



Parenting and neighbouring in the consolidating city: The emotional geographies of sound in apartments[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Apartment residents share space vertically and horizontally, and apartment materiality shapes their experiences of sound and space. Across diverse contexts, rapid urban population growth has prompted a shift towards higher-density dwellings – often a pronounced departure from cultural norms of detached, suburban housing. Yet little is known about the everyday emotional experiences of apartment residents. This paper draws on insights gathered from families, *with children*, living in apartments in Sydney, Australia – a city undergoing profound densification. Developers typically market high-rise apartments as a transitional housing form for singles and couples. However, a sizeable number of families with children now live in apartments, and as our findings suggest, they struggle with expectations that children (and their sounds) do not belong. These families' experiences of high-density living reveal how the materiality of sound and built form interact with cultural norms to shape how apartment spaces are understood and inhabited. So too, how the emotions of everyday life co-construct apartment spaces and social relations (both within families and between neighbours). Physical proximity leads to tensions around acoustics and privacy, while apartment materiality creates an emotional dilemma between being a good parent and a good neighbour. Sound can lead to feelings of guilt, shame, and stress. We discuss such travails, as well as families' spatial, temporal and material coping strategies. Cultural and technical norms, we contend, must shift to support families with children in the consolidating vertical city.

1. Introduction

Apartment developments are transforming urban morphology globally. Across diverse contexts where low-density suburbs were previously the norm, this shift towards high-density dwellings represents a major transition from the ideal of detached, suburban housing. This is particularly so for families with children, for whom houses are seen to support middle-class familial values, practices and identities (Dowling and Power, 2012). In contrast to the privacy and space afforded by idealised and often expansive houses (Dowling and Power, 2012), apartments are typically characterised by smaller spaces, close physical proximity and sharing of built features and facilities with unrelated others (Easthope and Judd, 2010). Housing design, materials, size and form iteratively shape everyday practices and experiences (Shove, 2003; Klocker et al., 2012), yet there is little understanding of how apartment-dwellers negotiate their everyday emotional lives. Scholars have called for further qualitative research into experiences of living in apartments, to determine whether urban consolidation and densification policies meet the needs of a diverse population (Gleeson and Sipe,

2006; Easthope and Judd, 2010; Woolcock et al., 2010; Easthope and Tice, 2011).

Our focus is on the everyday lives of families with children; a social group for whom many apartment developments were not explicitly intended. This paper explores the emotional terrain of parenting in apartments, within close proximity to neighbours. While in some contexts, children living in apartments are already common place (for example, Singapore, Hong Kong, Paris and Moscow), apartments have typically been viewed as a transitional stage in the housing cycle of city residents in the USA, Canada and Australia. High-rise apartments in newly densifying cities are envisaged as places for young childless couples, young singles or empty nesters. Families are expected to move to detached houses after having children (Fincher, 2004; Easthope et al., 2009). Social and cultural norms position children in apartments as atypical, inappropriate even (Horin, 2011; Harrison, 2012). Planners and developers reproduce such expectations (Fincher, 2004), as evidenced in building design and marketing (Martel et al., 2013; Gower, 2015). Yet apartment living is a growing reality for many families with children. In Sydney, Australia – the location of the current study –

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families with children under the age of 15 comprised 25 per cent of the city's apartment population in 2016 (ABS, 2016). For some of these families apartment living is a choice based on location and lifestyle (Schwarz, 2017). For others, growing housing unaffordability makes apartment life a financial necessity (Kennedy and Blumer, 2017). It is a circumstance increasingly shared in such cities as Vancouver, Auckland and San Francisco undergoing both real estate booms and rapid densification. Irrespective of motive, families with children *are* living in apartments, and their numbers are increasing rapidly in neighbourhoods where high-density living has not historically been the norm.

The following section situates this study in a broader body of literature on families, children and the city (Gleeson and Sipe, 2006). We then review relevant research on materiality, sound and home; as well as sound, parenting and surveillance. Our empirical case, based on interviews and home tours with families residing in apartments in Sydney, is presented as a series of vignettes that demonstrate how families struggle with their children's noise, and associated guilt and shame, at different times of night and day. For several of the families interviewed, relationships with neighbours were deeply unsettling, and parents felt undue pressure to compromise on their parenting ideals. In the context of transitions towards higher-density urban morphologies, we argue that sound is a key locus of contestation shaping families' emotional geographies. Accordingly, technical and cultural norms need to shift to be more inclusive of families; and more mindful of how materials, emotions and sound play out in everyday lives.

2. Families, children and the city

Around the world, increasing numbers of families reside in higher-density environments (Karsten, 2015). This trend has been attributed to new spatial manifestations of global real estate capital investment (such as grand urban renewal schemes focused on high-rise residential apartments); social changes (e.g. more women in the paid workforce), and the lifestyles enabled by higher-density living due to the proximity of amenities (Karsten, 2007, 2015; Brydon, 2014; Rogers, 2016). While there are a number of benefits to higher-density living, consolidation plans in Sydney (and other cities globally) have been criticised for neglecting families' changing relationships with urban space. The complexity of apartment populations is not reflected in apartment designs, thus creating challenges for diverse household configurations (Easthope and Judd, 2010; Klocker and Gibson, 2013).

Despite such trends, the experiences of families living in apartments with children remain under-researched. The extant literature is predominantly quantitative (Randolph, 2006; Easthope et al., 2009; Easthope and Tice, 2011; Whitzman and Mizrachi, 2012); has tended to focus on lower socio-economic groups (e.g. Randolph, 2006); and on the spaces surrounding apartment complexes, rather than indoor spaces (Whitzman and Mizrachi, 2012). Previous studies have drawn attention to issues facing children and their parents in apartments, relating to the physical environment (e.g. lack of private space) and social context (e.g. safety, affordability). Important insights of relevance to our own research are found in Brydon (2014) and Nethercote and Horne (2016). These qualitative studies have foregrounded the lived experiences of families with children in apartments, including issues relating to internal space (e.g. number of bedrooms, size of living areas and storage challenges). Nethercote and Horne (2016) drew particular attention to the ways in which families mediate intra-familial needs for privacy and separation through time-zoning, interpersonal and socio-material negotiation and readjustments. They also shed light on families' use of shared apartment facilities and sense of community. However, less is known about how interactions *between* apartment residents – that is, with neighbours – are shaped by the materiality of apartment designs, layouts and features. And moreover, how families respond emotionally to living in apartments, especially ones where children were not originally imagined as inhabitants – and which may be poorly designed to accommodate for their (sometimes noisy) presence.

This paper accordingly explores the emotional experiences of living and parenting in close proximity to unrelated others, sharing physical, social and acoustic space. It considers how the internal materiality of apartments shapes interactions with neighbours, and how parents *feel* when parenting in this context (with implications for their parenting practices). We adopt a socio-material perspective to explore relationships between building materiality, sound, emotions and everyday practices of parenting and neighbouring, within apartments. In so doing, we draw attention to the ways in which emotions are mutually co-constructive of space and social relations.

3. Materiality, sound and home

Sound provides an under-utilised sensory departure point for understanding the fabric of urban spaces (Connell and Gibson, 2003; Atkinson, 2007). Nevertheless, inspired by antecedent work in cultural geography on soundscapes (Smith, 1994), an interest in emotional and affective geographies of sound has emerged in recent years, with researchers seeking to better understand the impact of sound on emotions, bodies, place and everyday experiences (Thompson and Biddle, 2013; Duffy et al., 2016; Doughty et al., 2016; Gallagher, 2016; Gallagher et al., 2017). Sound is not merely observed; it is *felt*, with the capacity to move bodies and affect particular emotions and social relations (Doughty et al., 2016; Gallagher, 2016). Sound has political agency and therefore can be a source of contest or conflict in certain spatio-temporal settings (Revill, 2016).

Duffy and Waitt (2013) argued that attention to the everyday visceral experiences of sound offers new insights into geographies of home. Emotional responses to sound provide an opportunity to understand where the body feels at home and whose (or what) sounds belong (Duffy et al., 2011). Such observations coincide with the relatively recent 'material turn' in housing studies, which foregrounds socio-material interactions between spaces, objects and subjects within the home (Jacobs and Gabriel, 2013; Nansen et al., 2011; Jacobs and Smith, 2008; Blunt, 2005). The home is understood as a material *and* affective space, 'shaped by everyday practices, lived experiences, social relations, memories and emotions' (Blunt, 2005:506). Research into the materiality of the building and the lived experience of sharing space has provided insights into politics of domesticity, intimacy and privacy (Blunt, 2005; Gorman-Murray, 2007); and into the negotiations that underpin families' daily lives as they share physical and acoustic space (Dowling and Power, 2012).

Despite cities being layered with different sounds, discourses surrounding home are entwined with ideas of personal autonomy and quietude (Adams et al., 2006; Atkinson, 2007). Sounds deemed to intrude into these personal spaces are understood as noise. Insights from literature on noise and acoustics, demonstrate the complexity of distinguishing between sound and noise, as interpretations are highly subjective and dependent on the context of the sound to the listener (Adams et al., 2006; Gallagher et al., 2017). The relative presence or absence of sound prompts visceral reactions that interact with residents' everyday lives in meaningful ways (Atkinson, 2007; Duffy and Waitt, 2013). The implications of being surveilled by sound-prints, leads people to manage themselves in ways which reduce sounds made at different times and places, to avoid becoming a source of annoyance (Atkinson, 2007). And indeed, regulations in apartment blocks frequently demand such self-management. In the state of New South Wales (NSW), where Sydney is located, strata schemes divide buildings into individual 'lots' or units; apartment-owners own their individual lot, and also share ownership of common property with other lot owners (NSW Government, 2015a). Each strata scheme has by-laws that owners, tenants and visitors must follow. The model by-law for residential strata schemes in NSW relating to noise reads: "An owner or occupier of a lot ... must not create any noise on a lot or the common property likely to interfere with the peaceful enjoyment of the owner or occupier of another lot or of any person lawfully using common

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