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Looking inwards: Extended family living as an urban consolidation alternative

Abstract

Western cities face multiple interrelated and complex predicaments. Demand for new dwellings has outstripped population growth due to a confluence of socio-demographic trends that contribute to shrinking household sizes: population ageing, high rates of divorce and delayed age of family formation (Wulff, Healy and Reynolds, 2004). In Australia, a quarter of households now contain just one person (ABS, 2012). Similar socio-demographic processes, with associated urban spatial planning implications, have unfurled throughout Europe, the UK and North America (Buzar, Ogden, and Hall, 2005, Re'rat, 2012). Households are key "agents of urban transformation"; we need to understand them in order to grapple with contemporary urban problems (Buzar et al., 2005, p.413). The urban implications of shifting "household geometries" (Buzar et al., 2005, p.429) are wide-reaching: (sub)urban sprawl, car dependence, carbon emissions, loss of peri-urban bushland and farmland, rising housing costs, social isolation, socio-economic inequality, and disconnectedness. Urban consolidation appears to offer a solution. High-density, high-rise living has been pitched and implemented as a pathway towards connected, efficient, liveable, compact cities. The need to rethink and replan urban space to accommodate growing populations without endless geographical expansion, is indeed urgent. But existing urban consolidation strategies have been single-mindedly outward looking. They strive for increased density of dwellings; enabling multitudes of small, atomised households to live side by side and on top of one another. But there are other ways of consolidating urban space. Here, we argue the case for looking inward, towards strategies that enable more people to live together within households. Extended family living - in which various configurations of adult children, parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles and grandchildren reside under one roof - is one option that counters the trend towards shrinking household sizes. This mode of living can make a tangible contribution to the broader projects of urban consolidation, community building and climate change response. We use findings from our ethnographic research with extended family households in Australia to consider two important questions: How might looking inward contribute to environmentally and socially sustainable (consolidated) urban morphologies? What would it take to plan for dwellings that enable more family members to live under one roof, without driving each other crazy?

Keywords

looking, urban, extended, family, alternative, living, consolidation, inwards

Disciplines

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Western cities face multiple interrelated and complex predicaments. Demand for new dwellings has outstripped population growth due to a confluence of socio-demographic trends that contribute to shrinking household sizes: population ageing, high rates of divorce and delayed age of family formation (Wulff et al. 2004). In Australia, one-quarter of households now contain just one person (ABS 2012). Similar socio-demographic processes, with associated urban spatial planning implications, have unfurled throughout Europe, the United Kingdom and North America (Buzar et al. 2005, Rérat 2012). Households are key 'agents of urban transformation'; we need to understand them in order to grapple with contemporary urban problems (Buzar et al. 2005: 413). The urban implications of shifting 'household geometries' (Buzar et al. 2005: 429) are wide-reaching: (sub)urban sprawl, car dependence, carbon emissions, loss of peri-urban bushland and farmland, rising housing costs, social isolation, socio-economic inequality and disconnectedness. Urban consolidation appears to offer a solution. High-density, high-rise living has been pitched and implemented as a pathway toward connected, efficient, liveable, compact cities.

The need to re-think and re-plan urban space to accommodate growing populations, without endless geographical expansion, is indeed urgent. But existing urban consolidation strategies have been single-mindedly *outward* looking. They strive for increased density of dwellings; enabling multitudes of small, atomised households to live side-by-side and on top of one another. But there are other ways of consolidating urban space. Here, we argue the case for looking *inward*, towards strategies that enable more people to live together *within* households. Extended family living – in which various configurations of adult children, parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles and grandchildren reside under one roof – is one option that counters the trend towards shrinking household sizes. This mode of living can make a tangible contribution to the broader projects of

urban consolidation, community building and climate change response. We use findings from our ethnographic research with extended family households in Australia¹ to consider two important questions: How might looking *inward* contribute to environmentally and socially sustainable (consolidated) urban morphologies? What would it take to plan for dwellings that enable more family members to live under one roof, without driving each other crazy?

Looking inward: environmental and social benefits of extended family living

In environmental terms, small households are doubly problematic. New dwellings are responsible for masses of carbon emissions as a result of the energy embodied in building materials (Berners-Lee 2010). And, once up and running, small households are inefficient: on a per capita basis they consume more resources and produce more waste than larger ones (Keilman 2003). Approaches to urban planning that neglect the possibility of increased occupants per dwelling may thus generate perverse environmental outcomes. While none of our study participants formed extended family households for environmental reasons, many opportunities arose to share space, energy and resources, and to minimise waste. Gabrielle lived with her husband, young child and widowed mother. She explained:

[I]f you're running your own house, it's a lot less sustainable than living in part of someone else's house...we'll often do stuff together...we just have the one garden...[and] with the heating and electricity and the lights [and]...you'd be doing half loads [of washing].

Wendy lived with her husband Wes and elderly mother. For Wendy, fuel savings were 'probably the biggest thing' because she no longer had to drive to fulfil her caring role. Across these and other extended family households that we interviewed, shopping trips and other outings were combined; active heating or cooling burdens were shared; and household appliances, leftover food, clothing

¹Further detail on the study methods and results can be found in Klocker et al. (2012). We acknowledge Erin Borger's contribution to the research on which this paper is based.

and furnishings were passed across the co-resident family units. Although sharing (of resources, space, time) is a fundamental human behaviour, it is all too regularly overlooked by academics and policymakers because it is subtle, and often takes place in the interior of the home as part of ‘mundane’ everyday routines (Belk 2009). The potential sustainability benefits of collective forms of housing and family living have been neglected in urban planning theory and practice.

It would be a mistake to assume – based on evidence of shrinking household sizes – that everybody who lives alone does so out of choice (Jarvis 2013). Critics have challenged the high-density urban planning orthodoxy for not adequately reflecting diverse housing needs and desires (Myers 2001; Randolph 2006, Easthope and Tice 2011). Small, atomised dwellings make life more difficult for families with caring responsibilities, whether for the elderly or the young. Almost all of the participants in our study lived with extended family members to cope with caring demands. In large Australian cities, childcare waiting lists regularly stretch to two-years and beyond; and daily fees of AUD100 (or more) per child are typical. At the other end of the spectrum, population ageing places great pressure on aged-care facilities.

Extended family living responds to both these challenges. Although masked by the overall demographic shift to smaller average household sizes, rates of extended family living have actually risen in the US and Australia in recent years due to financial crisis, high housing costs, delayed age of home leaving, population ageing and the growing presence of migrants from countries where extended family living is common (de Vaus 2004; Buzar et al. 2005; Keene and Batson 2010). The households involved in our study were primarily comprised of older family members who could not, or did not want to, live alone; and/or parents of young children who struggled to balance paid work and caring responsibilities. Having family members nearby, under one roof, and without needing to jump in the car was invaluable. Our participants felt comfort, and even joy, at hearing extended family members laugh through walls, floors and ceilings; likewise help was within reach

if an elderly parent fell, or a young mother was at her wits' end with a screaming child in the middle of the night. Melissa, a single-mother, lived with her own mother and adult sisters: 'If I feel like I am losing it [at the child], I'll call mum, and mum will come down'. Gail was widowed in recent years and subsequently moved in with her adult daughter, Gabrielle's, family. She commented, 'One thing I like is that I can hear them up there'. And Gabrielle, in turn, reflected:

She [Gail] was in her own house for a little while after Dad died...and we were both worried about if she was a bit lonely...now we don't need to worry. We know that she is downstairs and if she wants to she'll come and say hello.

Extended family living fostered a sense of connectedness and contentment. Marion, who lived with her husband and adult daughter Pauline (together with Pauline's husband and two children), reflected:

[I]t's a really nice way to live...If you've got the space and you've got the opportunity and you can work on getting on with one another...there's always somebody in this house so the kids don't come home to an empty house...I think that's really lovely...Before my father died, he lived here too, and so he was being cared for by the whole group...He died here in this house which is what he wanted to do...he had the emotional support around him.

Nevertheless a lack of diversity in the housing stock may inhibit the wider uptake of extended family living as a 'real alternative'. Many new high-density developments are marketed as responding to changing consumer demands, yet atomised housing units still dominate the market – assuming and supporting the formation of nuclear- or small couple-only households; and limiting the scope for other household configurations.

Strategies for peaceful co-existence in extended family households

For the households involved in our study, the capacity to endure and enjoy extended family living hinged upon the ability to separate domestic spaces to achieve independence, privacy and harmony. They sought dwellings with self-contained units within them, or which could be modified to meet their need for separation of kitchens, living rooms and bathrooms. Yet, our research participants struggled to find dwellings configured to facilitate extended family living. After two years of searching, Wendy and Wes found a home in which they could create a separate living space for Wendy's mother:

We looked for a long period of time and we saw various houses...that had so-called granny flats and some of them were just awful. And a lot of them were not configured well given that we wanted to put an older person in there...It's hard to find a place (Wendy).

For Marion, the kitchen was key: 'separate the kitchens...then you're right'. Wendy did not think her family would cope without separate spaces: '[I]t just wouldn't work...It's a personality thing'. Melissa and Pauline had previously lived in a small house that inhibited neat separation between co-resident family units. The result was 'bedlam' (Pauline) – with toys constantly underfoot and fights between adult siblings over household chores and the disciplining of Melissa's young child. They searched for a long time and were only able to find one house that could be split to enable Melissa and her daughter to occupy a separate, self-contained space. Without such scope for separation they would have abandoned extended family living, despite its benefits. While they lived under one roof, the separation of space enabled them to enjoy independence and togetherness on their own terms – and without treading on each others' toes. Such 'survival' strategies provide guidance for managing a possible future where dwellings are increasingly shared. Efforts to support extended family living as a sustainable and durable alternative must be informed by a detailed understanding of the types of spaces these families need.

We are left then with a real alternative, but also a dilemma of planning and design. There is a need to look *within* dwellings to consider how they may be designed or retrofitted to better accommodate for fluctuations in family size, and various types of sharing – beyond the nuclear or single-parent family. Progressive alternatives are already being found in the everyday lives of extended family households (Gibson et al 2013). Their actions are at once mundane, familiar, accessible and feasible; as well as exciting, powerful and potentially transformative. Larger household sizes deliver direct and indirect energy savings, reduce car dependency, emissions and waste, and save space. They also respond to caring needs. With an ageing population and the rising prevalence of dual income and single-parent households, growing numbers of families may choose (or be forced) to look within, for solutions. By looking inward, urban planners can uncover existing but unheralded ‘real alternatives’ to environmental and social pressures; and better accommodate the needs of a diverse population. This will require a mix of initiatives. First, advocacy is needed to raise awareness of the growing potential for extended family and other forms of larger-household living. Such advocacy ought to come from a diversity of perspectives: from climate change activists seeking to reduce per capita domestic carbon emissions; from demographers who track the emergence of this unique family type (with its specific housing needs); from aged care providers (many of whom are already advocating for improved means to keep ageing people at home longer); and from planners charged with the responsibility to reimagine our urban built environments. Second, smarter design and retrofitting is needed, not limited to but including: new home designs incorporating upstairs living space, small second kitchens and family ‘break-out’ rooms; retrofit technologies, appliances and fittings that facilitate privacy and partial autonomy within larger family units (but with minimal impacts on carbon, energy or water use); sympathetic development approval guidelines (for instance, for ‘granny flat’ additions²); and provisions for adjoining units in

²For instance, significant planning changes were implemented by the New South Wales Department of Planning and Infrastructure (2011) under the *State Environmental Planning Policy (Affordable Rental Housing) 2009*, which aims to ‘help mums and dads create a place for those who need a space of their own, like elderly relatives or younger people who have not left home’. The policy aims to support families to add granny flats by allowing compliant developments

new medium and high-density apartment blocks to be potentially linked. Third – and perhaps the most immediate need of all – is for a shift in mindset, moving beyond singular assumptions about nuclear families as the norm, and about densification and demand for smaller dwellings as the only levers for consolidation.

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to be approved within ten days; instructing councils that granny flats are permitted in *all* residential zones, and by setting clear standards for these developments.

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