Sustainability is on top of the urban agenda. It dominates current agendas in architecture and urban design, and gives impetus and a new sense of mission to a blasé or apathetic profession. Normative literature on sustainable architecture and urbanism is abundant and checklists and best practice collections are plentiful, reflecting a number of positions or even conflicting discourses. The seminar will look critically into the way the question of sustainability is being addressed in contemporary urban design, and especially it seeks to address the question of how we understand the predominant ‘compact city-model’ in urban design. How can we qualify the link between sustainability and compact cities? To what extend is density the tool to achieve sustainable cities? Is compactness and density just the most readily available tool for cities, in continuation of traditional planning methods? And is the identity focused postmodern compact urban model really the optimal solution? In the seminar the question is pursued in two directions. Firstly, what does ‘compact’ mean? Is it a measurable quality relating to energy consumption and travel distances, a purely aesthetical preference or is there a more complex and architectural answer to the question? Secondly, what do we mean with ‘sustainability’? How is the concept constructed in society and how is it perceived by designers?

Speakers:

Simon Guy is a professor of architecture and director of the Manchester Architecture Research Centre and has a background in urban sociology and engineering. In his research he has explored the socio-economic processes underpinning urban development processes and practices and the changing logics of infrastructure networks, and their relationship to urban change. In a series of articles and books, he has investigated the contested nature of urban and architectural sustainability. He has identified a diverse range of interpretations of the environmental challenge, and suggested pathways to sustainability and argues that notions of sustainability are socially constructed and make up a wide field of competing logics. His new book, Reinterpreting Sustainable Architecture: Theories, Discourses, Practices (with G. Farmer) is forthcoming.

Jens Kvorning is a professor at the Center for Urban Planning at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, School of Architecture. He was the project leader on a report to the Agency for Spatial and Environmental Planning which belongs to the Ministry of the Environment, investigating densities and programs in existing urban areas. The report discusses how existing, well known contexts may function as models for sustainable urban form. Download the report: Den tætte by – danske eksempler, Miljøministeriet, By- og Landskabsstyrelsen (http://l.dk/ba1221)

Poul Bæk Pedersen is a practicing architect (Bæk, Simonsen & Aaris arkitekter) and an associated professor at the Aarhus School of Architecture. He was the leader of the Compact City Project who set out explore the concept of density as a sustainability indicator. This happened thorough an interaction between design practice and environmental assessment modeling, and resulted in the book Sustainable Compact City, published in 2009.