning. While

Table 2: Overview of Treatment Videos

Treatment Video	Summary
Modern Buildings Ugly	Video comparing historic European architecture with ornate details and character to modern buildings described as bland, sterile boxes. Questions why contemporary construction lacks the aesthetic beauty of the past.
Urban Unrest and Looting	Television news coverage of looting incidents in Beverly Hills and surrounding areas during civil unrest. Footage shows luxury stores being ransacked, crowds fleeing with merchandise, and a destroyed CVS pharmacy.
Health Benefits of Cities	Educational video explaining how cities have transformed from disease-ridden environments in the 19th century to places that promote longer, healthier lives through modern medicine, infrastructure improvements, and lifestyle factors like walkability.
Homelessness	Television news report depicting widespread homelessness, and criticizing San Francisco's aggressive encampment sweeps. Advocate argues for building housing for the homeless rather than forcing unhoused people off streets, issuing fines, and making arrests.

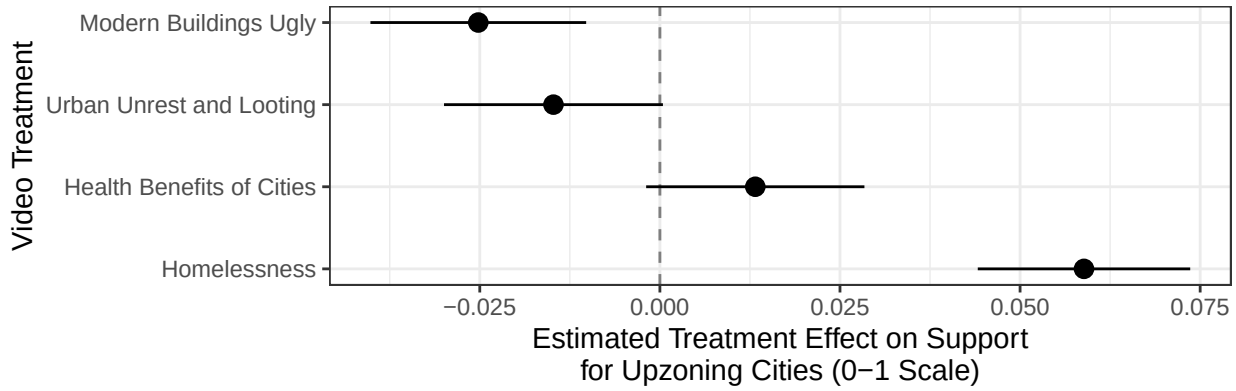
we cannot definitively isolate this causal mechanism, this pattern of results provides further causal evidence consistent with our theory.

The other videos, though, underscore that aesthetics are not the *only* relevant consideration. The second coefficient in Figure 7 shows that there is also some evidence that priming concerns about urban unrest might also reduce support for upzoning cities. This could be because the video primes concerns about new residents, or because it reduces affect towards cities as a symbol (see Broockman, Elmendorf and Kalla 2025); Table A14 finds evidence consistent with both possibilities.

Finally, there is only weak evidence that information about the health benefits of cities increases support for upzoning, but priming the housing shortage through the issue of homelessness does meaningfully increase support for upzoning.[21]

[21] We originally intended this video to prime concerns about crime and urban disorder, but it also contains advocacy

Figure 7: Estimated Effects of Videos on Support for Upzoning Cities



Notes: Each coefficient shows the estimated effect of the video shown at left on answers to the question "Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: In cities, 5-story apartment buildings should be allowed to be built along major streets and in commercial areas." Answers are rescaled to 0-1. 95% confidence intervals surround point estimates. Appendix Table A7 has numeric results.

Discussion

The United States faces an acute housing shortage, a crisis rooted largely in government restrictions on dense housing development. While the economic consequences of these restrictions are well-documented, the origins of the political pressure policymakers face from their constituents to maintain these restrictions remain debated. Previous literature largely attributes voter opposition to development to two factors: the economic self-interest of homeowners ("homevoters") and the hyperlocal concerns of residents regarding neighborhood nuisances ("NIMBYism"). This paper offers a third, complementary explanation: sociotropic aesthetic judgments. In short, our theory posits that voters often judge housing policies not only by calculating financial returns or anticipating local nuisances, but by relying on cognitively easy aesthetic judgments about what they think the built environment should look like—judgments they also apply sociotropically when judging the impacts of policies on neighborhoods far from their own.

We demonstrated this theory through a variety of observational and experimental tests. A

for building housing for the homeless.

recurring pattern in our data is that aesthetic preferences—such as a taste for tall buildings or objections to the appearance of tall buildings next to shorter buildings—strongly influence support for development, often outperforming traditional metrics of self-interest or manipulations which cue "NIMBY" concerns. We showed that homeowners in already-dense neighborhoods are often the strongest supporters of further density in already-dense neighborhoods (including their own) and actually less supportive of dense development in other, low-density neighborhoods—findings which defy the predictions of standard homevoter or "NIMBY" theories but align with both sorting based on aesthetic preferences and there being a widely-held view that dense development aesthetically fits in best in already-dense areas. Demonstrating that aesthetics matter to voters, our experimental results showed more directly that manipulating the aesthetics of a project powerfully affects support for it. Further, that the very same apartment building was judged to be less attractive if proposed in a neighborhood of single-family homes than in a neighborhood with other apartment buildings supports that aesthetics play a role in driving opposition to high density development in low-density areas. Similarly, we found that opposition to development was often stronger for similarly sized office buildings than for apartments, suggesting that objections to the physical structure itself frequently outweigh concerns about the new residents who might inhabit it. Our findings suggest that for many voters, the questions they ask about development are often not "How will this affect my pocketbook?" or "Who will be moving into my neighborhood?" but "How will it look?"

Our research has several important limitations. First, it is challenging to establish the causal effects of aesthetic judgments and to demonstrate that they are an important mechanism for the patterns we found, and we acknowledge that no one of our findings does so definitively. However, our range of descriptive and experimental approaches found consistent evidence for our theory's predictions despite relying on different assumptions and being vulnerable to different alternative explanations. In several instances, we also explicitly evaluated these alternative explanations and found that they did not hold. Second, with respect to external validity, it is possible that organized

opposition campaigns could successfully activate fears about crime, traffic, or taxes, which might crowd out the aesthetic considerations that dominated respondents' choices in our survey environment. We would welcome further research on this. With this said, Martin and Venugopal's (2025) finding that aesthetics is the matter most often raised in public meetings about proposed housing projects suggests that these concerns may not attenuate in contentious circumstances—they may in fact be accentuated. Third, while we manipulated aesthetic cues experimentally, we cannot fully rule out that unmeasured dispositions correlating with aesthetic tastes—such as tastes for other aspects of density or broader personality traits—drive some of the associations and effects we found.[22] Likewise, some of opposition to "ugly" apartment buildings may arise from inferences that people make about what it would cost to rent a unit in the building, on about the effect of such buildings on nearby home values or rents. Yet the similarity of homeowners' and renters' responses to our ugliness manipulations suggests that economic reasoning isn't driving our results. Finally, we again emphasize that we do not see our argument as mutually exclusive with others in the literature; we readily allow that other factors also influence housing policy preferences, too.

These limitations notwithstanding, our findings suggest distinct policy implications that differ from those derived from purely economic models of housing politics.

The most important implication of our research concerns how government policies may wish to target upzoning. We found that voters who live in neighborhoods of all kinds are more supportive of upzoning already-dense areas for dense housing, and that the voters who live in these neighborhoods are also the most supportive of dense development in general (see also Larsen and Nyholt 2024*b*; Pietrzak and Mendelberg 2025). These findings suggest there is a powerful political logic to prioritizing already-dense areas for further dense development. However, this runs contrary to many activist efforts and recent state laws, which seek to add density primarily in currently

[22]For example, it is possible that homeowners in dense areas not only find tall buildings aesthetically pleasing, but also have a taste for the amenity benefits density affords (restaurants available within walking distance, etc.). Consistent with this, a feeling thermometer towards "big cities" and an interest in living in a city in the future are also both positively correlated with both living in a dense area and support for dense development, although the relationship between support for dense development and aesthetic tastes are stronger.

low-density areas—such as efforts to "ban single family zoning" (e.g., California's SB 9, for further review see Manville, Monkkonen and Lens 2020). Opposition to such policies is sometimes dismissed as reflecting mere NIMBYism or even racism, and thus assessed as illegitimate. Our findings suggest that it may also arise in part from sincere aesthetic judgments that voters widely share. Our findings thus underscore the greater political feasibility of policies that concentrate new density in already-dense areas.

Second, our results also suggest that increasing the aesthetic quality of new apartments—including their stylistic "fit" with their surrounding context (e.g., Pietrzak and Mendelberg 2025)—could meaningfully increase support for development. For example, voters' preferences for nearby buildings to be of similar height could be accommodated with "incremental upzoning" policies that are explicitly sensitive to the height of nearby structures, allowing for development that is slightly taller, but not much taller, than surrounding structures.[23] Although prior research finds that existing design-review institutions do not deliver results the public likes (Stamps 2000), there are promising alternatives.[24] A number of cities have adopted pre-approved designs for certain housing typologies like accessory dwelling units; commentators have suggested extending this model to apartment buildings (Owens 2025). Pre-approved designs, vetted by a cross-section of the public, could create the aesthetic uniformity people seem to find aesthetically pleasing. Prior research also points to regularities in the public's aesthetic judgments, such as favoring symmetry, greenery, and tradition, that might be translated into objective design standards (Stamps 2000; 2014). We did not examine whether these additional dimensions of developments' aesthetics influence support for their construction, but future work should. Such research could help advocates for increased housing supply reform design review processes not only to reduce costs and regulatory uncertainty, but also so that these processes result in buildings with aesthetics that inspire greater voter support

[23] See, e.g., https://actionlab.strongtowns.org/hc/en-us/articles/11668956072340-Incremental-Housing-Overview#h_01JK91ATK859DXAGXY2N4C3BVD.

[24] Indeed, the "Ugly" building respondents disliked in Vignette 2 (Figure 5b) satisfied the City of San Francisco's stringent design standards.

for development.

If voters sometimes oppose upzoning due to the perceived ugliness of piecemeal transitions—where a lone apartment building rises among single-family homes—then mechanisms that would facilitate the wholesale transformation of a block or neighborhood are worth considering too. Nelson (1977) argued that neighborhoods should be able to sell themselves to developers by supermajority vote, allowing for the coordinated redevelopment of entire blocks. Unlike piecemeal redevelopment, which could create an aesthetically disjointed mix of old and new, such block-level transitions would yield the aesthetic coherence that voters appear to value. Developers working at block-level and larger scales also have stronger incentives to make their projects aesthetically pleasing, as the developer would capture the local positive externality from nice-looking buildings (capitalized into the value of nearby property).

The housing shortage afflicting America requires policy solutions that grapple with political reality. Our findings suggest that voters' aesthetic judgments about the built environment—applied sociotropically across entire cities—constitute a powerful yet underappreciated force shaping housing politics. This insight reframes the policy challenge: rather than dismissing aesthetic concerns as superficial or illegitimate, reformers should recognize them as sincere preferences that meaningfully constrain political feasibility. Recognizing that voters have strong intuitions about how their cities should look thus offers a roadmap for creating the political conditions necessary to address America's housing crisis.

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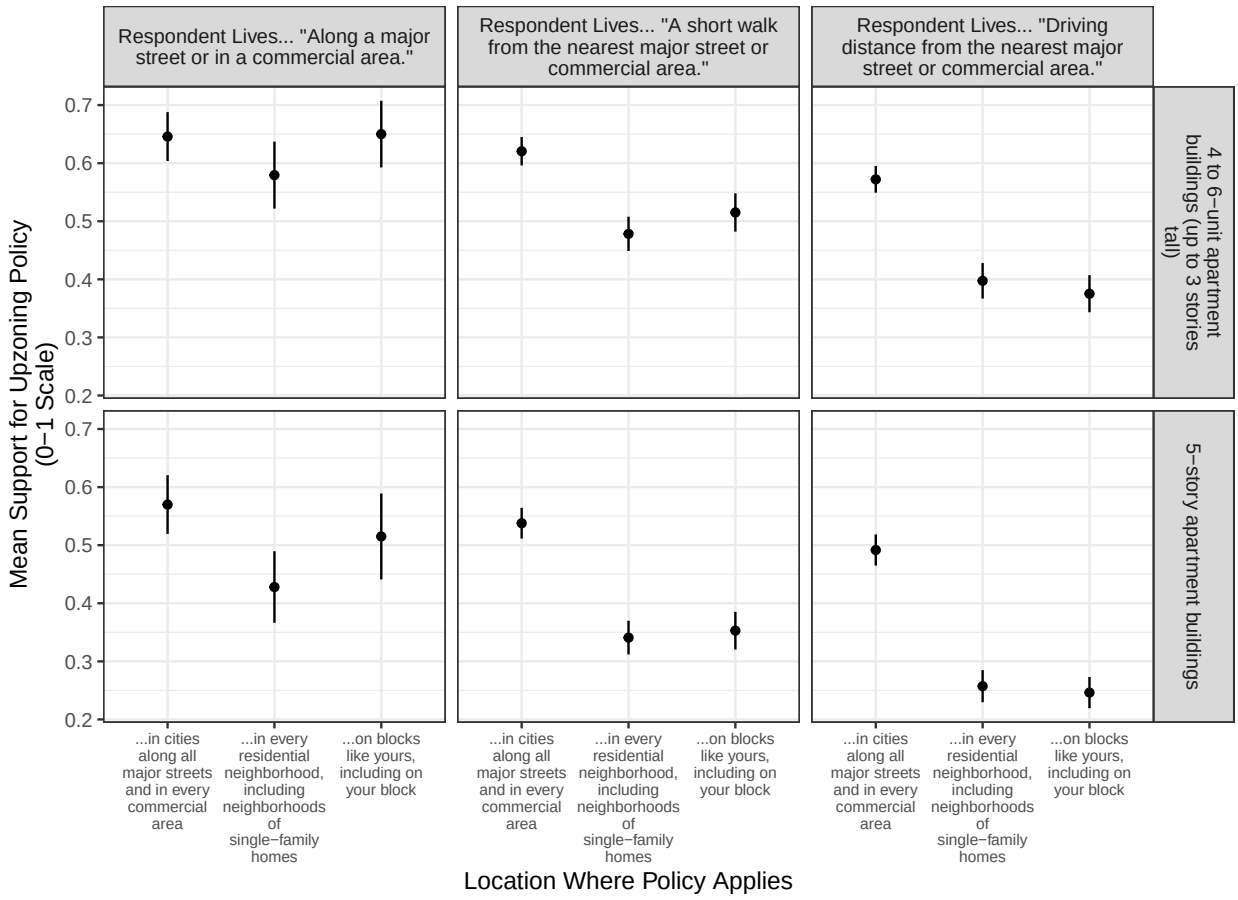
Online Appendices

A Additional Tables and Figures

Figure A1: Support for Upzoning, by Respondent Location and Homeownership Status

Notes: Survey question: "In cities, 5-story apartment buildings should be allowed to be built along all major streets and in every commercial area."

Figure A2: Support for Upzoning, by Project Type and Respondent and Policy Location



Notes: Survey question: "Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: `type` *should be allowed* `context`*."* `context` *is either "in every residential neighborhood, including neighborhoods of single-family homes," "in cities along major streets and in commercial areas," or "on blocks like yours, including on your block."* `type` *is either "4 to 6-unit apartment buildings (up to 3 stories tall)" or "5-story apartment buildings."*

Figure A3: Descriptive Relationship Between Distaste for Tall Buildings in Cities and Density of Own Neighborhood

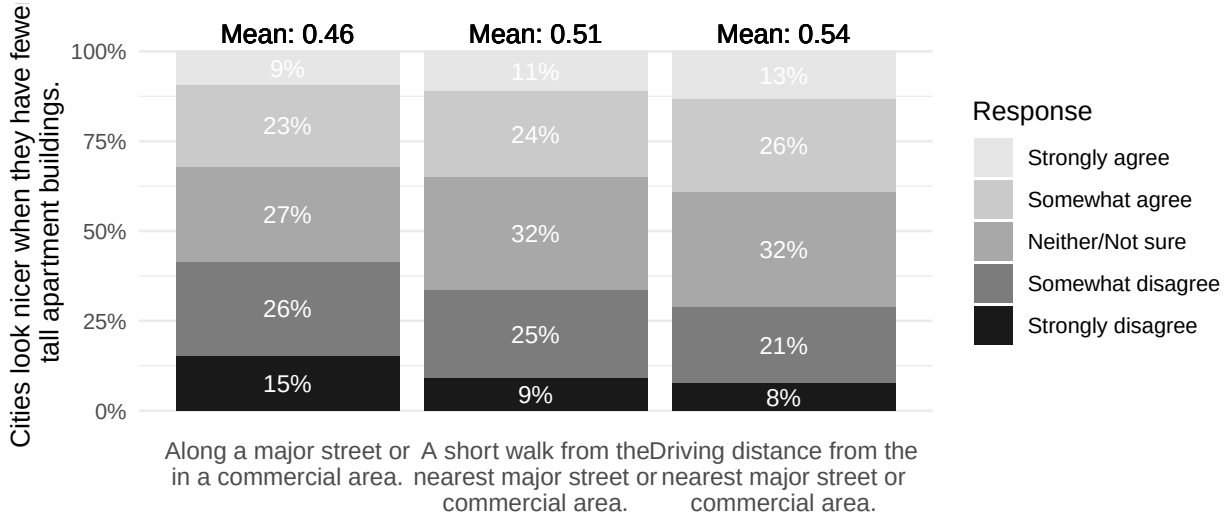
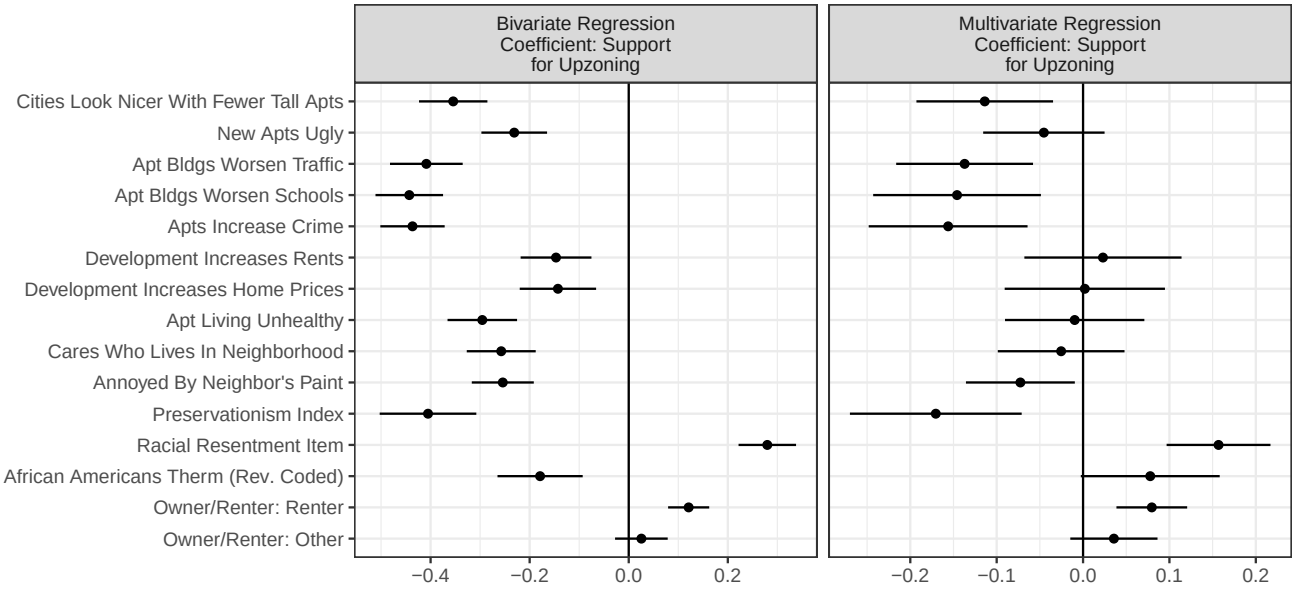
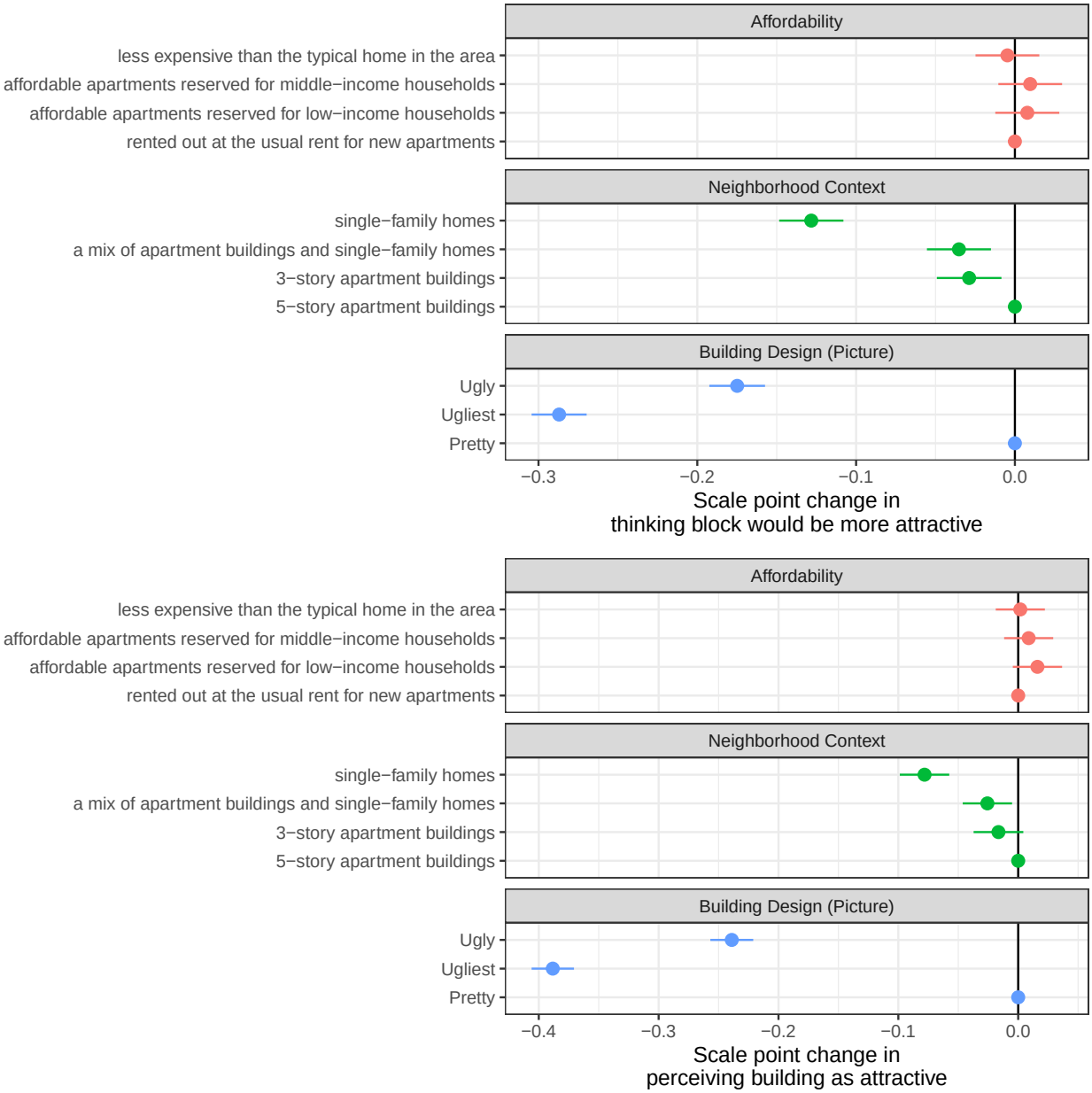


Figure A4: Predictors of Support for Upzoning for 4-6 unit, 3-story apartment buildings



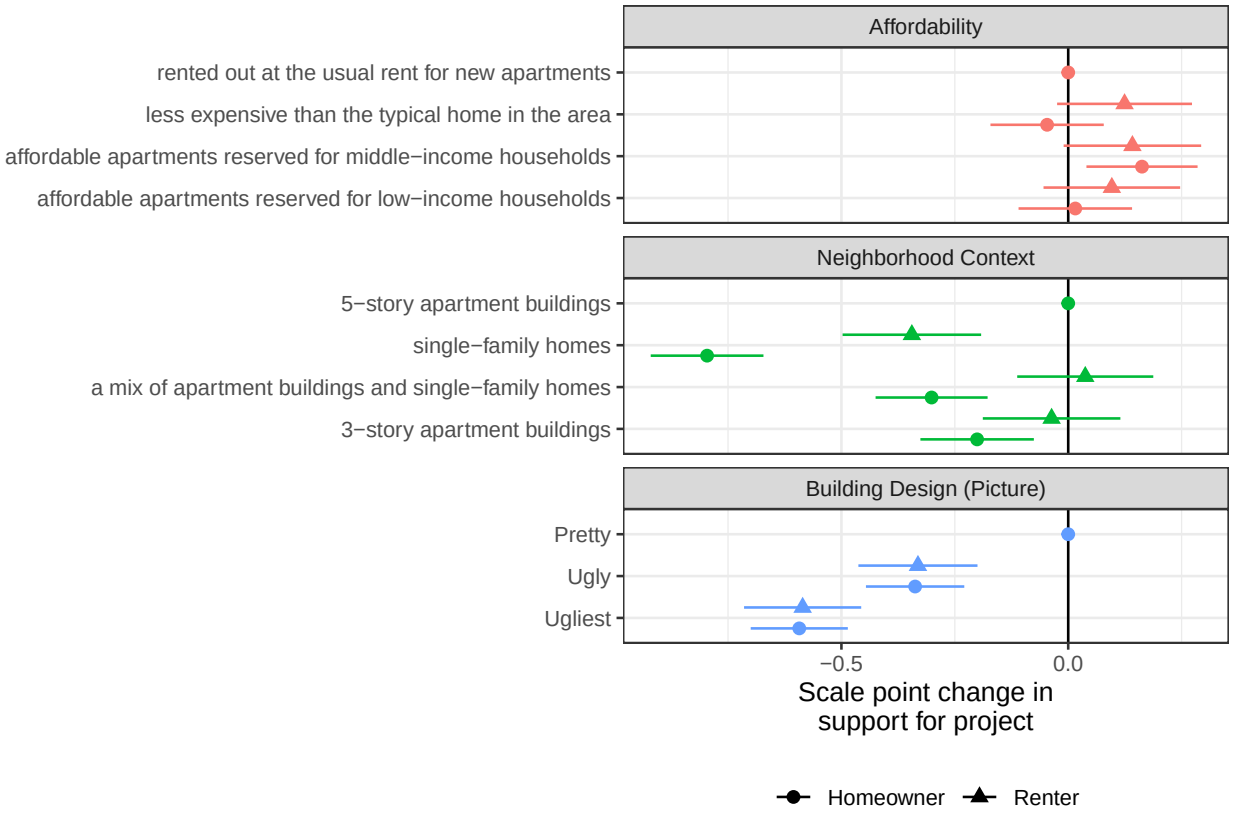
Notes: The left panel shows coefficients from a series of bivariate regressions, and the right panel from a single multivariate regression, with the dependent variable "Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: 4 to 6-unit apartment buildings (up to 3 stories tall) should be allowed in every residential neighborhood, including neighborhoods of single-family homes." All variables are rescaled to range from 0-1, where higher values reflect greater agreement.

Figure A5: Vignette 2 Results: Effect on Perception of Building Attractiveness



Notes: Dependent variables: "The new building would make the block more attractive" (top panel) and "I would find the new building attractive" (bottom panel).

Figure A6: Vignette 2 Results: Effects on Support, by Tenure



Notes: This result is off-plan. Coefficients are from multivariate regressions predicting responses to the question "Would you support or oppose allowing this apartment building to be built?", rescaled to 0-1.

Table A1: Demographics of Respondents to Survey 1

Variable	Category	Count	Percentage
Age Group	Under 25	464	7.7
Age Group	25-34	1459	24.3
Age Group	35-44	1365	22.8
Age Group	45-54	1339	22.3
Age Group	55-64	835	13.9
Age Group	65+	523	8.7
Sex	Female	3599	60.0
Sex	Male	2359	39.3
Sex	Prefer not to say	21	0.4
Ethnicity	Asian	318	5.3
Ethnicity	Black	713	11.9
Ethnicity	Mixed	332	5.5
Ethnicity	Other	174	2.9
Ethnicity	Prefer not to say	4	0.1
Ethnicity	White	4418	73.6
Education	Associates Degree (2-year degree)	632	10.5
Education	Bachelor's Degree (4-year degree)	2177	36.3
Education	Did not finish high school	37	0.6
Education	Graduate Degree (Masters, Ph.D, JD, MD, etc)	1151	19.2
Education	High school or GED	901	15.0
Education	Some College	961	16.0
Education	Vocational Degree	140	2.3
Party ID	Democrat	2479	41.3
Party ID	Independent	1814	30.2
Party ID	Other Party	147	2.5
Party ID	Republican	1559	26.0
Homeownership	I live as a guest or dependent of friends or family (don't pay rent)	776	12.9
Homeownership	I own it	3162	52.7
Homeownership	I rent it	2003	33.4
Homeownership	Other (please explain)	58	1.0

Table A2: Mean Support (SE) [N] by Respondent Perception of Policy Application and Homeownership Status

Policy Application Perception	Homeownership	Mean Support (SE) [N]
No	Homeowner	0.494 (0.008) [1116]
No	Renter	0.478 (0.014) [424]
Not sure	Homeowner	0.536 (0.019) [194]
Not sure	Renter	0.566 (0.018) [206]
Yes	Homeowner	0.669 (0.016) [304]
Yes	Renter	0.646 (0.014) [395]

Table A3: Mean Support (SE) [N] by Respondent Location and Policy Context

location	in cities along all major streets and in every commercial area	in every residential neighborhood, including neighborhoods of single-family homes	on blocks like yours, including on your block
Short walk from major street	0.579 (0.009) [891]	0.412 (0.011) [893]	0.432 (0.012) [881]
Along major street	0.607 (0.017) [245]	0.500 (0.022) [225]	0.587 (0.024) [215]
Driving distance	0.532 (0.009) [912]	0.329 (0.011) [853]	0.307 (0.011) [884]

Table A4: Predictors of Support for Upzoning

	Mean (5,999 obs)	Bivar. (3,058 obs)	Multivar. (3,058 obs)
Cities Look Nicer With Fewer Tall Apts	0.517 (0.004)	-0.391 (0.017)	-0.222 (0.021)
New Apts Ugly	0.411 (0.004)	-0.276 (0.017)	-0.096 (0.019)
Apt Bldgs Worsen Traffic	0.685 (0.003)	-0.355 (0.019)	-0.141 (0.020)
Apt Bldgs Worsen Schools	0.364 (0.004)	-0.327 (0.019)	-0.050 (0.025)
Apts Increase Crime	0.393 (0.004)	-0.315 (0.018)	-0.057 (0.024)
Development Increases Rents	0.487 (0.004)	-0.279 (0.017)	-0.112 (0.022)
Development Increases Home Prices	0.465 (0.004)	-0.242 (0.019)	-0.011 (0.023)
Apt Living Unhealthy	0.302 (0.004)	-0.251 (0.020)	-0.004 (0.022)
Cares Who Lives In Neighborhood	0.673 (0.004)	-0.129 (0.018)	-0.013 (0.017)
Annoyed By Neighbor's Paint	0.314 (0.004)	-0.106 (0.017)	-0.004 (0.016)
Preservationism Index	0.556 (0.003)	-0.169 (0.025)	-0.029 (0.025)
Racial Resentment Item	0.584 (0.004)	0.103 (0.016)	0.023 (0.016)
African Americans Therm (Rev. Coded)	0.258 (0.003)	-0.085 (0.022)	0.041 (0.022)
Owner/Renter: Renter	0.334 (0.006)	0.028 (0.011)	0.001 (0.010)
Owner/Renter: Other	0.139 (0.004)	-0.008 (0.015)	-0.016 (0.014)

Table A5: Vignette 1 Numerical Results (N = 5,999)

Variable	Level	Estimate	SE
Neighborhood	on your block	0.000	(NA)
Neighborhood	in a neighborhood across the country that has many 5-story apartment buildings already	0.145	(0.015)
Neighborhood	in a neighborhood like yours in Copenhagen, Denmark	0.093	(0.015)
Neighborhood	in a neighborhood like yours somewhere across the country	0.053	(0.010)
Design	architect Steven Holl, who won the Aesthetic Atrocity Award, an annual dishonor given to the ugliest new building in the United States	0.000	(NA)
Design	architect Tom Kundig, who won the American Institute of Architects Housing Award for architectural design excellence in residential projects	0.132	(0.009)
Tax	paid to the city	0.000	(NA)
Tax	used to improve the quality of the local school	0.037	(0.011)
Tax	used to reduce property taxes for homeowners on the block	0.034	(0.011)
Parking	will have the same street parking privileges as other residents on the block	0.000	(NA)
Parking	will not be allowed to own cars	-0.036	(0.011)
Parking	will not be allowed to park on the street near the building	0.014	(0.011)
New Residents	office workers who work at a nearby office building	0.000	(NA)
New Residents	formerly homeless people	0.001	(0.012)
New Residents	retirees	0.032	(0.012)
New Residents	young men who recently left the foster system	-0.008	(0.012)
Environment	Each unit will have a washer and dryer.	0.000	(NA)
Environment	The builder will use best practices to minimize construction noise and dust.	0.009	(0.011)
Environment	The building will have high-quality air filters installed to make sure the indoor air is clean.	0.007	(0.010)

Table A6: Vignette 2 Numerical Results (N = 5,999)

Variable	Level	Estimate	SE
Affordability	rented out at the usual rent for new apartments	0.000	(NA)
Affordability	affordable apartments reserved for low-income households	0.024	(0.011)
Affordability	affordable apartments reserved for middle-income households	0.042	(0.011)
Affordability	less expensive than the typical home in the area	0.013	(0.011)
Neighborhood Context	5-story apartment buildings	0.000	(NA)
Neighborhood Context	3-story apartment buildings	-0.036	(0.012)
Neighborhood Context	a mix of apartment buildings and single-family homes	-0.044	(0.011)
Neighborhood Context	single-family homes	-0.156	(0.011)
Building Design (Picture)	Pretty	0.000	(NA)
Building Design (Picture)	Ugliest	-0.141	(0.010)
Building Design (Picture)	Ugly	-0.077	(0.010)

Table A7: Treatment Effects on Support for Upzoning Cities (N = 12,534)

Treatment	Estimate	SE
Homelessness	0.059	0.008
Urban Unrest and Looting	-0.015	0.008
Modern Buildings Ugly	-0.025	0.008
Health Benefits of Cities	0.013	0.008

Table A8: Comparing Support for New Apartment Buildings vs. Offices

	Dependent variable:							
	Support for Upzoning Cities for 5-Story Apartment/Office Buildings (0-1)							
	All	All	All	All	Owners	Owners	Renters	Renters
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Building Type = Office	-0.072^{***}	-0.106^{***}	-0.126^{***}	0.036	-0.080^{***}	-0.036^{*}	-0.157^{***}	-0.166^{***}
	(0.011)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.024)	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.023)	(0.023)
Apt Living Unhealthy	-0.251^{***}							
	(0.018)							
Office X Apt Living Unhealthy	0.098^{***}							
	(0.026)							
Apts Worsen Schools		-0.327^{***}						
		(0.018)						
Office X Apts Worsen Schools		0.172^{***}						
		(0.025)						
Apts Lead To Crime			-0.315^{***}					
			(0.017)					
Office X Apts Lead To Crime			0.201^{***}					
			(0.024)					
AfAm Therm				0.085^{***}				
				(0.021)				
Office X AfAm Therm				-0.112^{***}				
				(0.030)				
Apt Increase Rents					-0.248^{***}		-0.324^{***}	
					(0.024)		(0.028)	
Office X Apts Increase Rents					0.099^{***}		0.199^{***}	
					(0.034)		(0.039)	
Apts Increase Home Prices						-0.176^{***}		-0.314^{***}
						(0.026)		(0.029)
Office X Apts Increase Home Prices						0.004		0.233^{***}
						(0.036)		(0.041)
Constant	0.615^{***}	0.658^{***}	0.665^{***}	0.478^{***}	0.647^{***}	0.610^{***}	0.723^{***}	0.709^{***}
	(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.016)	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.016)	(0.016)
Observations	5,999	5,999	5,999	5,999	3,162	3,162	2,003	2,003
R^2	0.048	0.071	0.066	0.010	0.049	0.032	0.082	0.069

Notes: Columns 1-4 show regressions among all respondents. Columns 5-6 subset to owners, and Columns 7-8 subset to renters. * $p < 0.1$*;* ** $p < 0.05$*;* *** $p < 0.01$.

Table A9: Effects of Manipulations in Vignette 1 on Pre-Registered Measures of Posited Mechanisms

Outcome	Treatment	B	SE	T-stat	p-val
I would find the new building attractive.	area: in a neighborhood across the country that has many 5-story apartment buildings already	0.06	0.01	4.52	0.00
I would find the new building attractive.	area: in a neighborhood like yours in Copenhagen, Denmark	0.04	0.01	2.87	0.00
I would find the new building attractive.	area: in a neighborhood like yours somewhere across the country	0.02	0.01	2.54	0.01
Allowing this building to be built in hypothetical_area would make it more likely that similar buildings will be built in your neighborhood.	area: in a neighborhood across the country that has many 5-story apartment buildings already	-0.15	0.01	-12.06	0.00
Allowing this building to be built in hypothetical_area would make it more likely that similar buildings will be built in your neighborhood.	area: in a neighborhood like yours in Copenhagen, Denmark	-0.06	0.01	-4.99	0.00
Allowing this building to be built in hypothetical_area would make it more likely that similar buildings will be built in your neighborhood.	area: in a neighborhood like yours somewhere across the country	-0.04	0.01	-5.71	0.00
I would find the new building attractive.	design: architect Steven Holl, who won the Aesthetic Atrocity Award, an annual dishonor given to the ugliest new building in the United States	-0.19	0.01	-26.37	0.00
The new building would be bad for local residents' health.	environment: The builder will use best practices to minimize construction noise and dust.	0.02	0.01	1.83	0.07
The new building would be bad for local residents' health.	environment: The building will have high-quality air filters installed to make sure the indoor air is clean.	-0.02	0.01	-2.94	0.00
The new building would increase parking problems in the neighborhood.	parking: will not be allowed to own cars	-0.33	0.01	-34.53	0.00
The new building would increase parking problems in the neighborhood.	parking: will not be allowed to park on the street near the building	-0.15	0.01	-16.26	0.00
Crime would increase in the neighborhood.	residents: formerly homeless people	0.12	0.01	11.94	0.00
The new residents would fit well into the neighborhood.	residents: formerly homeless people	-0.11	0.01	-11.12	0.00
Crime would increase in the neighborhood.	residents: retirees	-0.08	0.01	-7.86	0.00
The new residents would fit well into the neighborhood.	residents: retirees	0.03	0.01	3.11	0.00
Crime would increase in the neighborhood.	residents: young men who recently left the foster system	0.09	0.01	8.92	0.00
The new residents would fit well into the neighborhood.	residents: young men who recently left the foster system	-0.08	0.01	-8.79	0.00
Schools would improve in the neighborhood.	tax: used to improve the quality of the local school	0.13	0.01	16.57	0.00
The new building would reduce the neighbors' property taxes.	tax: used to improve the quality of the local school	-0.01	0.01	-1.43	0.15
Schools would improve in the neighborhood.	tax: used to reduce property taxes for homeowners on the block	0.01	0.01	1.62	0.11
The new building would reduce the neighbors' property taxes.	tax: used to reduce property taxes for homeowners on the block	0.24	0.01	27.65	0.00

Notes: Each row shows the estimated treatment effect of the treatment in the second column on the outcome in the first column. The omitted categories are shown in Figure 3. All outcomes are rescaled to range from 0-1.

Table A10: Vignette 1: Support by Preservationism Index and Building Location

	Dependent variable:
	Support for Allowing Building (0-1)
Preservationism Score	-0.374^{***}
	(0.033)
Area: In a neighborhood like yours somewhere across the country	0.062^{**}
	(0.028)
Interaction	-0.013
	(0.047)
Constant	0.643^{***}
	(0.020)
Observations	4,793
R^2	0.058

Notes: ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. *Limited to cases where the building is located on the respondent's block or in a neighborhood like theirs somewhere across the country.*

Table A11: Effects of Manipulations in Vignette 2 on Pre-Registered Measures of Posited Mechanisms

Outcome	Treatment	B	SE	T-stat	p-val
Crime would increase in the neighborhood.	affordable: affordable apartments reserved for low-income households	0.05	0.01	5.59	0.00
Rents in the new building would be expensive.	affordable: affordable apartments reserved for low-income households	-0.22	0.01	-21.10	0.00
The new residents would fit well into the neighborhood.	affordable: affordable apartments reserved for low-income households	-0.05	0.01	-5.21	0.00
The new building would lead to higher apartment rents in the neighborhood.	affordable: affordable apartments reserved for low-income households	-0.05	0.01	-4.93	0.00
The new building would lead to higher home prices in the neighborhood.	affordable: affordable apartments reserved for low-income households	-0.06	0.01	-5.90	0.00
Crime would increase in the neighborhood.	affordable: affordable apartments reserved for middle-income households	-0.02	0.01	-2.21	0.03
Rents in the new building would be expensive.	affordable: affordable apartments reserved for middle-income households	-0.04	0.01	-4.57	0.00
The new residents would fit well into the neighborhood.	affordable: affordable apartments reserved for middle-income households	0.03	0.01	4.02	0.00
The new building would lead to higher apartment rents in the neighborhood.	affordable: affordable apartments reserved for middle-income households	0.01	0.01	1.32	0.19
The new building would lead to higher home prices in the neighborhood.	affordable: affordable apartments reserved for middle-income households	0.00	0.01	-0.10	0.92
Crime would increase in the neighborhood.	affordable: less expensive than the typical home in the area	0.02	0.01	1.68	0.09
Rents in the new building would be expensive.	affordable: less expensive than the typical home in the area	-0.11	0.01	-11.06	0.00
The new residents would fit well into the neighborhood.	affordable: less expensive than the typical home in the area	-0.02	0.01	-2.01	0.04
The new building would lead to higher apartment rents in the neighborhood.	affordable: less expensive than the typical home in the area	-0.02	0.01	-2.49	0.01
The new building would lead to higher home prices in the neighborhood.	affordable: less expensive than the typical home in the area	-0.03	0.01	-3.18	0.00
I would find the new building attractive.	buildinglook: Ugliest	-0.39	0.01	-44.59	0.00
The new building would make the block more attractive.	buildinglook: Ugliest	-0.29	0.01	-32.97	0.00
Crime would increase in the neighborhood.	buildinglook: Ugliest	0.07	0.01	8.30	0.00
The new residents would fit well into the neighborhood.	buildinglook: Ugliest	-0.06	0.01	-8.18	0.00
I would find the new building attractive.	buildinglook: Ugly	-0.24	0.01	-26.23	0.00
The new building would make the block more attractive.	buildinglook: Ugly	-0.17	0.01	-19.53	0.00
Crime would increase in the neighborhood.	buildinglook: Ugly	0.04	0.01	5.43	0.00
The new residents would fit well into the neighborhood.	buildinglook: Ugly	-0.04	0.01	-4.65	0.00
I would find the new building attractive.	context: 3-story apartment buildings	-0.02	0.01	-1.58	0.11
The new building would make the block more attractive.	context: 3-story apartment buildings	-0.03	0.01	-2.85	0.00
I would find the new building attractive.	context: a mix of apartment buildings and single-family homes	-0.03	0.01	-2.48	0.01
The new building would make the block more attractive.	context: a mix of apartment buildings and single-family homes	-0.04	0.01	-3.49	0.00
I would find the new building attractive.	context: single-family homes	-0.08	0.01	-7.40	0.00
The new building would make the block more attractive.	context: single-family homes	-0.13	0.01	-12.41	0.00

Notes: Each row shows the estimated treatment effect of the treatment in the second column on the outcome in the first column. The omitted categories are shown in Figure 4. All outcomes are rescaled to range from 0-1.

Table A12: Effect of Vignette 1 Design Manipulation on All Mechanisms

Outcome	Treatment	B	SE	T-stat	p-val
Allowing this building to be built in hypothetical_area would make it more likely that similar buildings will be built in your neighborhood.	design: architect Steven Holl, who won the Aesthetic Atrocity Award...	-0.02	0.02	-0.90	0.37
Crime would increase in the neighborhood.	design: architect Steven Holl, who won the Aesthetic Atrocity Award...	0.14	0.03	4.95	0.00
I would find the new building attractive.	design: architect Steven Holl, who won the Aesthetic Atrocity Award...	-0.77	0.03	-26.37	0.00
Schools would improve in the neighborhood.	design: architect Steven Holl, who won the Aesthetic Atrocity Award...	-0.15	0.02	-6.15	0.00
The new building would be bad for local residents' health.	design: architect Steven Holl, who won the Aesthetic Atrocity Award...	0.19	0.03	6.77	0.00
The new building would increase parking problems in the neighborhood.	design: architect Steven Holl, who won the Aesthetic Atrocity Award...	0.06	0.03	1.76	0.08
The new building would reduce the neighbors' property taxes.	design: architect Steven Holl, who won the Aesthetic Atrocity Award...	-0.01	0.03	-0.50	0.62
The new residents would fit well into the neighborhood.	design: architect Steven Holl, who won the Aesthetic Atrocity Award...	-0.19	0.03	-6.97	0.00

Notes: Each row shows the estimated effect of varying the project's architect from exceptionally good to exceptionally bad on agreement with statements in the first column. Except for "I would find the new building attractive," these results are off-plan. All outcomes are rescaled to range from 0-1.

Table A13: Effect of Vignette 2 Design Manipulation on All Mechanisms

Outcome	Treatment	B	SE	T-stat	p-val
I would find the new building attractive.	buildinglook: Ugliest	-1.55	0.03	-44.59	0
The new building would make the block more attractive.	buildinglook: Ugliest	-1.15	0.03	-32.97	0
Crime would increase in the neighborhood.	buildinglook: Ugliest	0.27	0.03	8.30	0
Rents in the new building would be expensive.	buildinglook: Ugliest	-0.46	0.04	-13.05	0
The new residents would fit well into the neighborhood.	buildinglook: Ugliest	-0.25	0.03	-8.18	0
The new building would lead to higher apartment rents in the neighborhood.	buildinglook: Ugliest	-0.29	0.03	-8.82	0
The new building would lead to higher home prices in the neighborhood.	buildinglook: Ugliest	-0.33	0.03	-10.37	0
I would find the new building attractive.	buildinglook: Ugly	-0.96	0.04	-26.23	0
The new building would make the block more attractive.	buildinglook: Ugly	-0.70	0.04	-19.53	0
Crime would increase in the neighborhood.	buildinglook: Ugly	0.18	0.03	5.43	0
Rents in the new building would be expensive.	buildinglook: Ugly	-0.23	0.04	-6.45	0
The new residents would fit well into the neighborhood.	buildinglook: Ugly	-0.14	0.03	-4.65	0
The new building would lead to higher apartment rents in the neighborhood.	buildinglook: Ugly	-0.22	0.03	-6.45	0
The new building would lead to higher home prices in the neighborhood.	buildinglook: Ugly	-0.20	0.03	-6.15	0

Notes: Each row shows the estimated effect of varying the project's photograph from "Pretty" to "Ugly" or "Ugliest" on agreement with statements in the first column. Results on statements about prices and rents are off-plan. All outcomes are rescaled to range from 0-1.

Table A14: Video Experiment: Estimated Effects on Pre-Registered Measures of Posited Mechanisms

Outcome	Treatment	B	SE	T-stat	p-val
Feeling thermometer: Big cities	Health Benefits of Cities	0.041	0.007	6.175	0.000
It is unhealthy to live in big cities	Health Benefits of Cities	-0.101	0.007	-13.597	0.000
Apartments increase crime	Homelessness	-0.015	0.007	-1.936	0.053
Feeling thermometer: Big cities	Homelessness	-0.013	0.007	-2.029	0.043
Cities look better with fewer tall apartments	Modern Buildings Ugly	0.069	0.007	9.328	0.000
Feeling thermometer: Big cities	Modern Buildings Ugly	-0.023	0.007	-3.407	0.001
New apartment buildings are ugly	Modern Buildings Ugly	0.142	0.008	18.234	0.000
Apartments increase crime	Urban Unrest and Looting	0.021	0.008	2.632	0.008
Feeling thermometer: Big cities	Urban Unrest and Looting	-0.035	0.007	-5.224	0.000

B Full Text of Descriptive Survey Items

The full text of the survey items used to construct Figure 6 are as follows:

- Cities Nicer With Few Tall Apt Bldgs: "Cities look nicer when they have fewer tall apartment buildings."
- New Apts Ugly: "New apartment buildings are ugly."
- Apt Bldgs Worsen Traffic: "Building new apartment buildings makes local traffic worse."
- Apt Bldgs Worsen Schools: "Building new apartment buildings makes local schools worse."
- Apts Increase Crime: "More apartment buildings in a city will lead to more crime."
- Development Increases Rents: "Building new apartment buildings causes rent for existing apartments to go up."
- Development Increases Home Prices: "Building new apartment buildings causes prices for existing homes to go up."
- Apt Living Unhealthy: "Living in an apartment building is unhealthy."
- Cares Who Lives In Neighborhood: "I care a lot about what kinds of people live in my neighborhood."
- Annoyed By Neighbor's Paint: "I would be annoyed if someone in my neighborhood painted their house so it looks really different than other buildings nearby."
- Preservationism Index (from (Larsen and Nyholt 2024*a*)): Mean of the following items (each respondent saw a random sample of four): (1) "I don't think too much about what my neighborhood looks like." (reverse); (2) "I don't have strong feelings about how my neighborhood looks." (reverse); (3)"My neighborhood is truly unique."; (4) "I'm happy with the way my

neighborhood looks."; (5) "I want my neighborhood to change." (reverse); (6) "I want my neighborhood to retain its special character."; (7) "I mostly live where I do for practical reasons." (reverse); (8) "I can't imagine living anywhere other than where I do now."

- Racial Resentment Item: "Over the past few years, blacks have gotten less than they deserve."
- African Americans Therm: Feeling thermometer for "African-Americans."
- Owner/Renter: Renter (omitted category is homeowner). Owner/Renter: Other (omitted category is homeowner). Respondent says either "I live as a guest or dependent of friends or family (don't pay rent)" or "Other."

C Video Scripts and Descriptions

Urban Unrest and Looting

- **00:00 – 00:17 (Studio Intro):** The anchor announces a **1:00 PM curfew in Beverly Hills** aimed at preventing looting. She remarks that the affected areas symbolize the divide between "the haves and the have-nots."
- **00:17 – 00:24 (Alexander McQueen):** Mayhem at the luxury clothing store **Alexander McQueen**, with looters shown stealing thousands of dollars worth of goods.
- **00:24 – 00:50 (Santa Monica):** Footage from **Upscale Santa Monica** shows a woman physically attempting to block looters, one armed with a hammer, from smashing their way into a store. She is violently pulled away, and looters make off with **bicycles and backpacks**.
- **00:51 – 00:59 (Patagonia):** Looters flee the **Patagonia** store carrying **surfboards**; one individual makes a getaway on a motorcycle.
- **01:00 – 01:16 (Vans Store):** Chaotic scenes at a **Vans store** show looters rushing out with shoeboxes; one man slips and falls. An interviewee states, "People need to start chaos in order to make their point across."
- **01:17 – 01:28 (Santa Monica Place):** Aerial footage captures crowds of looters pouring out of the **Santa Monica Place Mall**, while street-level shots show individuals strolling with allegedly stolen merchandise.
- **01:29 – 01:34 (San Bernardino):** Disturbing night footage shows a man using an aerosol can to torch a **San Bernardino DMV** building.
- **01:35 – 01:50 (CVS Pharmacy):** Reporter **Jim Moret** stands inside a destroyed **CVS** pharmacy. Amidst ringing alarms, he describes the store as "ransacked," noting items were thrown from shelves and destroyed.

Health Benefits of Cities

- **00:00 – 00:08 (Archival Footage):** The video opens with black and white footage of industrial smokestacks and crowded streets, followed by a graph titled "19th Century Cities By Population Density."

  Narrator: "For most of human history, cities were kind of terrible for your health."

- **00:09 – 00:16 (Speaker Intro):** The host, a woman with long red hair, speaks to the camera. The scene cuts to modern footage of crowds on busy sidewalks.

  Speaker: "Living in a city actually shortened your life expectancy compared to rural areas. But today? It's the opposite. Cities can actually help people live longer. So, what changed?"

- **00:17 – 00:27 (Historical Context):** Historical photographs show crowded tenement streets with laundry lines, followed by vintage posters warning of Cholera and cartoons depicting Cow Pox vaccinations.

  Speaker: "Well, in the mid to late 1800s, city life often meant dealing with outbreaks of things like cholera, tuberculosis, cowpox, and living in close quarters meant diseases spread quickly."

- **00:28 – 00:45 (Industrial Innovations):** Footage shows workers digging trenches for pipes, factory workers at sewing machines, and a scientist examining bacteria. A clip shows a child in a hospital oxygen tent.

  Speaker: "But by the early 1900s, innovations in water treatment cleaned up drinking water. Investments in sewer systems removed waste. Indoor plumbing reduced exposure to harmful bacteria. Garbage collection kept streets cleaner, and workplace reforms improved safety. Modern medicine, like penicillin, helped fight infections."

- **00:46 – 00:58 (Modern Medicine):** The visual shifts to the exterior of a large modern

hospital complex, followed by interior shots of bright laboratories and doctors analyzing CT scans.

Speaker: "Today, cities are home to top-tier hospitals, cutting-edge research labs, and medical specialists. This proximity naturally fosters collaboration and innovation, which then drives forward progress in public health."

- **00:59 – 01:14 (Paradox of Proximity):** Shots of crowded streets and lecture halls are juxtaposed with a patient undergoing radiation therapy on a large medical machine.

  Speaker: "It's kind of funny—what once made cities breeding grounds for disease—people being packed close together—has also made them the perfect incubator for thwarting disease, and for spurring other medical breakthroughs."

- **01:15 – 01:25 (Lifestyle Factors):** The video shows people walking down cobblestone streets, browsing outdoor farmers markets, and exercising in a large green park.

  Speaker: "Beyond medicine, cities help promote healthy lifestyles. Walkable neighborhoods encourage daily exercise. Easy access to world-class healthcare saves lives. Strong social connections help combat loneliness."

- **01:26 – 01:36 (Conclusion):** A visual transition wipes from a vintage street view to the same street in the modern day. An older couple walks arm-in-arm, and the video ends with a high-angle shot of a city skyline.

  Speaker: "Cities have come a long way over the past few hundred years. So much so that they're now some of the best places to live a longer, healthier life."

Homelessness

- **00:00 – 00:17 (Studio Intro):** The news anchor introduces a report by Kelsi Thorud regarding San Francisco's homeless crisis. She poses the question of whether current actions

are “helping the problem or just doing more harm than good,” noting that advocates are criticizing the weeks-long effort to force unhoused people off the streets.

- **00:17 – 00:36 (Sweeps Criticism):** Over footage of police and workers in hazmat suits spraying down sidewalks and clearing debris, the reporter explains that it has been a month since the city began “aggressively sweeping homeless encampments.” Jennifer Friedenbach, executive director of the Coalition on Homelessness, argues that the sweeps are futile, stating they are “really just moving people across the street and back” rather than successfully placing large numbers of people into shelter.

- **00:36 – 01:14 (The Tenderloin):** Walking with the reporter near the intersection of Leavenworth and Turk, the reporter notes that city employees and police come to the block at least once a week. Friedenbach corrects that it happens “every four days,” pushing everyone out even if there are only one or two tents present.

- **01:14 – 01:31 (City Policy and Arrests):** Amidst visuals of city workers cleaning up, police detaining individuals, and a truck loading debris, the reporter outlines the official stance: the Mayor claims sweeps are necessary for “health and safety.” The reporter notes that while services are offered, the city claims a majority refuse them, leaving officials “no choice but to kick them out or even arrest them.”

- **01:31 – 02:08 (Worsening the Issue):** Friedenbach argues that the current policy is counterproductive. She explains that issuing fines and fees to people who cannot pay them, and citing them for having “no other choice but to be out here,” only makes the problem worse. She asserts, “There’s never been a ticket that has led somebody off the streets.”

- **02:08 – 02:22 (Proposed Solutions):** The video concludes with shots of tents set up against residential buildings. The reporter explains that Friedenbach advocates for converting vacant downtown buildings into housing to help people get back on their feet. Friedenbach ends the

report with a reminder of the humanity involved: “A tent is a piece of fabric... who’s inside that tent is a human being.”

Modern Buildings Ugly

- **Historic Downtown (00:00 - 00:07):** The video opens with a POV walk through a narrow, charming European street lined with unique, colorful, historic buildings featuring ornate details and balconies. This scene is praised for its character and atmosphere.

- **Modern Residential (00:08 - 00:16):** The scene shifts to “newly built” areas featuring sterile, boxy apartment complexes painted in uniform or muted colors (greys, beiges, pale greens), which the narrator describes as a “cultural dead zone” lacking charm.

- **Corporate District (00:17 - 00:35):** The setting transitions through modern, blocky apartment/mixed-use buildings (00:17-00:21) before showing images of massive, cold **glass-and-steel skyscrapers** (00:22-00:33), described as “glass cubes” and “depressing” by the narrator.

- **Commercial/Retail (00:36 - 00:48):** The visual compares the warm, intricate interiors and facades of **historic market halls** (00:36-00:39) against modern retail spaces, which are shown as **sprawling commercial centers** (00:40-00:48) that look like large metal/white boxes surrounded by parking lots.

- The narrator concludes by questioning the shift in architectural philosophy, asking why contemporary buildings are constructed as bland, depressing boxes rather than maintaining the aesthetic beauty of the past.