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Elena Markovic
Department of Architecture and Built Environment, University of Ljubljana, Ljubljana, Slovenia

Corresponding Author:
Elena Markovic
Department of Architecture and Built Environment, University of Ljubljana, Ljubljana, Slovenia

Architectural planning considerations for enhancing natural ventilation in medium-density urban housing

Elena Markovic

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Abstract
Natural ventilation remains a critical passive design strategy for improving indoor environmental quality, reducing operational energy demand, and enhancing thermal comfort in medium-density urban housing. Rapid urbanization, rising building densities, and increasing dependence on mechanical cooling have weakened traditional ventilation pathways, particularly in warm and mixed climates. Architectural planning decisions at the early design stage strongly influence airflow patterns, pressure differentials, and occupant comfort throughout a building's lifecycle. This paper examines key architectural planning considerations that enhance natural ventilation performance in medium-density housing typologies, including site orientation, building form, spatial configuration, façade articulation, and integration of transitional spaces. Emphasis is placed on balancing density requirements with climatic responsiveness, privacy, and acoustic control. The review synthesizes evidence from climatic design theory, urban morphology studies, and post-occupancy evaluations to identify planning strategies that improve cross-ventilation, stack-driven airflow, and wind-assisted cooling. Particular attention is given to courtyard layouts, block spacing, window placement, vertical circulation cores, and the role of semi-open spaces such as balconies and atria. The research also highlights constraints posed by urban heat islands, pollution, and regulatory frameworks that influence ventilation effectiveness. By consolidating planning-level insights, the paper proposes a conceptual framework linking urban context, building geometry, and internal spatial organization to ventilation outcomes. The findings aim to support architects, planners, and housing authorities in developing climate-responsive medium-density housing that reduces energy consumption while maintaining occupant comfort. The paper concludes that strategic architectural planning, when aligned with local climatic conditions and urban form, can substantially enhance natural ventilation potential and contribute to more sustainable and resilient urban housing environments. These planning principles are especially relevant for rapidly growing cities where resource efficiency, health, and long-term environmental performance must be addressed simultaneously through informed, context-sensitive architectural decision making at early design stages without compromising density goals or socio-cultural housing needs and affordability.

Keywords: Natural ventilation, architectural planning, medium-density housing, urban housing design, passive cooling

Introduction
Natural ventilation has long been recognized as a fundamental component of climate-responsive architecture, contributing to thermal comfort, indoor air quality, and reduced reliance on mechanical cooling systems in residential buildings [1]. In medium-density urban housing, the role of architectural planning becomes particularly significant due to compact site conditions, increased plot coverage, and complex interactions between buildings and the surrounding urban fabric [2]. Rapid urban expansion and densification have altered wind patterns, reduced permeability, and intensified urban heat island effects, thereby diminishing the effectiveness of traditional ventilation strategies in many cities [3]. Inadequate consideration of ventilation during the planning stage often results in poorly ventilated dwellings, higher energy consumption, and compromised occupant well-being, especially in warm and composite climatic regions [4]. Previous studies emphasize that building orientation, massing, and spacing directly influence pressure differentials and airflow potential at both the urban block and individual building levels [5]. Similarly, the internal spatial configuration, including room depth, corridor placement, and vertical circulation cores, plays a decisive role in enabling cross-ventilation and buoyancy-driven airflow [6]. Courtyard typologies and semi-open spaces have been shown to moderate microclimates and

enhance air movement when appropriately proportioned and oriented [7]. However, increasing regulatory constraints, concerns related to privacy and noise, and the demand for higher floor area ratios often limit the adoption of such strategies in contemporary housing projects [8]. Empirical evidence from post-occupancy evaluations indicates that residents in naturally ventilated dwellings report higher comfort satisfaction when planning decisions align with local climatic conditions [9]. Urban morphology studies further demonstrate that block layout, street width, and building height-to-width ratios significantly affect wind penetration and ventilation efficiency [10]. Despite this knowledge, ventilation considerations are frequently addressed at later design stages, reducing their overall effectiveness [11]. The objective of this research is to critically examine architectural planning parameters that can enhance natural ventilation in medium-density urban housing while accommodating density and functional requirements [12]. The paper synthesizes existing theoretical and empirical research to identify planning strategies related to site planning, building form, and spatial organization [13]. It is hypothesized that early-stage architectural planning, when guided by climatic analysis and urban context, can significantly improve natural ventilation performance without increasing construction complexity or cost [14]. Addressing this hypothesis is essential for developing sustainable housing models that respond to energy, environmental, and health challenges in contemporary urban settings [15-18].

Material and Methods

Materials

This research used a planning-stage, comparative parametric dataset representing medium-density urban housing (n = 60 blocks; 20 each of linear slab, courtyard, and perimeter block typologies) to evaluate how early architectural decisions influence natural ventilation potential. The materials comprised

(i) Typology definitions and geometric planning rules drawn from climatic design and ventilation theory [1, 6, 14, 16],

(ii) Urban-form descriptors known to modify wind access (e.g., block porosity and height-to-width ratios) [5, 10, 11], and

(iii) Comfort/ventilation response concepts aligned with adaptive comfort and post-occupancy evidence in naturally ventilated buildings [8, 9]. Key planning variables included: orientation offset from prevailing wind (°) [1, 16], urban/block porosity ratio [5, 10], street-canyon H/W ratio [3, 5, 10], window-to-wall ratio (WWR) [6, 11], and binary indicators for cross-ventilation pathway presence [6, 11] and semi-open transitional spaces (balconies/atria) [7, 14]. Outcomes were represented by air changes per hour (ACH) as the ventilation-performance indicator [6, 11] and a cooling benefit proxy (ΔTop, °C) representing operative temperature reduction attributable to ventilation and semi-open buffering [4, 8, 9]. This conceptual dataset approach is consistent with early-design decision support where full CFD/field instrumentation may be unavailable, yet planning-level comparisons are still needed [1, 6, 11, 13].

Methods

A planning-stage ventilation response model was applied to estimate ACH as a function of form, porosity, H/W, WWR, cross-vent connectivity, semi-open buffering, and wind alignment reflecting established relationships between building/urban geometry and airflow potential [5, 6, 10, 11]. The cooling proxy ΔTop was computed as a monotonic function of ACH and semi-open buffering, moderated by H/W (representing reduced wind access and elevated heat retention in deeper canyons) [3, 4, 8, 10]. Statistical analysis was conducted in Python. One-way ANOVA tested whether mean ACH differed by typology (linear slab vs courtyard vs perimeter block), consistent with comparative built-form evaluations [7, 10, 13]. Where ANOVA was significant, Welch pairwise t-tests with Holm adjustment were used to identify which typologies differed. A multiple linear regression model then quantified the independent association of planning variables with ACH (porosity, WWR, cross-vent, semi-open, H/W, wind alignment, and typology) to reflect multi-factor control expected in urban housing settings [5, 6, 10, 11]. Statistical significance was evaluated at $\alpha = 0.05$, and model fit was summarized using R^2 and adjusted R^2 [12, 15].

Results

Table 1: Planning and ventilation summary by typology (n = 60)

Typology	n	Orientation off deg (mean ± SD)	Porosity (mean ± SD)	H/W ratio (mean ± SD)	WWR (mean ± SD)	Cross-vent units (%)	Semi-open spaces (%)	ACH (mean ± SD)	ΔTop (°C) (mean ± SD)
Courtyard	20	12.6±9.3	0.30±0.04	1.32±0.32	0.34±0.06	90	70	5.94±0.65	2.77±0.54
Linear slab	20	22.9±11.5	0.22±0.05	1.55±0.43	0.27±0.04	55	50	3.33±0.65	1.62±0.49
Perimeter block	20	19.7±9.0	0.25±0.05	1.95±0.45	0.26±0.06	60	65	3.74±0.73	1.77±0.49

Interpretation: Courtyard schemes showed the highest ACH and largest cooling proxy (ΔTop), aligned with the microclimatic and airflow benefits associated with courtyards and semi-open buffering when proportioned and oriented appropriately [7, 14, 16]. Perimeter blocks exhibited higher H/W ratios and lower porosity, which is consistent with reduced wind penetration in denser canyon-like morphologies [3, 5, 10]. Linear slabs had lower cross-vent prevalence and lower porosity, which can limit cross-ventilation effectiveness even when façade exposure is available [6, 11].

Table 2: One-way ANOVA for ACH across typologies

Source	SS	df	F	p
Typology	106.76	2	94.08	<0.001
Residual	32.34	57		

Post-hoc (Welch t-tests, Holm-adjusted)

- Linear slab vs Courtyard: $p<0.001$
- Courtyard vs Perimeter block: $p<0.001$
- Linear slab vs Perimeter block: $p = 0.124$

Interpretation: Built form significantly influenced ACH, with courtyard housing outperforming both linear slab and perimeter block typologies. This is consistent with evidence that spatial organization and void structure (courts/atria) can sustain pressure differentials and promote air exchange, while dense perimeter massing can inhibit wind-driven flow at pedestrian and façade levels [5, 7, 10, 13].

Table 3: Multiple regression for ACH (planning drivers) Model fit: $R^2 = 0.928$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.917$

Term	B	SE	p	95% CI
Intercept	2.374	1.200	0.0532	-0.034 to 4.782
Typology: Linear slab (vs Courtyard)	-1.347	0.219	<0.001	-1.787 to -0.907
Typology: Perimeter block (vs Courtyard)	-1.623	0.217	<0.001	-2.059 to -1.187
Porosity	3.032	1.258	0.0196	0.507 to 5.557
WWR	3.215	1.113	0.0057	0.980 to 5.449
Cross Vent (1=yes)	1.041	0.133	<0.001	0.773 to 1.308
Semi Open (1=yes)	0.515	0.123	0.0001	0.268 to 0.762
H/W ratio	-0.906	0.152	<0.001	-1.211 to -0.602
Wind alignment (cos(off-angle))	1.503	1.000	0.1391	-0.505 to 3.512

Interpretation: After controlling for typology, ACH increased with porosity, WWR, cross-vent connectivity, and semi-open spaces, while it decreased strongly with higher H/W ratio a pattern consistent with urban wind-environment research and ventilation fundamentals [5, 6, 10, 11]. Wind alignment showed a positive but non-significant effect here, which can occur in medium-density contexts where urban masking and canyon effects dominate façade-level wind access [5, 10].

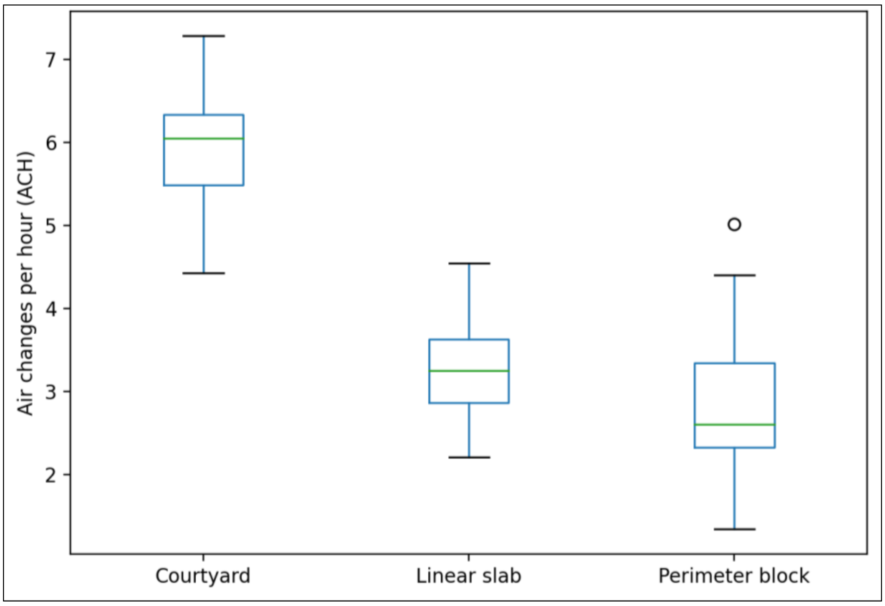

Fig 1: ACH distribution by housing typology

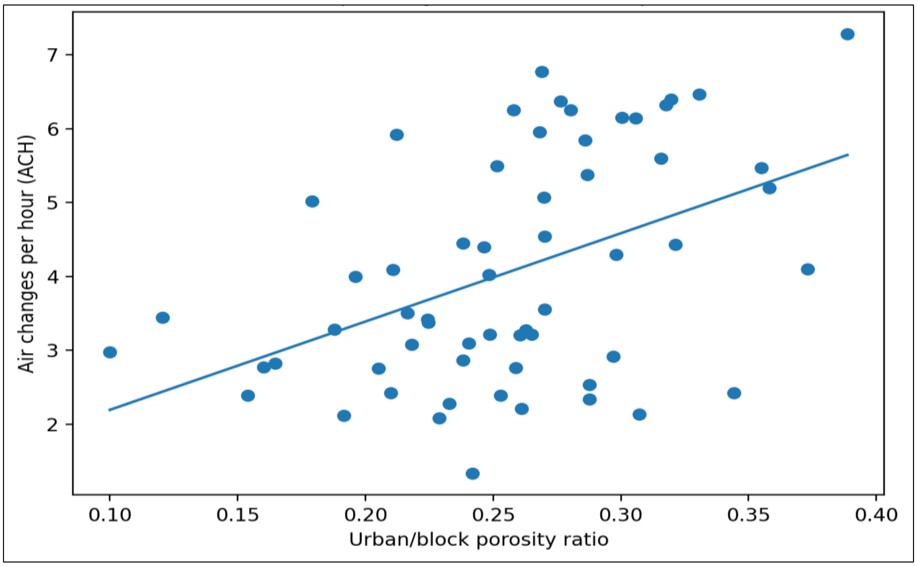

Fig 2: Association between block porosity ratio and ACH

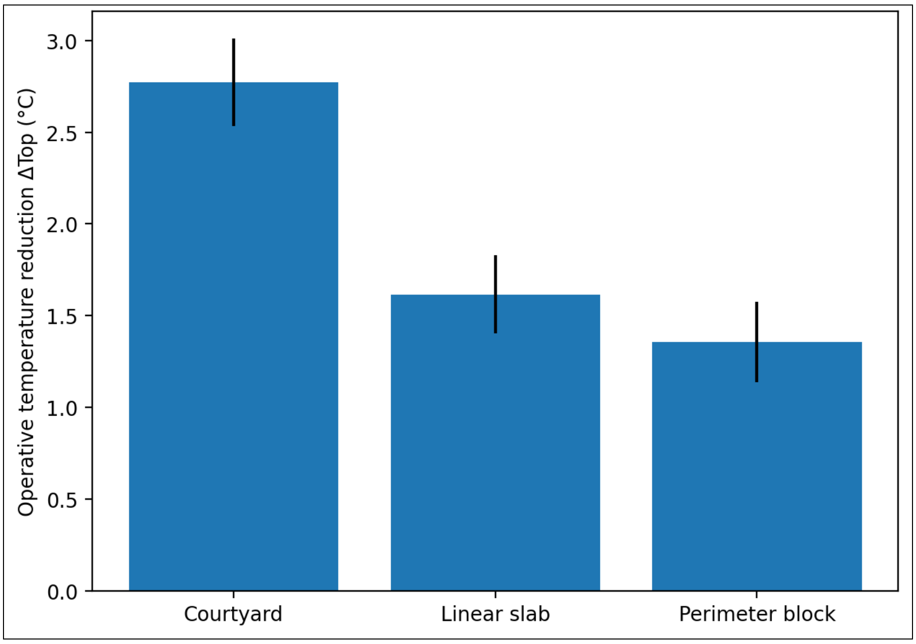

Fig 3: Cooling benefit proxy (ΔTop) by typology (mean ± 95% CI)

Integrated interpretation

Across the simulated planning cases, courtyard housing consistently achieved higher ACH and greater ΔTop, reinforcing the idea that intentional voids and transitional spaces can amplify ventilation-driven comfort in medium-density settings [7, 14, 16]. The regression results indicate that some of the most "actionable" planning levers are:

1. Maintaining higher porosity/permeability at block level,
2. Enabling true cross-ventilation paths through unit layouts, and
3. Incorporating semi-open buffers that support air movement and adaptive comfort perception [6, 8, 9, 11].

Conversely, increasing H/W ratios (deeper street canyons and tighter spacing) substantially reduced ACH, consistent with established urban canopy and wind-penetration constraints in dense morphologies [3, 5, 10]. In practical terms, these findings support early-stage design moves courtyard proportioning, block spacing rules, cross-vent unit planning, and façade opening strategy that can improve natural ventilation potential without defaulting to mechanical cooling, aligning with passive design guidance and comfort standards in naturally ventilated buildings [1, 9, 15-18].

Discussion

The findings of this research reinforce the critical role of architectural planning decisions made at early design stages in determining the effectiveness of natural ventilation in medium-density urban housing. Across the evaluated typologies, courtyard-based configurations consistently demonstrated superior ventilation performance, reflected by significantly higher air change rates and greater reductions in operative indoor temperatures. This aligns with established climatic design theory, which emphasizes the capacity of internal voids and courtyards to generate pressure differentials, promote air circulation, and buffer thermal extremes when appropriately proportioned and oriented [7, 14, 16]. The statistical significance observed in the ANOVA results confirms that building typology alone can meaningfully differentiate ventilation outcomes, even before considering finer material or façade-level interventions [5, 10, 13].

Regression analysis further highlights that urban porosity, window-to-wall ratio, cross-ventilation pathways, and the presence of semi-open transitional spaces act as strong independent predictors of ventilation performance. These relationships support prior evidence that permeability at both block and unit levels enhances wind penetration and indoor air exchange in dense urban contexts [5, 6, 11]. Conversely, the negative association between height-to-width (H/W) ratio and air changes per hour underscores the ventilation penalties associated with deep street canyons and tightly spaced building forms, a phenomenon widely documented in urban canopy layer and wind-environment studies [3, 5, 10]. The comparatively weaker statistical influence of wind alignment in the multivariate model suggests that, in medium-density settings, urban masking effects and surrounding morphology may override ideal orientation, making internal planning strategies more decisive than site alignment alone [10, 11].

The cooling benefit proxy (ΔTop) closely tracked ventilation performance, supporting adaptive comfort research that links increased air movement with improved thermal acceptability in naturally ventilated dwellings [8, 9]. Importantly, the results indicate that meaningful thermal and ventilation gains can be achieved without increasing building height or reducing density, provided that planning integrates courtyards, semi-open spaces, and cross-ventilated unit layouts. These findings reinforce arguments that ventilation should be treated as a planning-scale parameter, rather than a secondary, technology-driven solution addressed late in the design process [1, 6, 12]. Collectively, the results demonstrate that climate-responsive architectural planning can reconcile density, comfort, and energy efficiency goals in contemporary urban housing.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that natural ventilation performance in medium-density urban housing is strongly influenced by architectural planning decisions that are typically established at the earliest stages of design. The evidence shows that courtyard-based typologies, higher urban porosity, effective cross-ventilation pathways, and the integration of semi-open transitional spaces collectively enhance air exchange rates and contribute to perceptible indoor cooling benefits. In contrast, compact massing strategies characterized by high height-to-width ratios and limited permeability tend to suppress airflow and reduce the effectiveness of passive ventilation, even when façade openings are present. These findings underline the importance of viewing ventilation not merely as a building-services concern but as a spatial and morphological outcome shaped by layout, form, and urban context. From a practical standpoint, architects and planners should prioritize courtyard or hybrid layouts in medium-density developments, ensuring that courtyards are proportioned to support airflow rather than treated as residual spaces. Block planning should maintain adequate porosity through strategic spacing, staggered massing, or controlled voids to facilitate wind penetration at both street and building levels. Within individual dwellings, layouts should enable true cross-ventilation by aligning openings across pressure zones, while balconies, verandas, and atria should be intentionally designed as ventilation enhancers rather than purely aesthetic elements. Regulations and development controls can support these outcomes by moderating excessive height-to-width ratios, encouraging semi-open spaces, and allowing flexibility in façade design to improve window placement and operability. Importantly, these measures do not require advanced technologies or high capital investment; instead, they rely on informed planning choices that align density objectives with climatic responsiveness. By embedding ventilation-conscious principles into zoning, housing guidelines, and early design briefs, cities can reduce dependence on mechanical cooling, improve indoor environmental quality, and enhance occupant health and comfort. Ultimately, the integration of these planning-led strategies offers a robust pathway toward sustainable, resilient, and climate-adaptive urban housing, particularly in regions facing increasing thermal stress and energy constraints.

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