



Middle-class households with children on vertical family living in Hong Kong



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ABSTRACT

Although apartment living is widely seen as inappropriate for children, the number of families living in flats is rising, particularly in large global cities. What does the (new) urban condition of vertical family living mean for households with children? This question is explored in a qualitative study among middle-class parents in Hong Kong. They were invited to reflect on the specific housing situation of the apartment, the high-rise neighbourhood and the global city. The results of this study indicate the deconstruction of the single family home as the most aspired type of housing. Apartment living is not considered to be particularly negative by the families. The high-rise neighbourhood, however, is seen as constraining neighbouring. Only a minority of the families, particularly those residing in small-scale estates with good facilities for children, socialize with neighbours. Hong Kong as a large city is valued because of career chances and its efficient transport and safety, but child friendly (green) spaces and work-life policies are deeply missed. In the context of global competition, cities should be advised to pay higher attention to family needs in urban planning.

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Introduction

High-rise housing, including high-density living, has become prominent in many regions, most typically in South-East Asia. Newly built cities in China consist largely of numerous tall flats meant for housing the ever-growing population migrating from rural to urban areas. Hong Kong and Singapore are the densest cities in the world, with high-rise housing as the exclusive form of urban development (Yeh & Yuen, 2011: 4). And also in Europe and Australia the growth of high-density apartment housing is apparent (Turkington, van Kempen, & Wassenberg, 2004; Whitzman & Mizrachi, 2009). Across the globe, the number of high-rise living environments is expected to grow.

More than half of the world population lives in cities and many of them will be housed in high-rise apartment buildings. They will include young families despite that urban apartment living is widely seen as inappropriate for households with young children (Costello, 2005; Van Vliet, 1983). In their Australian study, Easthope and Tice (2011) show that there is a serious disparity between the

identified population of high rises—namely young and old people without children—and the actual population of high-rise living, which encompasses families with children as well. Some European studies indicate there is a growing number of young family households living in inner-city apartment buildings (Boterman, Karsten, & Musterd, 2010; Butler, 2003; Hjortol & Bjornskau, 2005).

Changing practices of vertical living families have not yet received the scientific and policy attention needed. Fragmented research indicates that families and children are not among the first city builders keep in mind when developing apartment building complexes (Fincher, 2004), and many families have no other choice than to accept (Howley, 2010; Mitrany, 2005). Although flats may be considered to be in great contrast with the traditional ideal of the single-family home, it will increasingly become the housing situation of many young families across the globe. Therefore the main research question is: what does the 'new' urban condition of vertical living mean for families with young children? In this paper, the issue of vertical living is explored on three geographical scale levels: the apartment, the estate/neighbourhood and the city as a whole. To answer the research question, we situated our study in Hong Kong, where vertical living is the standard for all types of households, including families with small children. The aim of this paper is to contribute to the knowledge of vertical family living: what can be learnt from the Hong Kong case?

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Literature

Within western cities, high-rise apartment buildings – largely built in the social renting sector – have long been associated with the urban poor. Flats were considered to represent urban decay and family disorganisation (Costello, 2005). Instead of cramped housing in the city, middle-class families in particular left for the suburb and its spacious single-family houses and private gardens. Government policies stimulated suburbanisation processes and contributed to the social construction of the single-family house as the ideal for family living (Jarvis, 2013; Karsten, Lupi, & de Stigter-Speksnijder, 2013; Mougenot, 1988). But the close link between suburbanisation and traditional families began to loosen with the growing participation of mothers on the labour market. Time pressures related to the daily combination of care and career forced families to look for a house in the city. Practical timespace considerations, such as short distances to work and school, made cities more attractive for dual earner families with small children (Karsten, 2007). The urban turn observed in family housing is particularly visible among resourceful families with working parents. From their perspective vertical family living in a dense urban environment became an option, although not yet a new ideal. As Costello (2005) and Fincher (2004) make clear in the context of Australia urban professionals incline to neglect family needs when designing those new inner city housing estates. Many inner city developments focus on the building of apartments with luxurious elements that make them a desirable form of housing associated with the higher classes, but not very practical for families. This situation may be different in cities such as Hong Kong, Singapore and the new Chinese mega-cities where it is very clear from the beginning that all newly built apartments will also house young families.

There is some indication that the social construction of the single-family house as the happy family home is a western projection (Appold & Yuen, 2007), but studies on vertical family living are rare and many date back to the period before 1980 (Van Vliet, 1983). Family living in flats is different from the residential practices of single-family houses in at least three ways. First, apartments tend to be smaller than single-family houses, which can result in cramped family living. Second, high-rise apartments create different time-space trajectories due to the absence of private outdoor space and relatively complicated access to public outdoor space. Residents have to negotiate lifts and stairs to leave their homes, which can be problematic for young children (Stevenson, Martin, & O'Neill, 1967; Van der Burgt & Gustafson, 2013). Negative outcomes on children's outdoor play, freedom of movement and personal development are also reported in some recent Australian studies (Dockery et al., 2010; Whitzman & Mizrachi, 2009). But the claims of negative effects in many studies are relatively weak. Most studies focus on social housing estates with poor conditions and relatively deprived families, meaning the negative conclusions cannot be generalised. Appold and Yuen (2007) state they do not want to over-estimate the negative effects of high-rise living. They compared daily time schedules in Singapore high-rise housing and US low-rise housing and did not find significant differences.

Third, apartment living creates a different sense of neighbourhood (Wekerle, 1976). Instead of a horizontally organised neighbourhood with streets and neighbouring gardens, neighbours in apartment buildings live vertically and are not visible from inside the house or directly accessible for social interactions and play. What is the significance of the neighbourhood in flat environments? Some studies in Hong Kong and Singapore show that there is less interaction between neighbours in high-rise living and that high-rise residents are less willing to turn to their neighbours in

time of need (Appold & Yuen, 2007; Forrest, La Grange, & Ngai-ming, 2002; HDB, 2000). But according to Chiu (2002), the little time investment in neighbours in Hong Kong is rather due to long working hours and high family demands than to high-rise living. Forrest et al. (2002) found in their Hong Kong study that a sense of neighbourhood is influenced by everyday routines. Housewives and elderly people with a strong orientation to local facilities develop a stronger sense of neighbourhood than busy middle-class residents working elsewhere. However, none of the studies about neighbouring in high rise highlight the territorial ties of young middle-class working families who combine the features of both taking care of children and the household and of the busy middle class life with long working hours.

In summary, high-rise housing has often been evaluated as not an appropriate type of housing for families. Most studies, however, focus on public housing with poor conditions and deprived residents. This makes it difficult to assess to what extent the constraints of vertical family living are related to the poor conditions of the public housing estates or to high-rise living itself. In addition: the literature about vertical family living in Asian contexts is only limited. Both biases justify the focus of this study: vertical family living in a middle class Asian context.

Research design

Hong Kong is a city of over 7 million people, almost all living in high-rise housing on Hong Kong Island, Kowloon and the New Territories. The high-rise environment is surrounded by hilly nature with beaches and islands with scattered villages. Strict regulations on preserving nature makes the available building space limited and the property prices high. The production of flats is highly standardised. Floor plans are widely copied, and the same goes for facades, buildings and even whole estates. Apartments are generally limited in their number of rooms and square metres. The ongoing struggle for space leaves little room for extravagant housing, such as that of the new rich in mainland China (Zhang, 2010). Hong Kong has made the transformation from a 'making and trading' city to a service and financial city, which is obvious from the large rise in the (international) professional work force. Working hours are long and many middle class working families employ live-in female domestic workers from overseas countries (Cortes & Pan, 2009). It is among those professional families that the research on vertical family has been conducted.

The fieldwork for this research was carried out from February through April 2013 by a non-native researcher. The qualitative research consisted of twenty interviews that collected information about forty middle class parents and their children (Table 1) The middle class status of the respondents is reflected in their professional status, their educational level (college or beyond) and their ability to speak English. They can be described as middle-class citizens with some wealth, in between the very wealthy and the ordinary population (Forrest, La Grange, & Ngai-ming, 2004: 215–7). Respondents don't live in the wealthiest districts of Hong Kong Island, around the Peak or along the scenic beaches of the south, nor do they live in social housing flats. Interviewees were found in three different ways. First, colleagues working at two different universities in Hong Kong were approached. They provided some email addresses of families who might be willing to participate. Second, the researcher interviewed Hong Kong informants and asked them to look for families who would be interested in participating in the research. Third, some interviewees were spontaneously solicited on playgrounds and in other public spaces by the researcher herself.

In this study, daily practices and evaluations of family vertical living are considered to be dependent on two sets of variables: the

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