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Including the majority: Examining the local social interactions of renters in four case study condominiums in Sydney

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Abstract

Although an ever-increasing number of social interactions are taking place virtually, people's relationships with their neighbors remain important. Apartment residents make up a growing proportion of the population in cities worldwide, but there is evidence that many find it challenging to form and maintain local social connections, especially those renting their home. This can negatively impact physical and mental health, and have implications for the management of apartment complexes and local area social sustainability. In this paper, we draw on interviews (n=41) with renters of four large case study condominium complexes in Sydney, Australia, to investigate their local social interactions. The findings reveal that while many renters desire greater local connection, their opportunities and motivations are limited by factors relating to mobility, tenure security, prejudice, and exclusion from building-related governance. The paper concludes by considering the scope for interventions in design, management and governance to enhance opportunities for social connection.

Keywords: apartments; social connection; planning; weak ties; density; design

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Introduction

Compact city policies and increasing urbanization are together leading to rapid growth in the number of people living in apartments internationally (OECD, 2012). A key consequence of this trend is that more people are living in close physical proximity to one another (Randolph, 2006), in cities as diverse as Sydney, Athens, Paris, Portland (Oregon) and Singapore (Deacon, 2017; OECD, 2012; Yeh & Yuen, 2011). While this *physical proximity* can have beneficial effects at the level of both individuals and societies (Quastel et al., 2012; Westerink et al., 2013), there is growing evidence that many apartment residents find it difficult to establish and maintain a desirable level of *social proximity* with their neighbors. Apartment residents often report few social connections with other people in their local area (Gifford, 2007; Reid, 2015; Scanlon et al., 2018), desire more than they have (Easthope et al., 2017; Forrest et al., 2002; Thompson, 2019; Hirvonen & Lilius, 2019), and struggle to balance sociability with privacy in their buildings (Gifford, 2007; Reid, 2015). With growing proportions of people living in apartments, even in cities where low-density living is traditionally the norm, this situation is concerning for three main reasons: a lack of local social connection can have negative impacts on a person's mental and physical health (Eicher & Kawachi, 2011); may weaken the ability of apartment residents to work together to maintain and manage their buildings (Borisova et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2018); and can undermine the wider social sustainability of local areas (Dempsey et al., 2011; Sandercock, 2003).

This paper examines experiences of local social connection among residents of four large apartment complexes in Sydney, Australia, focusing on the needs and aspirations of private renters. This focus on private renters is a response to evidence from countries such as Sweden, Canada, Hong Kong, Germany and the USA that, compared with owner-occupiers, private renters are less likely to know their neighbors (Chaskin & Joseph, 2011; Farrell et al.,

2004; Forrest et al., 2002; Henning & Lieberg, 1996; Pollack et al., 2004), more likely to feel isolated (Franklin & Tranter, 2011; Hirvonen & Lilius, 2019) and be excluded from the governance of their buildings (Easthope, 2019; van der Merwe, 2012), and have greater desire for more local social connection (Hirvonen & Lilius, 2019; redacted for review).

By "private renters" we refer to people who rent their housing in the private rental sector (i.e., not in social or government housing). While many cities in North America and Europe have whole apartment buildings owned and operated as rental properties (see for example Fields (2015) on New York, Beswick et al. (2016) on London), in Australia this market is "embryonic" (Nethercote, 2020) and most private renters rent from small-scale property investors ("landlords" in Australia) who may own only one or a small number of rental properties, managed on their behalf by real estate agents (Randolph, 2006). Strata developments (Australia's equivalent of condominium) rely on pre-sales for development viability and because investors are more likely than owner-occupiers to purchase apartments prior to construction (Sharam et al., 2015), the resident profiles of these buildings tend to be dominated by private renters. At the most recent Census, over half (55%) of all residents of private 4+ story buildings in Sydney were renters (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). This situation is like that in many other large cities internationally, including London, Toronto, and Auckland (CANCEA & CUI, 2019; Easthope et al., 2020; Scanlon et al., 2018).

The paper begins by discussing the factors impacting the amount and types of social interaction renters have within their building and local area. We then outline the research approach, with assemblage thinking used to empirically explore the nature of local social connection in the case study complexes: people's needs, aspirations, and ideals; the barriers they encountered in forming social connections; and the ways in which such barriers were overcome by some participants. Based on these findings, the paper outlines targeted interventions in building design, management, and governance to afford social connections

for private renters in condominiums. The paper provides a theoretical contribution in operationalizing assemblage thinking for the study of building-based social networks. It also provides an empirical contribution by extending understanding of local social connection for an under-researched cohort (private apartment renters) and identifying opportunities for overcoming barriers to local social connection. The paper concludes by drawing on this evidence to make recommendations for policy and practice internationally.

Influences on the local social connection of renters in condominiums

The presence (or not) of local social connections can influence people's mental and physical health, as well as having implications for the management of condominiums and the wider social sustainability of an area. Local social connections can provide a sense of belonging and security (Granovetter, 1973; Kawachi & Berkman, 2001; Manzo et al., 2008), relieve stress by providing potential help and generating positive feelings through social interaction (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Kawachi & Berkman, 2001), and reduce loneliness, which has a clear association with physical health and mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). These connections may also support the development of social capital through increased trust, information flow and norms, as well as finding jobs (Granovetter, 1973; Coleman, 1988; Kleit, 2002; Putnam, 1995). They can promote collective efficacy based on shared expectations and mutual trust, aiding informal social control and social cohesion, providing people with help in need, and enabling the achievement of group goals (Forrest & Kearns, 2001; Sampson et al., 1997). Private renters in condominiums face barriers to local social connection on two fronts: due to their status as apartment residents, and due to their status as private renters.

Relationships in large apartment complexes tend to be more superficial due to privacy concerns, feelings of crowding and heterogeneity (Gifford, 2007; Reid, 2015; Scanlon et al.,

2018)[1], though this does not necessarily mean residents are less satisfied. In Chicago, Du and colleagues' (2017) research found high satisfaction with social interaction among high-rise residents (largely owners), which the authors attributed to a sense of safety and accessibility to amenities. Some recent research (Reid, 2015; Scanlon et al., 2018) suggests that private apartment residents may be satisfied with few *local* relationships, supporting the "community liberated" argument that modern relationships are liberated from geographical constraints, with benefits gained from relationships further afield (Wellman, 1979). However, needs and desires for local social connection are likely highly diverse (Forrest et al., 2002; Gu, 2020; Virtala, 2015). Other research has found that apartment residents desire more local social connection (Easthope et al., 2017; Hirvonen & Lilius, 2019). There is a need to better understand desire for local social interaction in this context, and how it may be met.

Regarding tenure, there is considerable evidence from multiple countries that private renters are more likely than owner-occupiers to find it challenging to establish and maintain local social connection (Chaskin & Joseph, 2011; Farrell et al., 2004; Forrest et al., 2002; Franklin & Tranter, 2011; Gu, 2020; Henning & Lieberg, 1996; Hirvonen & Lilius, 2019; Pollack et al., 2004). While the "community liberated" argument suggests that this may not be a problem, the larger study from which this paper draws (Thompson, 2019) found 35% of apartment renters surveyed felt they did not have enough local social contact, compared to 22% of owner-occupiers. While many factors influence the nature and extent of local social connections among private renters, the three most common issues raised in the existing literature are: high rates of residential mobility among private renters; prejudicial attitudes of owner-occupiers towards them; and their frequent exclusion from condominium governance

[1] This differs across markets: in Asia, apartment living often has little detrimental impact on local social connection, due to contextual factors including social homogeneity, socio-economic factors, different design approaches, and popular preference for high rise living (Gu, 2020).

processes. The latter two reasons are intertwined, and below we discuss them together.

Mobility

Mobility for private renters tends to be much higher than for owner-occupiers, and this is especially the case in larger apartment complexes in Australia (Reid, 2015). In large private apartment complexes in Australia, almost half (45%) of renters had lived in their current residence for less than one year, compared to 16% of all Australian residents (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). Considering all residents across the USA, 22% of renters had moved in the previous year in 2017, compared to 6% of owners (Moore, 2017). And in South Korea, where more than half the population lives in apartments, renters' average length of residence is 3.6 years, compared to 10.6 years for owners (Gu, 2020). Some of this mobility will be voluntary. Residents may choose to move for many reasons, including work, travel and education – indeed, affluent people in their twenties and early thirties are often expected to be on the move before settling down (Florida, 2002; Watt & Smets, 2014). In Australia, perceptions that apartments are a temporary option for younger residents (Randolph, 2006) contribute to increased voluntary mobility, supported by developers' and planners' targeting of singles, couples and empty nesters in designing and marketing buildings (Fincher, 2004).

However, much renter mobility is involuntary and results from decisions made by property investors and their agents. Renters are particularly exposed to involuntary residential mobility in jurisdictions where there is limited protection against forced eviction or rent increases, as is the case in Australia (Hulse & Milligan, 2014). This insecure occupancy reduces opportunities for social connection, but also impacts renters' ability to feel ontologically secure and develop a sense of home and belonging, and can heavily disrupt their lives (Easthope, 2014; Evans et al., 2003; Hulse & Milligan, 2014; Manzo et al., 2008; Watt & Smets, 2014).

Time spent living in an area has a clear association with the number of relationships maintained there (Farrell et al., 2004; Lewicka, 2011; Li et al., 2019; Sampson et al., 1988). Many authors have highlighted the importance of chance meetings and crossed paths in developing and strengthening local relationships over time (Festinger et al., 1950; Grannis, 2009; Kuo et al., 1998; Manzo et al., 2008), with short-term residents likely to have reduced opportunities for these encounters. Certainty of continued residence can also have an impact; an expected shared future can encourage people to get to know one another (Chaskin & Joseph, 2011; Manturuk et al., 2010).

Prejudice and exclusion from governance

Renters in condominiums live alongside owner-occupiers, but do not have the same rights to participate in building-related governance. The condominium system of multi-ownership was developed on the assumption that these buildings would be dominated by owner-occupiers (Lippert, 2012; McKenzie, 1994), and governance and management decisions are typically made by property owners and their elected representatives, with little room for renter involvement (Easthope et al., 2012; Lippert, 2012; van der Merwe, 2012). Most condominiums in Australia employ a "strata manager" to assist with administration and some hire a "building manager" to assist with facilities management. Strata managers typically manage a large portfolio of buildings, while building managers may manage a single or multiple buildings, depending on the size/demands of the building. Property owners pay management fees and building running costs through levy payments (recouped through rents in the case of investor-owned properties). The exclusion of renters from the governance of these buildings, especially when coupled with poor tenure security and a perceived "temporary" status (Reid, 2015, p. 444), means that renters have little possibility for formal engagement in their apartment complexes. This, in turn, can reduce renters' chances for

interaction (Chaskin & Joseph, 2011) and influence owners' perceptions of them.[2]

Renters across dwelling types may be characterized as "flawed consumers" by owner-occupiers (Cheshire et al., 2010), with ownership discourses framing "homeowners as hardworking and aspiring" and renters as "feckless or lazy" (Knight, 2001, p. 6). Lippert (2012, p. 268) suggests prejudice against renters is particularly pronounced in condominium buildings because the system is premised on co-ownership. He posits:

> by their mere presence renters call into doubt the condominium ideal, which is premised on owners sharing and governing common spaces together in a stable "community". Renters are a discursive affront to the possibility of the condominium due to their assumed disregard for the nobility of homeownership and lack of care for property.

In Australia, renters are frequently associated with excessive noise, poor maintenance of property, rubbish dumping, and a general lack of responsibility and respect (Cheshire et al., 2010; Reid, 2015). Half the respondents in Easthope et al.'s (2012) survey of strata (condominium) owners in the state of New South Wales (NSW) who felt that unacceptable behavior was a problem specifically identified private renters as the perpetrators. Walters and Rosenblatt (2008) found that renters in Australia were perceived as unwelcome, less legitimate residents, and in Canada, renters may be associated with threats to safety (Rollwagen, 2015). In Hong Kong, Yau (2020, p. 10) found that residents in buildings with a higher proportion of renters were "less resilient" in controlling and managing anti-social behavior, but that fostering neighborliness could increase resilience. If renters are expected by owner-occupiers to be "bad" (and more mobile) neighbors, the motivations of those owners to connect with them are reduced (Reid, 2015), and they may be unfairly or

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[2] Chaskin and Joseph (2011) discuss interaction in a mixed tenure community of public housing residents, affordable housing renters/owners and market rate renters/owners, with wider gaps in status between resident groups than is common in a market-rate condominium.

prospectively penalized with over-zealous restrictions (Lippert, 2012; Power, 2015). Stereotypes may also become self-fulfilling prophecies, with renters seeing no reason to break a stereotype when they themselves are not treated with respect (Madon et al., 2011).

In summary, there is considerable evidence internationally that private renters have less social connection in their apartment complexes than owner-occupiers. In some cases, this might be by choice, but in others it is due to factors outside their control and these renters desire more local connection. Given the acknowledged importance of social connection to physical and mental health (Eicher & Kawachi, 2011), the growing proportion of apartment dwellers renting in many large cities (CANCEA & CUI, 2019; Easthope et al., 2020; Scanlon et al., 2018), and the potential implications of social disconnection among residents for the ongoing management of apartment complexes (Borisova et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2018), there is a need to better understand private renters' experiences of apartment living and opportunities for those experiences to be improved.

Research approach

The research used a mixed methods case study approach, focused on four large apartment complexes and their surroundings ("local area" within ten minutes' walk) in the Sydney metropolitan area. Sydney, the capital of NSW, is a prime example of the present worldwide shift toward apartment living, with the percentage of people living in larger apartment complexes[3] increasing from 6.7% to 10.1% between 2006 and 2016 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006, 2016).

Case study complexes were chosen based on conditions that make it theoretically

[3] Including private flats, units, or apartments in a 4+ story block in a Greater Sydney statistical area (the closest approximation of 'large apartment complex' available in the Census).

difficult to develop ties: large size[4] (Abu-Ghazzeh, 1999; Gifford, 2007); recent development[5] (Farrell et al., 2004); resident heterogeneity (McPherson et al., 2001); and many private renters (Franklin & Tranter, 2011). However, we specifically targeted cases where residents appeared to have overcome these barriers. Recruitment calls (through built environment academics, strata and building managers and local council officers) specified that buildings should be "friendly" places to live with a "good sense of community". We confirmed perceived friendliness and resident heterogeneity (age, cultural background) through discussions with initial resident contacts and building managers. Perceptions of friendliness did not have to hold true for all residents, as we were interested in how residents might variously experience the buildings. The research methods included the following:

- Interviews with residents of each complex (41 renters, plus 22 owners. We focus on renters' perspectives in this paper). Recruited through contact details given in an initial resident survey (not reported in this paper) and direct in-person approach.
- 360° photography of shared spaces and accompanying fieldnotes.

The methods were chosen to illuminate preferences and experiences around social interaction and "casual social ties" (CSTs) in these four apartment complexes, and the process through which ties are formed, including the role of the built environment. "Casual social ties" is offered as an umbrella term to denote non-primary relationships including Granovetter's (1973) "weak ties", Lofland's (1998) "intimate-secondary relationships", Jacobs' (1961) "familiar public" relationships, and "bridging social capital" (Putnam, 1995). These relationships involve low time and emotional commitment (Granovetter, 1973) and at

[4] More than 150 units: likely to be more than 150 residents, a suggested upper limit to active personal network size (Roberts et al., 2009) therefore too many people to know personally.

[5] Limited time to develop ties, though this may sometimes be offset by initial welcome events.

their best provide help and everyday interaction, without overly imposing on peoples' lives (Abu-Ghazzeh, 1999; Jacobs, 1961). They allow residents to maintain relationships with a variety of people who can provide access to diverse resources (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Grannis, 2009; Granovetter, 1973; Putnam, 1995), and facilitate a moderate level of social cohesion and trust (Forrest & Kearns, 2001; Granovetter, 1973), "balancing community togetherness and support with an 'appropriate' social distance" (Power, 2015, p. 247). Two types of CSTs were examined: "acknowledgment ties" involving recognition and brief acknowledgment/greetings, and "chatting ties" involving more extensive conversations (based on Henning & Lieberg's (1996) terms). In the interviews, the interviewer described these, in turn, as people "you know by sight and might say hello to but nothing more", and people "you stop and chat with (acquaintances)". These categories capture a variety of loose relationships not often considered by researchers or the public (Granovetter, 1973; Lofland, 1998; Sennett, 2012), enabling more focused discussion on how such relationships develop as well as their value. The semi-structured interviews focused on actual and desired local social connection, and how relationships had developed over time, including interactions in the spaces residents used in the apartment complex and local area.

The research used an assemblage thinking approach, which assumes materialist and realist ontologies (DeLanda, 2016; Whatmore, 2006), emphasizing the material environment as well as human experience and ideas (Di Masso & Dixon, 2015). Assemblages may be defined as entities consisting of many heterogeneous, ontologically diverse parts that, when interacting, are more than the sum of the parts – they have emergent qualities that are immanent, with no special "essence" in addition to the parts (DeLanda, 2016; Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987). Assemblage thinking also focuses on change, following the history of how an assemblage has come to be in its present state, how it might develop in the future, and attending to "the messiness and complexity of phenomena" (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 175).

Its approach to complexity and process makes it especially suitable to understanding the ever-evolving social and environmental relations in a large apartment complex.

Compared with alternative approaches, the adoption of an assemblage thinking perspective prompted consideration of numerous ontologically heterogeneous elements in concert, better reflecting the complexity of the real-life circumstances under investigation. This enabled a holistic view of the socio-spatial phenomenon of relationship development, reducing the chances of neglecting important factors, and supporting a focus on material elements in addition to social elements. It also allowed a more nuanced consideration of the influence of different factors on relationship development, through opening up or closing down possibilities rather than implying cause and effect (Anderson et al., 2012; DeLanda, 2016). This nuanced consideration permitted a better understanding of why interventions may or may not work across different contexts.

The four case study apartment complexes (designated “Shore”, “River”, “Bay Court” and “Bay Park”) were in densifying areas within three local government areas and contained between 164 and 345 units over multiple buildings. Between two thirds and three quarters of residents rented their units. Shore’s neighborhood was affluent, and Bay Court and Bay Park were affluent apartment complexes in a gentrifying neighborhood. Rents in both neighborhoods were relatively high (see Table 1), and paying rent was a stretch for many renters interviewed, despite their good incomes. River’s neighborhood was more affordable, with most renters on moderate incomes and a small number of social housing renters – the only participants on low incomes. Owners interviewed across all buildings appeared to have bought within their means, rarely mentioning housing costs. The buildings opened in the six years prior to data collection in 2017-2018, and all complexes were managed by private management companies, with a building manager onsite during business hours. Building managers’ duties focused on maintaining assets and addressing disputes, rather than

community building, but all organized one or two social events a year in collaboration with the owners' corporation committee. None of the complexes had concierges, however the building manager's office at Shore was adjacent to the main entrance and he was available to receive parcels and open doors as needed during business hours. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the complexes.

[Table 1 approximately here]

Key characteristics of participants

Table 2 profiles the 41 renters interviewed for this project. Interviewees came from a diverse range of countries, with most of overseas origin, particularly from Asia and Europe. For context, in Greater Sydney, 31% of private renters and 43% of owners in 4+ story blocks are Australian-born (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). Over a third of renter interviewees had lived in their apartments less than one year, and more than half were between 25 and 34 years of age, younger than most owner-occupiers. Despite some building managers expecting low interest in the research from renters, renter participation was broadly comparable to owner-occupier participation (Table 1). Survey respondents could enter an AU$100 prize draw, but it is unclear whether this incentive increased renters' participation more than owners', and there was no incentive for the interviews. To counteract self-selection bias, the recruitment materials stressed that we sought a diversity of opinions.

[Table 2 approximately here]

Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and thematically coded by the lead author (following Braun and Clarke (2006)), focusing on how CSTs developed and how they affected residential experience. As Walter (2010) advises, the coproduction of the interview data by the interviewer (the lead author) and the interviewee was kept in mind, acknowledging that

answers may be affected by social desirability and memory issues. A round of coding was then undertaken using a second cycle coding method (axial coding), aiming to develop a conceptual model of themes and physical spaces (Saldaña, 2009). This stage specifically focused on how human and built/natural environment factors (including tenure status) interact to produce CSTs, and drew on an understanding of the apartment complex and local area as a complex socio-material assemblage of many interrelated factors interacting to produce emergent qualities. Photographs, fieldnotes, building plans and local area maps were analyzed in conjunction with interview material to understand the "affordances" (Gibson, 1979) available in shared spaces. Drawing on the interview themes and photograph/fieldnote/plan/map analysis, a model of the human, environmental and management factors increasing or decreasing relationship development possibilities in the socio-material assemblage was developed (following DeLanda (2016)). This enabled identification of factors specifically affecting renters, plus design and policy intervention factors to better support social connection.

Findings

In the case study apartment complexes, prejudice, exclusion from governance and most particularly mobility had directly reduced renters' local social connection, and indirectly reduced it through reducing motivation to connect. We first present and discuss resident experiences and aspirations for local social connection, and barriers encountered. We then outline several ways forward to better support local social connection, based on evidence from the research. While the larger study (Thompson, 2019) identified a broad range of factors influencing CST development including heterogeneity, life stage and cultural background (guided by assemblage thinking's prompting to appraise all possible factors), we focus here on the factors most relevant and specific to renters and the ways in which design,

management, and policy factors can influence outcomes.

Preferences for social connection

Most renter interviewees wanted to know a few neighbors (particularly on their floor) in case of emergencies, building management staff for assistance, a few staff members in nearby small businesses for interaction and a feeling of belonging, and a few people with common interests within the complex or local area with whom to socialize or exchange small talk. Common interests could include a shared cultural background, but in these culturally diverse buildings, cultural background was also a conversation-starter and a chance to expand one's horizons (cf. Manzo et al., 2008).

> My wife set off the alarm. And John[6] just came, "What happened? I thought there was a robbery." It gave me a good feeling that, okay, somebody is bothered, somebody knows me, and because they know me, they just ran out of their house. – Aziz, River renter, 25-34
>
> I very much enjoy this building because this is a building where you can find people from everywhere, local, from across the world, anything. – Tarun, River renter, 35-44

Knowing neighbors could also help with inclusion in governance, if only indirectly. Jason (Shore renter, 25-34) knew someone "in the committee for the building … he was super nice, and he would update us on what's going on."

Relationships with staff (including building managers and staff of local small businesses) were common, largely due to residents having a concrete reason to initiate interaction: meeting the building manager when moving in, or regular transactions with staff in small businesses such as cafés, convenience stores or newsagents, where staffing was consistent. These relationships were very much valued.

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[6] All names are pseudonyms.

> I know [the manager's] there and if anything happens, that will be okay. And because I've met him, I trust him. – Jessica, Bay Court renter, 25-34

Even interviewees who desired minimal local connection enjoyed such ties.

> I know the chef there […] I just say, "As usual, Gary." And then I just sit down, and he knows. […] It's more comfortable. – Panit, Shore renter, 35-44

Relationships with other residents were harder to develop. In many cases, they were limited to acknowledgment ties, never developing into stronger relationships. This suited some, such as Panit, however others were frustrated with the lack of deeper connection.

> [In the building] you smile, and you just say hello, but never actually have a conversation with anybody, an actual conversation. – Kavya, River renter, 25-34

Uncertainty about who might have common interests or be open to connecting prevented some from interacting more extensively, especially in circulation spaces such as elevators and lobbies, where everyone appeared busy traveling somewhere else.

> I do like knowing my neighbors, ideally. I'm not sure if it's mutual or not, and that's always... something that perhaps keeps me from doing more. – Daniel, Bay Park renter, 25-34

Indeed, some interviewees valued civil inattention or politely ignoring others in complexes' shared spaces (cf. Chaskin & Joseph, 2011; Goffman, 1971), and the option to not engage is important for a sense of control when living close to many people.

> Getting to know everyone would be painful. Just because you're always going to bump into them and […] you need to say hello […] but probably it would be good to know people from the floor. – Rohit, Bay Court renter, 25-34

This quote sheds light on the more complex motivations and conditions behind developing local relationships. While interviewees often liked the ideal of close-knit community, it was

not something they desired or saw as practical in their current situation, and they rarely needed to rely on neighbors for support.[7] Some interviewees were reluctant to engage with other locals, however they were often open to interaction if it involved minimal effort or was with particular people (e.g., those on their floor). This preference suggests that CSTs may be more commonly held with floor neighbors than with others in the building, however more research is needed to confirm this suggestion. Ben (Shore renter, 25-34) saw his apartment complex as “a bit of a sanctuary” but would consider getting to know people he “shared interests with”. In modern society where middle-high income people “can pick and choose who you want to be friends with” (Jessica, Bay Court renter 25-34), residents tended to look for deeper friendships based on strong shared interests, rather than physical proximity.

> I don't think I’d ever really make friends with people on my floor. I think our interests are too different, and there would never be the opportunity to take that step from going from small chit chat to a friendship. – Jessica, Bay Court renter 25-34

Clearly, there is a mismatch between what is practical and desirable in the close quarters of a private apartment complex and commonly held ideals of community. The fact that the ideal of a close-knit local community is, in most cases, unwanted, may demotivate residents to connect with neighbors, when they are concerned with the specter of the over-friendly or intrusive neighbor and guarding their own time, energy and privacy – even when they desire a greater level of connection. Efforts to promote connection in such contexts would benefit from highlighting the utility of acquaintanceships in emergencies, better supporting incidental encounters, and connecting residents with shared interests (further discussed below).

[7] This related to the low-maintenance, secure access nature of the buildings, and potentially also to renters’ moderate-high incomes, see Kleit (2001).

Barriers to social connection

In addition to the barrier of guarding time, energy and privacy, the research findings support existing literature on barriers to social connection in relation to mobility, prejudice, and exclusion from governance. Concurring with literature on sense of community and residential stability (Forrest et al., 2002; Hirvonen & Lilius, 2019; Sampson, 1988), high mobility (Table 2) directly affected relationship development through restricting the number of interactions, cutting short opportunities for "incremental increase in mutual regard" (Painter, 2012, p. 527). It also reduced motivation to connect (cf. Cheshire et al., 2010; Manturuk et al., 2010), especially for renters, who most perceived as highly mobile.

> You think gosh, how much effort do I put in if they're moving out in a month's time. – Megan, Shore renter, 25-34

This mobility could be voluntary – with renters "not invested in this area" and so not spending "time and effort making friends" (Greg, Bay Court renter, 35-44) – or involuntary, including due to tenure insecurity.

> It doesn't matter what we're planning, it depends on our landlord's plans. […] You can't– you don't know. Maybe your rent goes up and you can't pay it anymore. Or they just want to sell it, or […] move back in. – George, Bay Park renter, 35-44

When residents in an apartment complex cannot count on themselves or their neighbors remaining long, this dampens motivation to connect, with residents believing they will not have time to reap the benefits of relationships.

Additionally, several owner interviewees spoke of renters in terms of disinterest and lack of care and stake in the complex, echoing findings from Power (2015) and Reid (2015). Some renters felt that owner-occupiers had prejudicial attitudes towards them.

> That [attitude], "Well we'll keep together because we're owner occupiers, and all you

> scum renters, well you just shut up and don't make noise, and stop drying your laundry on the balcony." – Scott, Bay Court renter, 45-54

Several owner-occupier interviewees felt that renters' lack of attendance at governance meetings meant they were uninterested in the life of the building, furthering division. Nevertheless, most renters interviewed had not noticed an owner/renter divide, implying this prejudice was not overt.[8]

Ways forward

Internationally, there is growing practitioner interest in the opportunities for planning, design, and management of the built environment to support local social connection (e.g., City of Sydney, 2016; The Happy City, n.d.; The Transition Network, 2011; Woodcraft et al., 2012). Below, we focus on the spaces and management practices that *enabled residents to overcome barriers* in the case study complexes through opening up possibilities for interaction in the built environment. This is followed by discussion of broader policy responses (i.e. improving tenure security and making governance processes more inclusive). While we do not suggest that these factors will have the same effect in all apartment complexes nor for all residents, they can increase possibilities for interaction in similar contexts in Australia and internationally.

Supporting interaction through the built environment

The shared built environment is particularly important to the well-being of apartment residents, whether they be renters or owners, with the generally smaller areas of their living spaces (compared with houses) and limited private open space necessitating a greater reliance

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[8] The same could be said of cultural background, where any prejudice was restricted to private opinions and lack of interaction.

on shared and public spaces. In the high-density neighborhoods studied in this research, shared spaces and facilities provided key "opportunity structures" (Baum & Palmer, 2002, p. 351) for developing and maintaining local CSTs (cf. Gu, 2020). We first discuss public/commercial spaces in the local area, followed by spaces within the apartment complex.

Many residents had developed relationships with long-term staff of local small businesses such as cafés, but fewer CSTs were developed with staff in larger and more impersonal businesses such as supermarkets. Parks were highly valued, especially when close by and of high quality, and often enabled CSTs – largely between caregivers with children or dog owners (we further discuss pets below). Several participants developed CSTs at local gyms, dance classes, and library groups. These are activities that occur regularly, with attendees likely to encounter each other again. These "very very local" activities help develop ties based on shared interests and cater to renters who may have limited "time and motivation" (Nastasia, Bay Park renter, 25-34). The often-high cost of regularly using cafés or attending classes was sometimes a deterrent, however, lending support to Baum & Palmer's (2002) call for government subsidies to support local small businesses that act as "third places" (Oldenburg, 1999). Public buildings and spaces were also important in providing low-cost and inclusive spaces for the development of CSTs, especially given the high cost of living in Sydney:

> Because the rent's so high here, you can't go out and buy a book anymore. You have to really think about what you're doing. So, the library is really, really great. – Tara, Bay Park renter, 25-34

Destination spaces inside complexes such as rooftop gardens and swimming pools were free to use, and regular users had developed chatting ties with other residents in these spaces, supporting calls for the inclusion of such spaces in complexes (e.g., Hirvonen & Lilius, 2019; Yau, 2020). The fact that these spaces were only accessible to residents also meant users

could assume a commonality (shared residence) and expect to see one another again – residents were therefore more *receptive to interaction* in these spaces.

> In the … building, [interacting in common spaces is] just accepted. You walk past a stranger but here you both know you live in the building, so it makes that element of pressure [to interact]. – Sean, Shore, renter 25-34

However, many participants used these spaces rarely or not at all, reducing encounters. The main reasons for this lack of use were purposes/functions not matching residents' needs, inadequate seating, weather protection or bathroom facilities, and poor accessibility and visibility. These last two particularly affected renters, many of whom had not received detailed information about the wider complex when they moved in. Buildings also lacked signage directing residents to these spaces. If these spaces were more widely known, they could better support resident encounters and be used as much-needed break-out space.

> That's my building. On level three and level four there's something? Really? […] That is insane. I've lived there for two years and I had no idea. […] If [partner]'s watching TV […] it's only a small one bedroom [apartment]. I would be like, "I have to get out of here." I'd feel like there was nowhere I can go. – Liz, Bay Court renter 25-34

In addition to signage, spaces could be better located. Kavya, who had given up trying to find the pool at River (accessed through a succession of elevators with poor signage), felt improved visibility and accessibility would encourage use (cf. Reid, 2015), and therefore encounters.

> [In a friend's building] when you walk towards the lift [elevator] you can actually see the gym and the pool area, […] so you know where it is, and you're bound to go there. – Kavya, River renter, 25-34

This principle of improving the accessibility, visibility, relevant purposes and amenities of common spaces is equally as relevant in less affluent developments, where common spaces

might be meeting rooms or gardens, rather than swimming pools and gyms. The key factors are supporting *encounters* through enabling regular, extended use, *receptivity to interaction* through making spaces specifically for residents or smaller groups, and providing or allowing *catalysts* including common purposes, children or pets. No-frills, flexible spaces that suit residents' purposes, have sufficient seating and weather protection, and are readily accessible and visible, are likely to support chatting tie development. Functional spaces such as laundries alongside pleasant spaces to sit are one example encouraging regular use, lingering and common purposes (cf. The Happy City, n.d.)

In contrast to these spaces, impromptu encounters most commonly occurred in circulation spaces such as elevators and lobbies, and supported acknowledgment ties. However, the apparent busyness of people in these spaces discouraged lengthy interactions and often impeded the development of chatting ties, even when seating was provided (cf. Virtala, 2015). Interaction was more common in spaces shared by fewer people, for example elevator lobbies for ten units rather than 100, because residents felt they had more in common and would see each other again.

Overall, the research findings highlight the benefits for tie development in having easy access to inexpensive local facilities such as libraries and gyms, public green spaces and small "third place" businesses where apartment residents can more quickly develop CSTs with staff and regular users who share interests (cf. Oldenburg, 1999; Thompson, 2018). To enable access and reduce impersonality, mixed land uses and the presence of a larger number of quality "scattered" smaller facilities and parks is preferable to the centralization of those facilities. Within complexes, the findings suggest that chatting ties are most likely to be developed in *destination* spaces such as gardens, laundries, and swimming pools. These spaces tend to support social connection most effectively where they have a clear function or purpose matching residents' needs (though flexible spaces are to be encouraged), provide

support for lingering (e.g., comfortable seating, views, weather protection), are available for use only by certain groups (e.g., residents of a particular building or floor), and are accessible and easy to find. In contrast, acknowledgment ties are most likely to be developed in circulation spaces such as corridors, lobbies, and elevators. Especially where such spaces are used by limited numbers of people, for example just those living on a particular floor, they afford regular brief encounters that can also develop into chatting ties over time. Thompson (2019) further discusses the features of successful circulation and destination spaces.

Management interventions supporting social connection

Management and activation of spaces had sometimes provided effective catalysts for social connection in the case study complexes. Events were the most commonly suggested method of increasing CSTs among research participants, and there was some evidence that events had helped neighbors get to know one another (cf. Cho & Lee, 2011). Events furnish spaces with clearer, more interaction-oriented norms, however they may attract only those with strong motivation to develop ties, as well as those who happen to be free at the time. Some participants also felt the rarity of barbecue or drinks-and-nibbles style events reduced their usefulness for CST development, especially for renters who might experience only one event during their tenure. Others disliked the "artificial" environment of these events.

> I wouldn't join anything if it was just to go and meet people […] I'd like something with a purpose. [An event], it's quite artificial. It's not very organic. But I am happy to meet people through a class. – Susan, Bay Park renter, 45-54

The staging of events and activities in apartment complexes could be complicated and time-consuming, however, due to insurance requirements and lack of suitable spaces. Where they had occurred, renters had been largely uninvolved in their planning or organization, with owner-occupiers and/or building managers the principal driving forces (cf. Walters & Rosenblatt, 2008). Notably, building managers saw community building as a "nice to have"

when their workload allowed, or not their responsibility, while strata governance (strata managers, owners' corporation committees) largely focused on administration rather than encouraging social connection. Community-building responsibilities were thus left to those socially minded residents willing to take it on. Further research is needed on how regular, frequent events and resident activities are supported and organized in buildings that have them, and the extent to which renters are involved.

Finally, pets, and especially dogs, were a strong promoter of CSTs among interviewees. They provided an easy topic of conversation, indicated potential shared interests, and increased time spent in common or public spaces (as did children – see Thompson (2019) for further discussion). Pet owners are also what Lofland (1998) would call "open persons": it is more socially acceptable to interact with them, though renters often encounter barriers to pet ownership.

> How I know people in here is to do with my dog […] Our dogs get to know each others' dogs, and that's how we come to know each other. – Rebecca, Shore renter, 35-44
> Don't tell the owners [I have a dog]. In the lift [elevator] people will say, "Oh, I've got a dog just like that." – Victoria, Shore renter, 25-34

Power (2017) notes that renters in strata schemes (condominiums) are usually required to seek permission from both their landlord and the owners' corporation (condominium association), and suggests renters' pets are less likely than owners' to be approved by the owners' corporation. Some interviewees pointed to the need for more consideration of pets in built environment design and management, including provision for dog waste disposal and resilient landscaping.

Improving tenure security and making governance processes more inclusive

Finally, two policy responses would help support renters' inclusion in condominiums. Changes to residential tenancy laws, as have been recommended and considered in Australia

for several decades (Hulse & Milligan, 2014), would allow renters more certainty over their length of residence, and would increase motivation to connect.[9] The provision of affordable housing and reduction and/or control of market rents, however this is to be achieved, would also mean renters are less likely to be forced to move by increasing rent.

Second, if renters were able to contribute to building governance, their opportunities for CST development would increase. Many owner-occupiers interviewed for this research had developed CSTs through their engagement in management. van der Merwe (2012, p. 168) argues that giving condominium renters the right to vote on matters directly affecting them, such as hours of silence or swimming pool use, could "nurture a sense of belonging in the community as well as a sense that their presence in the scheme and their rights are not ignored". Working together on common goals can break down prejudices (Lofland, 1998; Sennett, 2012), helping owners and renters to understand each other's interests. It could also raise awareness of rules and the importance of respecting others' rights to peaceful enjoyment (Ross-Harrington, 2009), reduce disagreements, or help solve them more efficiently.

> I think the more people that are encouraged to be involved in the community, even from everyone being invited to the strata meetings, […] the better the strike rate will be with people getting things resolved within the community before it becomes a litigation issue.
> – Scott, Bay Court renter, 45-54

In cities like Sydney, London and Toronto where renting is increasingly common (CANCEA & CUI, 2019; Easthope et al., 2020; Scanlon et al., 2018), ever more residents will be excluded from governance processes if renters are not able to have a say. A further consideration is that investor owners may be more likely to pursue cost savings over livability

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[9] New South Wales has recently amended their residential tenancy laws, and rent increases are now restricted to once per year to "reduce tenants' fear of retaliatory rent increases" (NSW Fair Trading, 2018). There are still no restrictions on how much rent may be increased, however.

improvements (Lippert, 2012); allowing renters to vote could improve livability outcomes for all residents. Some jurisdictions better enable renter involvement in decision-making. For example, in South Korea, all residents are members of the governing body (Kim & Jang, 2017) and in Taiwan renters can vote if their landlord consents (Chen & Webster, 2005). Similarly, the USA's Uniform Common Interest Ownership Act provides for renters to vote on specific matters, as determined in the building's Declaration (Uniform Common Interest Ownership Act s 3-110(e) (2008)).

Conclusion

Renters comprise a significant and growing proportion of apartment residents in private multi-owned (condominium) complexes in many cities worldwide. Our research focused on four apartment complexes in a single Australian city: Sydney. Cultural context is likely to influence renters' experiences, and further research in different contexts is needed to gain insight into these differences. Notwithstanding this specific context, Sydney's historical low density, current densification and significant renter population is mirrored in cities such as London, Toronto, and Auckland (CANCEA & CUI, 2019; Easthope et al., 2020; Scanlon et al., 2018), and our findings therefore have broader relevance.

Some owners and managers in this study, as well as researchers (Reid, 2015; Scanlon et al., 2018), suggest that renters have little desire to develop local social connection. However, this study's findings challenge these suggestions, with many renter participants desiring more social connection than they have. Desires for social connection were also highly nuanced, with participants reporting a diverse range of desires for both weak and stronger connection with chosen people (those on one's floor, those with common interests, building and local area staff) balanced with privacy and time considerations, rather than a tight-knit community. Our findings highlight the role of local social connection in providing

proximate aid in emergency situations, as well as fostering feelings of belonging and trust, and developing friendships. Social connection among residents within an apartment complex can also facilitate its effective management and governance (Borisova et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2018).

The research identified a range of barriers that closed down renters' possibilities for social connection. These included increased mobility and uncertainty around length of tenure, prejudice among owner-occupiers, limited formal rights to participate in building governance, and reduced knowledge of shared spaces due to poor information dissemination. Addressing these barriers is no small task. It requires three types of response, from a broad range of actors. First, creating "opportunity structures" (Baum & Palmer, 2002) through design and management interventions to increase impromptu encounters and provide catalysts such as events and activities. Ensuring such interventions are inclusive and effective, especially for time-limited renters, will require concerted action through the design, development, and management of a building. The second type of response involves improving security of tenure for renters, reducing involuntary residential mobility, and increasing motivation to connect through providing certainty of continued residence. These initiatives will require changes in legislation. The third type of response involves changes in governance structures to facilitate the inclusion of renters in building governance processes, which would provide more opportunities for interaction in addition to potentially reducing tensions and prejudice between owners and renters. Inclusion could be achieved through a combination of changes in everyday governance at the level of individual buildings (facilitated by strata managers, building managers and apartment residents and owners), alongside changes in policy and practice at a broader scale supported by changes in business practices (e.g., of management firms) and regulation (possibly requiring changes to legislation).

We acknowledge that the second and third responses are not easily accomplished,

especially as they challenge both deeply engrained structures of power and the laws and regulations that legitimate them. However, drawing on assemblage thinking, our findings indicate that the development of opportunity structures alone, while important, is unlikely to bridge the gap between owner-occupiers and renters in terms of their social relations within condominiums. We would add that the continued growth in apartment living, in Australia and elsewhere, provides clear justification for legal and regulatory responses such as these. Our research suggests that, without these responses, many people will be unable to develop the local social connection they desire, with serious negative consequences both for those individuals and for the buildings and neighborhoods they inhabit.

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Table 1. Summary of case complexes.

Feature	SHORE	RIVER	BAY COURT	BAY PARK
Number of units	190	164	345	185
Estimated population[10] (ABS 2016)	275 adults, 24 children	305 adults, 59 children	571 adults, 42 children	255 adults, 27 children
Residents renting (ABS 2016)	67%	70%	75%	75%
Number of Interviews	11 renters, 6 owners	7 renters, 7 owners	13 renters, 4 owners	10 renters, 5 owners
Built form	Two buildings around small public courtyard	Five buildings around large public plaza	Four buildings around a courtyard, with terraced units	Two buildings split by pocket park, with terraced units
Height	5-17 storeys	4-8 storeys	7-8 storeys	8 storeys
Mixed use?	Cafés, services, convenience store	Supermarket, childcare, cafés, restaurants, commercial gym, services	Residential only	Residential only
Shared spaces in addition to lobbies, carpark, corridors, elevators	Two roof terraces, meeting room	Pool, gym, sauna, WC, changing rooms, defunct barbecue area	Library and study spaces, courtyard garden	Public pocket parks
Year completed	2013	2011	2015	2014
Surrounding area	Existing established high-density fringe area of North Sydney	Existing established medium-density fringe area of Parramatta	Large urban redevelopment within existing established low-density area of the Inner West	
SEIFA (socio-economic) Index for SA2 (ABS, 2016)	97th percentile in NSW (affluent)	64th percentile in NSW (more affordable)	83rd percentile in NSW (affluent development in mixed-income area)	
Median unit rent/buy price in suburb, 2018, USD (Realestate.com.au, 2019)	\$373/wk 1 bed \$464/wk 2 bed \$471K 1 bed \$720K 2 bed	\$264/wk 1 bed \$286/wk 2 bed No data 1 bed \$385K 2 bed	\$393/wk 1 bed \$557/wk 2 bed \$525K 1 bed \$800K 2 bed	

[10] Based on the smallest geographical unit for which Census data is available, the mesh block.

Table 2: Characteristics of Renter Participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Background	Length of residence	Case	Living…
Ava	18-24	Female	Northeast Asia	2 years	Bay Court	With others
Nicholas	25-34	Male	Americas	1 year	Bay Court	Alone
Natalie	25-34	Female	Australia	1 year	Bay Court	With others
Liz	25-34	Female	Australia	<6 months	Bay Court	With others
Sheng	25-34	Male	Northeast Asia	1 year	Bay Court	With others
Li Wei	25-34	Female	Northeast Asia	3 years	Bay Court	With others
April	25-34	Female	Northwest Europe	2 years	Bay Court	With others
Jessica	25-34	Female	Northwest Europe	4 years	Bay Court	With others
Rohit	25-34	Male	South Asia	<6 months	Bay Court	With others
Daniel	25-34	Male	Southeast Asia	6-11 months	Bay Court	Alone
Tanya	25-34	Female	South/East Europe	1 year	Bay Court	With others
Greg	35-44	Male	Australia	<6 months	Bay Court	With others
Scott	45-54	Male	Australia	2 years	Bay Court	With others
Matthew	25-34	Male	Australia	2 years	Bay Park	With others
Tara	25-34	Female	Australia	2 years	Bay Park	With others
Joseph	25-34	Male	Australia	6-11 months	Bay Park	With others
Nastasia	25-34	Female	South/East Europe	3 years	Bay Park	With others
Julia	25-34	Female	South/East Europe	6-11 months	Bay Park	With others
Anika	25-34	Female	South/East Europe	3 years	Bay Park	With others
Amanda	35-44	Female	Australia	6-11 months	Bay Park	With others
George	35-44	Male	South/East Europe	3 years	Bay Park	With others
Susan	45-54	Female	Australia	2 years	Bay Park	With others
David	55-64	Male	Northwest Europe	3 years	Bay Park	With others
Dylan	25-34	Male	Americas	<6 months	River	Alone
Kavya	25-34	Female	South Asia	3 years	River	With others
Aziz	25-34	Male	South Asia	<6 months	River	With others
Robert	35-44	Male	Australia	3 years	River	Alone
Melissa	35-44	Female	Australia	3 years	River	With others
Tarun	35-44	Male	South Asia	6-11 months	River	With others
Riya	35-44	Female	Southeast Asia	3 years	River	With others
Victoria	25-34	Female	Australia	1 year	Shore	With others
Megan	25-34	Female	Australia	6-11 months	Shore	With others
Sean	25-34	Male	Australia	<6 months	Shore	With others
Ben	25-34	Male	Australia	1 year	Shore	With others
Jason	25-34	Male	Northeast Asia	1 year	Shore	With others
Arjun	25-34	Male	South Asia	<6 months	Shore	With others
Steven	35-44	Male	Australia	<6 months	Shore	With others
Nicole	35-44	Female	Australia	1 year	Shore	Alone
Rebecca	35-44	Female	Northwest Europe	<6 months	Shore	Alone
Panit	35-44	Male	Southeast Asia	3 years	Shore	With others
Sanjana	65-74	Female	Oceania	6-11 months	Shore	With others