

## **Social representations of children in higher density housing: enviable, inevitable or evil?**

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Apartments and townhouses are increasingly being advocated by developers and planners as an attractive and cosmopolitan housing choice and as a solution to a range of urban ills in Australian cities. Brisbane, Australia's third largest city, has seen a dramatic increase in the construction of this relatively unfamiliar housing type in the past decade. Despite the proliferation of higher density developments, the appropriateness of apartments as a place to raise children is often contested by planners, developers and residents and in the newspaper media. In addition, Australian cities have often been criticised for failing to create child-friendly environments. Commentators have cited sedentary and over-protected lifestyles, lack of opportunity for recreation and self expression and high levels of parental anxiety as reasons why Australian cities are adversely impacting children (Gleeson & Sipe 2006). Prior research has noted a strong emphasis on childless, high income households in the discourses and marketing strategies surrounding this housing typology (Costello, 2005; Fincher 2007). This has historically served as a justification for the lack of provision of child-friendly facilities, areas and design in inner-city locations.

The following paper employs Social Representation Theory, a theory derived from social psychology, to identify the ways in which 'common sense' understandings of children in higher density housing is collectively constructed in Brisbane. The theory provides a critical lens to evaluate the way in which certain representations about children and housing are shared and supported while excluding, defending and limiting other representations in the process. The purpose of this paper is two-fold; firstly, it will identify key social representations of children in higher density occurring in the newspaper media and in the discourse of planners, developers and residents. Secondly, it will seek to draw attention to the power imbalances and planning

implications evident in these social representations. In doing so, it will draw attention to the culturally mediated processes through which attitudes to housing and child-rearing are expressed and discuss how housing consumption choices and expectations impact on different groups of people.

30 interviews and 100 newspaper articles published between 2007 and 2014 were thematically coded to identify key social representations at play. The decision to combine interviews and media analysis is common within social representation scholarship as it offers a way to discover both how individuals conceptualise the topic in informal discussion and also the ideas circulating in society and communicated in the media. Interviews were conducted with planners (n=10), developers (n=9), local councilors (n=2) and community members (n=9). The newspaper articles and interviews were thematically coded to identify dominant social representations. In this way, the paper joins an existing body of housing research concerned with the use of language as a way of subjugating or privileging certain groups within the city (Jacobs, Kemeny & Manzi, 2003).

The identified social representations, related to urban areas, apartments, suburbia, market mechanisms and housing affordability, have the capacity to shape how housing is delivered and consumed. Findings support an existing body of research that has remarked on the dominant child-free and lifestyle-based nature of higher density discourses. This representation is in stark contrast to the wholesome construction of suburban lifestyles (Mee, 2010). However, the research also identifies an emerging counter-argument that supports a future where children in higher density is inevitable or even desirable. These representations are still strongly based in notions of consumption, lifestyle and perceived Gen Y tastes, but are increasingly being employed to naturalise the idea of children in higher density. While this representation may result in the design of increasingly child-friendly cities, the silencing of lower-income households suggests a continuing emphasis on wealthy unit dwellers at the expense of more vulnerable families.

Analysis also identified two supplementary social representations used when discussing children in higher density housing. The first draws heavily on economic and market cycle principles to understand the rapid increase in higher density housing

aimed at investors and single-person or Double Income No Kids (DINK) households. This representation uses a pragmatic economic rationale to justify a focus on one and two-bedroom apartments that aren't suitable for families, suggesting that the lack of families is an understandable product of market forces that may or may not change in the future. The second social representation employs ideas about ethics, housing affordability and empathy for the children who will never afford housing in the future if appropriate higher density is developed for them to move into. This representation pits selfish, ignorant and wealthy low density dwellers against future generations who will need a 'leg up' in the property market.

This paper posits that identifying social representations can help city planners and public authorities to understand how aspects of the city are understood and evaluated. The socially-mediated constructions of housing types and how they relate to different members of society can influence design, consumption and planning decisions. As Australian debate and scholarship moves towards escalating concern for an ageing population, the creating of child-friendly cities has appeared to lose saliency in public discourse (Gleeson, 2006). Understanding the way this relatively new housing type is understood is particularly pertinent in the context of delivering just cities that support the needs of some of their most vulnerable and disempowered inhabitants - children.

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