



## 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

**Table 1**  
Profiles of the families interviewed.

Number	Age/sex	Roots abroad <sup>a</sup>	Children's age	District	Enclosed estate/building	Floor	Tenure/number of rooms	Years of stay
1	39/Female	no	Children: 6 and 9	Hong Kong Island	Building	36th	Owner/4	12
2	35/Female	one	Children: 4 and 1	Hong Kong Island	Estate	22nd	Owner/4	2
3	39/Female	two	Children: 6, 5 and 3	Hong Kong Island	Estate	14th	Owner/6	2
4	37/Female	two	Child: 2	Hong Kong Island	Building	13th	Rented/3	3
5	45/Male	one	Children: 14 and 15	Kowloon	Building	6th	Owner/3	12
6	34/Male	two	Child: 1	Kowloon	Building	14th	Rented/3	1
7	42/Female	two	Child: 4	Hong Kong Island	Building	3rd	Rented/6	4
8	39/Female	no	Children: 3 and 8	Hong Kong Island	Estate	16th	Owner/3	1
9	43/Female	no	Child: 6	New Territories	Estate	57th	Owner/3	2
10	41/Female	two	Children: 6 and 15	New Territories	Estate	7th	Rented/4	5
11	48/Male	two	Children: 12 and 17	Hong Kong Island	Building	1st	Rented/4	9
12	50/Male	two	Children: 12 and 17	Kowloon	Estate	8th	Owner/4	12
13	40/Female	no	Children: 6 and 11	New Territories	Estate	30th	Rented/4	10
14	48/Male	one	Children: 9 and 12	New Territories	Estate	3rd	Owner/5	10
15	45/Male	no	Children: 9 and 12	Hong Kong Island	Estate	15th	Owner/4	1
16	38/Male	no	Children: 3 and 6	New Territories	Estate	6th	Owner/3	2
17	40/Female	no	Children: 7 and 10	Hong Kong Island	Estate	35th	Rented/4	1
18	36/Female	no	Child: 0	New Territories	Estate	14th	Owner/4	1
19	51/Female	no	Child: 11	Hong Kong Island	Estate	2nd	Owner/4	18
20	46/Female	no	Children: 7 and 14	Kowloon	Estate	72nd	Rented/5	2

<sup>a</sup> Born abroad and/or studied/worked abroad.

household and the housing situation. All families involved are two-parent households with school-age children. They work mostly in internationally oriented organisations as researchers, teachers, managers, engineers, designers and consultants. They are working professionals with busy lives and all, except for three households, employ a domestic worker. Two mothers (2, 12) have quit their jobs because they want to be more fully involved with raising their children. Four mothers manage to work part-time by starting their own businesses from home (3,4,7,13). None of the fathers follow these 'lowering' trajectories. The majority of the parents are Hong Kong-born (26/40), but in half of the households, one or both of the parents were either born outside Hong Kong or have spent time abroad for study or work. Housing conditions differ by location, the number of rooms and the quality of the immediate outdoors/the estate. Six families live in the New Territories at some distance of central Hong Kong. With some exceptions (four) families have 3–4 room apartments, including the living room. Fourteen respondents live in an estate with a range of facilities and six live in a building with limited or no amenities.

The majority of the interviews took place at the respondents' work places during a coffee/lunch break or after working hours in a coffee shop. An out-of-home interview was clearly an interviewees' request, but the inability to observe the private housing situation forms a serious limitation of this study. In some cases, we agreed to do some observations of the interviewees' estates afterwards. Interviews took about ¾ of an hour and started with a list of questions about the household (see Table 1) and daily routines. This was followed by two blocks of open questions, of which, one is discussed in this paper: parental narratives of the housing situation on different scale levels. The other block of questions addressed parental cultures and children's everyday lives (see: Karsten, 2014). Open questions were fully recorded (in three instances the interviewees felt uncomfortable with recording, and the researcher had to take notes) and transcribed. Sometimes we did not manage to finish the interview in time, and continued by email. Using email worked very well and was also used to clarify issues afterwards.

For the sake of triangulations, interviews with informants (N = 7) were held with housing specialists (academic/designer/broker) and children/family specialists (academic, NGO, teachers) and observations at housing estates and other spaces frequented by young families, such as playgrounds, were added. How do parents with young children in Hong Kong assess vertical family living? In

the following sections, the answer on this question is structured along three inter-related scale levels: the apartment, the estate and the city of Hong Kong. Quotations are numbered related to the number of the interviewee in Table 1.

#### *The apartment*

Why have these families chosen the apartment they currently live in and how satisfied are they? Evidently, Hong Kong families don't have much of a choice other than apartment living; but do they prefer other locations, or do they dream of different types of housing? The mean duration of stay is relatively short (Table 1) and moving houses is quite common. The interviewees spoke pragmatically when talking about their housing situation. They are adept at moving to better locations for better prices. Some had just sold their house and were now living in a temporary (rented) apartment waiting for another (owner-occupied) apartment with better conditions. This may result in having more than one apartment at the same time, one rented and one owned, as a just-moved parent explained: "We wanted to live closer to the school and we are now renting out our own property"(20). This family has quite a history of changing houses. First, they moved to live closer to the children's school located in West Kowloon, and then again to find a more profitable apartment. "We are more or less circling around West Kowloon (laughing)".

Interviews reveal that choosing an apartment was led by two major considerations: the size and price of the apartment and the location in relation to the children's school and the parents' work. Housing in Hong Kong is expensive, and most families live cramped. Rooms are generally small, some parents work from home and often there are extra persons living in the apartment, such as domestic helpers or grandparents. Children do not always have a room of their own. During one of the interviews held at home, a mother showed her child's room that was shared with the helper: the middle of the room had a curtain dividing the space in two. She comments: "One more room would be better. Then our child would have a space for herself. Now she shares a room with the help. She needs more privacy when she grows older" (4). The mother hopes to have the resources to buy a bigger apartment by the time her child enters primary school. Not surprisingly, families living in cramped situations want to have more space, but they also stressed that in Hong Kong you cannot expect to live spacious. With

understatement: “I wouldn’t complain if my apartment would be bigger (laughing)” (2).

A bigger apartment was of some concern, but the apartment’s location is also very important: “It’s all about location, location, you know, in Hong Kong” (1). In this respect, parts of Kowloon and Hong Kong Island, with their ample supply of good schools and working spaces, are the most popular places to live. The New Territories are generally seen as less favourable but are acceptable because of lower prices and when the location has adequate facilities and connections. One interviewee (18) who lives in the New Territories: “We moved to this estate because of the location. We already lived in Sha Tin and it has very convenient connections to my work and also to many other parts of Hong Kong. It’s close to the shopping mall, near to the MTR, there is a nice park nearby and a library. Also a play group he can go [to]”. The mother felt that the new apartment was well located, even though it is not in the central part of Hong Kong. Another interviewee (16) would prefer living in the New Territories because of the small towns with more space for children to play and more nature nearby. However: “Living in Sai Kung [in the New Territories] ...that wouldn’t be possible for us with our work and all the activities of the children. That would end up in lots of travelling”. Time-spatial considerations of housing, school and work locations are important to these busy parents. That may include searching for an apartment near grandparents, as they sometimes engage in caring tasks, such as picking up the children from school or bringing them to their after-school clubs.

The dominance of apartment buildings in Hong Kong means that less consideration is given to alternative ways of housing. The respondents were asked: Have you ever dreamt of a single-family house? Most had not and did not think of it as desirable: “I don’t think of me becoming happier in a single family house. We do have elevator, but no problems with that” (14); “No, I don’t think it’s complicated to live with small children at a high floor” (17); “No, I don’t think so, people use the lift” (19). At times, this question was not fully understood by the interviewees, who would answer with, “What do you mean?” as if this possibility never rose in their minds. After some explanation (a separate house with a garden), a respondent stated, “Oh, you mean, a house? Never thought about it, and not possible, no” (9). While the lack of alternative housing in Hong Kong undoubtedly contribute to such answers, many interviewees have had some international experience and could be familiar with other types of housing abroad. But even parents born abroad did not see apartment living as particularly complicated. Some even mentioned advantages to apartment living. As one mother (10) born abroad explained in response to the question of if she had ever dreamt of a single family house: “Yes, because I was brought up in one! So I know the merits of it. Lots of open space. But it is not possible here in Hong Kong. And I don’t think it is complicated with children in high rise. It is more convenient at the contrary. You can track them, can keep an eye on them. I think it’s OK. You learn to compromise. You know you have a management, you know your kid is more protected than in a single family home where children can run out easily. I don’t prefer high rise but it is convenient”. She emphasised that children growing up in single family homes are less safe. Some others were also eager to comment on the downsides of the single-family home: “I’m quite satisfied with our apartment. I cannot imagine, a house with garden, lots of work to take care of, all the plants. I wouldn’t like that. Too much work. My apartment is OK” (8). One respondent narrate about the bad experience she had living on the 1st floor: “Too many insects there, and cats and dogs everywhere. I didn’t like it” (18). Several families also like living on higher floors because of the views and the potentially better air quality: “The view is magnificent; sometimes we have eagles in front of the window!” (20).

All families interviewed live in more or less the same apartment building within the urban area of Hong Kong and did not feel special or unique in terms of their housing situation; they didn’t have the feeling that they had something ‘distinguishing’ to display. The apartment and its location were not observed by respondents as an identity marker. This may be different for wealthier Hong Kong residents. Some of the interviewed parents work in the interior design sector and stated that they had a lot of work: rich residents who seemingly live in the same apartment building as everyone else put a lot of energy in restyling their apartment’s interior as an identity marker.

To summarise, Strong time-spatial motivations urge parents to live in the dense parts of Hong Kong, preferably a short distance from an MTR station, school and work. Apartment living matches the search for efficiency in daily life. The single-family house is deconstructed as the ideal family home, in that many interviewees do not aspire to it in this phase of life. A parent who is quite satisfied with his apartment that is walking distance from his work and a short distance to his children’s schools: “At this moment we wouldn’t know a better place to live. It is the right location. But when we are retired, we would like to have a home near the sea” (12).

#### *Vertical neighbourhood?*

In line with the literature on high-rise living, in this study also we do not see high levels of neighbouring among our respondents. Several parents agree that even on the floor they live, they do not know all their neighbours. However, we do see some differentiation. When looking at social interactions between neighbours, we see that respondents who live in a single building are less inclined to be in contact with neighbours than others living in an estate. Of the six families who live in a single building, only one has regular contact with one of her neighbours: another young family with whom she organises play dates every other week. The mother (4) explains that the fact that the play dates have to take place in the private space of the home is something of a disturbance. She would like to have some renovations performed in the building that would accommodate a play space for the children living in the building. So far, she has not been able to convince the owner of the building. This is something she regrets, but others do not: “We don’t socialise and that’s fine to me” (5).

Families who live in an estate share communal facilities (club house, swimming pool, playground and sometimes sporting facilities) and therefore have plentiful opportunities to meet neighbours if they would like. Out of the 14 families living at an estate, five socialise regularly with neighbours, five see only their children socialising with neighbouring children and four have not developed any neighbouring contacts beyond incidentally greeting. One mother (2) with many neighbouring contacts explains that she knows many of the other families who live in the same estate, which is of moderate height (22 floors). They see each other at the club house where the husbands play hockey, the mothers socialise and the children play. She emphasised the practicality of club facilities when you have small children: “When my son was younger and his brother was not yet born, we used to go out with the dogs and the baby more often. Like the Peak and the greenery over there. That’s a little bit more complicated today and now we have all that facilities of the club, so we prefer to stay home. Everything we need is there!” Social interactions with neighbours in the estate are easier when parents know each other from events related to sports membership (quote) or children’s school. One mother who had purposefully moved houses because of the school catchment area was content with an ‘unexpected’ consequence: “There are a lot of classmates we meet at the estate. Many children go to the same

school and the parents know each other. We made new friends after we moved to the estate” (9).

Not having schoolmates of the children within the estate is, thus, one possible explanation for not having social ties with neighbours, but there are other explanations, as well. These explanations work together to contribute to low uses of estate facilities and low levels of neighbour contact. Some respondents made clear that the scale of the estate is too large to get to know your neighbours: “We live in a very huge private estate. Mac, mega! ... I believe that by now (it's still developing) over 20,000 or may be 15,000 people live in that one place” (20). Additionally, facilities are sometimes considered to be too low standard or too crowded. A family who does not use the facilities at the estate: “It's approximately 20 years old now. We don't have a club house, but we do have a swimming pool and an outdoor playground and a tennis court. However, most of the time, we go to the public park ... The playground is outdated and not very attractive for the children” (16). Some indicated that the frequently relocating population of Hong Kong has a negative influence on neighbourly relations: “We don't have much of social life with the neighbours. Not so much, because the people move around very quickly. My block has 6 families. I think only ourselves and the one on the ground floor stayed, so all other people changed houses every two or three years. I don't really know them to be honest. I think ... when property prices go up, they want to make good profits” (14). This father does not regret missing out on the more traditional neighbourhood life but some others do. A mother with a six-year-old son sees her child playing outdoors regularly, but as she is from abroad, she would like to become more connected with the parents of her son's friends: “In the estate, it is classmates, mostly the children. On two occasions I have invited his friends and their parents [to our] home, but it is not the culture in Hong Kong. Not to get people to meet at home, they meet outside. So I have tried to invite the classmates along with the mothers, not the entire family. They were happy to be here, but there was just one other Canadian and Indonesian family that attempted a similar thing”. It is difficult to assess whether this reluctance to invite others into the home is typical in Hong Kong, but it is striking that among the parents who socialise with neighbours or who want to socialise more, most are foreigners or are Hong Kong-born who have lived abroad for some time. Some families who are unsatisfied with their social connections are purposefully making new arrangements elsewhere. One family (7) lives in a large and luxurious apartment but without any communal facilities. At their son's preschool, they met other families who live in an estate with good facilities for children. The family decided to buy a small apartment there that will give them access to a swimming pool and sport facilities where they can meet other parents from school and find playmates for their child: “That's how we solved the problem of the facilities (laughing)”. Another family who also reported limited contact with neighbours found a similar solution: the family became members of a club elsewhere. “We don't socialise. Again that's the vertical way of living. And being on the first floor you don't see anybody in the lift ... It was very difficult to adjust to. And that whole process ended up with a membership of the A. club. That's partly our search for the social; we knew some people there, you can socialise and so on”. In this case, it was not for the sake of the children, who were already at the age where they were developing their own social lives, but rather the decision was for the parents who wanted a more active social life.

Another dimension of neighbouring—offering mutual help—was found to be nearly absent among respondents. Some—again, mostly foreign—families have comic stories about this: “Once I had to go abroad for business and I had a plant and I wanted my neighbour to water it for a week. When I came back and picked up the flower, it

was dead. They forgot it, or didn't understand?” (6). From the interviews, it becomes clear that the employment of helpers reduces inter-family contact. During weekdays, and also in urgent cases on the weekend, domestic helpers are the ones who solve problems, and in doing so, they are the ones who have contact with other helpers and their families. Domestic helpers are escorting the children, walking dogs and do many other small tasks. Thus, middle-class families in Hong Kong are not dependent on their neighbours for odd jobs. According to some interviewees, asking neighbours for a favour is not part of the Chinese culture and would be considered strange: “We cannot imagine to ask the neighbours. They would be very surprised and think that we have a problem” (12).

In summary, a vertical sense of neighbourhood is not well developed among Hong Kong families, but nor is it completely absent. Those living in an estate have the best chance of making connections with neighbours, but only when there are good facilities, the estate is not too large and families have already mutual networks outside of the estate (particularly when their children attend the same school). As far as there is a sense of neighbourhood, it is constructed in the weekend and on ground floors where the facilities are.

#### *Hong Kong as a family place to live*

When asked whether Hong Kong is a good place for a family to live, respondents answered mostly negatively: “I wouldn't say so!”. The most commonly mentioned negative reasons had to do with high daily pressure at work and at school, the air pollution and the lack of green and other family-friendly spaces. A mother of three (5): “It's no way ideal. It's polluted, there is no places for children to really do things. Having said that, there are but you have to make an effort. Like Shek O, it's quite far. Beaches are often very crowded, you have to put a lot of effort in reaching nice places for the children. They don't really have like children-friendly restaurants. You cannot take a kid, and think the people will understand. They think children [are] too noisy, there [are] not [many] children friendly places to go. Cars [are] everywhere. There is no place for children to stretch out. Even the park here [at the estate], we are lucky, but there are many mosquitos, particularly in the summer”.

The positive attributes of living with a family in Hong Kong were reported as well; the high standards of public transport and urban safety are highly valued. A father of a baby: “I appreciate the safety. Also, in the evening you can go out and that feels good. Transportation is very good. The weather is OK. The one thing I suppose I miss, [is] being able to go into nature. There is hiking here in Hong Kong, I want to take her out when she is older. It's all very designated, not like I was used to when I was young. Anyway, I hope to encourage my daughter to hike together”. As this quote makes clear, respondents evaluate Hong Kong differently for adults and children. As adults, they can handle constraints and see advantages of living Hong Kong: “Yes it's very convenient living here in Hong Kong with everything around in the city, but it's too busy for a living with kids and too little room for them to play around, except going farther away from home to the countryside” (20). Another mother expressed powerfully, “Hong Kong is a city to make money [in], not to raise children” (4).

In this study, internationally oriented professional parents compare living in Hong Kong with other cities in the world. Some had previously worked in Singapore and made a negative comparison with Hong Kong: “In Singapore, [there] is more space and the facilities for children are better. In Hong Kong, there are too many people, too much traffic and the air quality is bad” (7). However, some parents who were born in China think of Hong Kong as a relatively good place to live: “First, the air is not as

polluted as in other big Chinese cities. Second, the education is not that demanding, and not yet that competitive. Third, healthcare and housing are better. But, compared to the US, I think life on the whole is better over there. However, we don't want to live in the US. Hong Kong is nearer to our cultural roots" (12).

## Conclusion and discussion

This paper reports on families with young children living in high-rise apartment buildings. As far as we know, this is the first study on this topic in Hong Kong. Primarily based on qualitative interviewing, the study has an exploratory character and focuses on one specific group of families: middle-class parents with young children. Further research is needed to generalise the findings and to highlight the experiences of other groups, most notably lower-income families and children themselves who didn't have a voice in this research.

In this paper the topic of vertical family living is explored on three different scale levels - the apartment, the neighbourhood and the city – which results in three main conclusions. First, living in an apartment as a family was considered a matter of course. The families interviewed showed a rather pragmatic view on apartment living. Families easily change houses in search of better locations. Complications for children and their parents were rarely referred to, apart from that, the size of most apartments is generally considered too small. The lift makes the outdoors accessible. They do not dream of living in a single-family house. Most even think of low-rise living as less convenient (too much work), less hygienic (too many dogs and cats), less safe (burglars) and less healthy (too noisy and too much air pollution). Whereas western studies suggest the apartment is less suitable for young families and most suitable for empty nesters, this Hong Kong study suggests the opposite. It offers a deconstruction of the single-family house as the ideal home for young families. What constitutes ideal housing differs across space, and what in the western world is considered as (in)appropriate may differ greatly from other regions in the world (Appold & Yuen, 2007; Yeh & Yuen, 2011).

Second, while apartment living is widely accepted, families do make negative comments on high-rise housing estates as neighbourhood. Their viewpoint has much to do with the social implications of living in flats. Neighbouring in terms of social interaction and mutual help are less developed. Several families report that they do not know their neighbours, not even those who live on their floor. And because of live-in domestic helpers, it is also unusual to ask a neighbour for help. Community building takes place only under specific conditions. Families living within relatively small scale estates have neighbouring contacts when facilities are good and when overlapping networks exist. This finding underlines the importance of intersections of routines (compare Forrest et al., 2002) for building a sense of neighbourhood. This study further indicates that the low neighbouring levels are related to the relatively fast changes in Hong Kong: both at the level of the household (migration) and at the level of the city (demolishing of old and building of new estates).

Third, experiences with family living in the city of Hong Kong are ambivalent. The interviewed families relate the merits of the city with adult's interests in the first place: work, career and money. In addition, parents in Hong Kong appreciate the safety and the good public transportation of Hong Kong. Time spatial considerations are comparable with the experiences of urban families elsewhere (Hjortol & Bjornskau, 2005). But Hong Kong families don't define their high-rise city as a child-friendly city. They complain about the built environment and the lack of green spaces that are only available at a great distance from the home. But they complain even more about their long working hours and the high

pressure on children's school achievements (see also: Karsten, 2014). There is little time left for leisurely family outings. That may be the reason that none of the families noted the culturally diverse Hong Kong as something attractive they embrace (compare Butler, 2003). The interviewed parents appreciate Hong Kong for adult functional reasons, but they dislike the way the city facilitates family life, and they seem to be indifferent to its specific urban vibe.

In their assessment of the city of Hong Kong, the families interviewed compare their living situations to international standards. They are critical of the absence of work-life policies, and they would prefer smaller-scale estates with child-friendly facilities, as well as more green areas within walking distance. Those family demands will be a challenge for global high-rise cities that want to attract and retain a professional work force.

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