

**Vertical Living Kids: Creating Supportive Environments for
Children in Melbourne Central City High Rises**

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Abstract: High rise housing has become an increasingly popular form of urban development in Australian capital cities. Yet the effects of high rise residences on children's well-being remain largely neglected by researchers and policy-makers. This paper reports the preliminary findings of research in central Melbourne with 39 children in public housing and newer middle-class high rises. Of particular interest in this research is the impact of living in high rise housing on children's independent mobility, which has declined radically in the last 30 years (Whitzman and Pike 2007). What kinds of social and physical elements do children aged 8-12 value in their neighbourhoods? What do they see as barriers and enablers to their independent exploration?

The territorial ranges of children in private housing are greater than those living in public housing. The children in public housing do not use many public spaces outside their estates, and complain about the poor quality of infrastructure within the estates. While children in private housing use more nearby facilities, they too complain about inadequate social space within and near their residences. Both groups of children paid great attention to 'child density': they like spaces where they can find other children. The findings suggest that planners and developers need to provide more local destinations such as milk bars, courtyard green spaces, and interesting play equipment. More fundamentally, a new planning approach is required that extends beyond purpose built 'cages'— school yards, playgrounds, and skate parks- to encompass children's right to explore freely within the entire urban realm.

Introduction

Australian skylines have undergone a profound change in recent years, with the emergence of new high rise residential developments occurring in tandem with economic restructuring and changing household demographics. In 1991, the City of Melbourne, comprising the central business district (CBD) and surrounding inner suburbs, had a population of approximately 34,000 people. By 2006, the population had doubled, to over 67,000 (City of Melbourne 2007a). The current population projections are for a further doubling of the municipality's population by 2021, with the CBD and its adjacent waterfront districts, Docklands and Southbank, specifically identified as growth areas.

This high rise residential development in Melbourne's centre has been planned on the assumption that new residents would comprise a mix of DINKs (dual-income-no-kids) and older 'empty-nesters' (Fincher 2004, Costello 2005). Consequently, the needs of children and families have been virtually ignored, and the newly developed areas are lacking essential facilities, services and appropriate open space for these residents. Yet, it is projected that almost 10,000 children aged 0 – 14 will reside in the City of Melbourne by 2021, many of whom will be accommodated in high rise housing (City of Melbourne 2007b). Our research interest in *vertical living kids* (children living in high rises) is sparked by concern about the decline of *children's independent mobility* (CIM; defined as the freedom of those under the age of 18 to move around in public space without adult accompaniment). Findings from our research are intended to elucidate those physical and social elements that encourage CIM, and inform planners and policy makers on supportive environments for children living in high rises in Australia's central cities. This paper will set out the context for this research, and discuss preliminary findings from 39 interviews with children living in both privately and publicly owned housing. The research will be completed in December 2009.

Background

'Good' Australian Children Don't Wander Around by Themselves.... Do They?

Internationally and within Australia, there has been a radical decline in CIM over little more than one generation. In the 1970s, most Australian children walked or cycled by themselves to school, while today, most children are driven by their parents (Peddie and Somerville 2005, Timperio et al 2004a, Tranter and Pawson 2001).

While much of the CIM research concentrates on the journey to school, UK evidence suggests that this only accounts for only one fifth of children's journeys (Mackett 2001: 1). Several researchers, following on from Hillman et al (1990) foundational study on CIM, talk about 'licences' as one way of measuring the shift in attitudes towards CIM. Licenses are the age at which parents allow children to travel to school alone; play in the street or a nearby park without adult supervision; cross main roads; travel to places other than school; take public transport; cycle on main roads; and go out after dark alone or with friends. Children aged 6 to 12 are at a key age where "graduated licenses" may or may not be granted by parents (Tranter and Pawson 2001: 31). The "territorial range", or distance from children's homes to where they are allowed to wander independently, is also measured in some studies (Kytta 2004: 180).

The individual and societal costs of this decrease in children's independent exploration are onerous. Walking and cycling are both examples of the kinds of moderate physical activity that need to be undertaken on a daily basis for good physical health. There is also a substantial and growing literature on the importance of autonomous exploration of local environments for the social and mental development of children, and the prevention of chronic diseases such as anxiety and depression (Ward 1977, Short 1989, Hillman et al 1990, Tranter and Pawson 2001, Malone 2007). Prezza et al (2005: 437) discuss the impacts of reduced autonomous walking and cycling in neighbourhoods, including lessened environmental knowledge, retarded development of spatial, motor and analytic skills, and reduced number of local friends and acquaintances. At the societal scale, adult dependent mobility is associated with increased use of 'the parent taxi',

reduced use of public spaces like parks and streets, and augmented fears of the strangers that surround us in cities (Martin and Carlson 2005, Tranter and Pawson 2001).

The most commonly cited reason for declining CIM is child and parental fears of traffic safety (children getting hit by a car) and stranger danger (children getting abducted by non-family members) (Timperio et al 2004a: 42). A more complex set of additional factors is found within a study on reducing children's car dependency in the UK: increasing car ownership and lessened public transport services in some areas; greater complexity in lifestyles, with more parents working; increasing sprawl, with workplaces, shops, schools, and leisure activities only accessible by car; the rationalization of services such as schools and shops (Mackett 2001: 5). A further social factor is the growing tendency to heavily schedule middle class children's and adult lives, a phenomenon that has been termed "turbo-childhood". Coupled with social messages about the dangers of allowing children to engage in outdoor and unstructured outdoor play has been middle class pressures to place children in private schools, organize private sports and arts lessons, and organize expensive and exotic 'play dates' (Malone 2007: 516).

Studies that have looked at the environmental attributes of particular areas in relation to children's mobility choices have found that key determinants include the age, density, and proximity of the neighbourhood to the central city; a set of traffic danger signifiers, including amount of traffic, width of roadway, quantity and quality of footpaths, and dangerous crossings; and a set of stranger danger signifiers including visible incivilities and alcohol/drug use (dog muck, broken bottles, used drug paraphernalia); along with local air and noise pollution (Prezza et al 2005: 438). Several researchers have drawn attention to a negative spiral of fear leading to fewer people on the street, which in turn leads to increased potential for accidents and crimes (Prezza et al 2005).

Whether an individual child walks or cycles independently is also related to their gender, age, and socio-economic status (SES). The relationship between SES and CIM is oblique. Tranter and Pawson (2001) found that traffic levels were greater determinants of CIM than SES, in their study of four New Zealand neighbourhoods. In general, children from lower SES

neighbourhoods are less likely to be physically active than children from higher SES neighbourhoods (Timperio et al 2004b: 21), even though low SES households are less likely to own vehicles. Morrow (2000), in her work with children in the UK aged 12-15, found that young people in low SES areas were deterred from their use of the urban environment by poor amenities and incivilities issues like garbage/filth, as well as fear of physical or sexual attack. Furthermore, visible minority youth were subject to harassment by authority figures such as shop owners and police.

Despite a clear social and health rationale for action, planners and policy makers have been slow to respond. A recent audit of local and state government policy in the State of Victoria found virtually no mention of CIM, even in 'whole of government' priorities such as *Go For Your Life*, which seeks to increase physical activity and intake of healthy foods, with children as a major target group (Whitzman and Pike 2007: 30). There is little mention of children's needs or rights in the *Melbourne 2030* metropolitan plan, in recent planning guidelines like *Healthy by Design* and *Safer Design Guidelines*, or in the ambitious *Neighbourhood Renewal* programme, which seeks to narrow the gap between the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Victoria and the rest of the State (Whitzman and Pike 2007: 33-35). While there are relatively new Child-Friendly Cities programmes in several local governments, which include an explicit "citizenship" approach to children's right to autonomously explore public space, the focus thus far has been on consulting with children, rather than integrating their recommendations into land use planning policies (Whitzman et al 2009).

'Good' Australian Families Don't Live in High Rises...Do They?

In Australia, the single-storey detached family housing has long reigned supreme as the dominant housing type (Randolph 2006: 473). Indeed, the "Great Australian Dream" is premised on attainment of a large house on a quarter acre block in the suburbs, with the backyard considered a crucial space in the Australian psyche (Costello 2005: 54). After World War Two, state authorities focused on central city slum clearance and replacement by high rise buildings

surrounded by green spaces, which was intended to improve both physical and moral health of low-income families (Costello 2005: 53). But the 1960s, which saw the construction of many of these high rise public housing estates, also witnessed an immediate backlash against them (Costello 2005). These critiques, influenced by US and UK public housing policy failures, described the high-rise block as the new ghetto, rife with social disorder. The high rise form itself was “considered to be ‘alien’ to the architectural and housing preferences of the Australian urban citizenry”, and essentially became “highly visible enclaves of disadvantaged people” (Jamieson and Jacobs 1996: 78, 83). Jamieson and Jacobs (1996: 83-4) insist that the “demonising of the highrise was always relative to the belief that it was the ‘wrong’ sort of housing, especially for the functional family” as it was out of sync with “Australian belief that it was the detached, single-story dwelling which was the ‘healthy’ way to raise families”. Because the open spaces provided on these public housing estates “belong to everybody and therefore belong to nobody,” they were considered a poor substitute to the backyard, instead becoming a “‘no-man’s-land’, free and unsupervised” (Stevenson et al. 1967: 146-7).

However, as noted by van Vliet (1983: 227); “apartment children do not ... live in a vacuum”; rather, “they are embedded in more encompassing social, cultural and spatial systems that may alleviate or exacerbate any effects that may occur”. Many studies investigating children’s experiences of high rise in Australia and Anglophone nations conflate high rise living with public housing, which has increasingly been populated by new migrants, households with very low SES, and sometimes, individuals with complex mental and physical health problems. Gifford (2007: 4) suggests that SES and the degree of choice that residents have to select their housing are “moderating factors” which influence their experiences of high rise living. Gifford also provides other moderating factors, including the location of the building, population density, dwelling design and the particular characteristics of the resident (including economic status, life cycle stage, gender and culture).

A comparative study undertaken in the 1970s of children’s experiences in both public and privately-owned high rise apartments in Sydney suggested that affluent households are in a

better position to offset the presumed disadvantages of apartment living on children (King 1974). Children aged 10 to 12 residing in privately owned high rise housing were found to have significantly larger travel ranges than their counterparts in public high rises (King 1974: 10-11). Moreover, the children residing in privately-owned high rise housing identified with, and expressed a greater sense of ownership over, the communal open spaces of their apartment complex (such as pools or gardens) much more positively than the public high rise sample.

Melbourne's central city has been undergoing a profound transformation since the 1980s, as unused office blocks and obsolete industrial precincts are converted into high rise residential developments. As the City of Melbourne mounted its *Postcode 3000* campaign, the charms of the urban lifestyle was marketed as the solution for those unburdened with children, with easy access to public transport, city attractions, and workplaces (Costello 2005, Fincher 2004). Following this logic, these developments were designed as family free zones, lacking sufficient services, facilities and open space (Fincher 2004: 331).

But families with children are found in these new central city flats. In 2001, 20% of the people living in high-rise units across Australia were living as a family containing children (ABS 2004: 169). In 2006, dual or single parents with children comprised 7.09%, 4.76% and 8.64% of households residing in Docklands, Melbourne (CBD) and Southbank respectively (City of Melbourne 2008: Appendix 7). This same year, children below the age of 12 comprised 3.1%, 2.1% and 3.3% of the total population of Docklands, Melbourne (CBD) and Southbank respectively (City of Melbourne 2008: Appendix 2). Moreover, by 2021 children below the age of 12 will comprise 7.72% of the total population of the CBD, Docklands and Southbank, equating to just over 4,000 people (City of Melbourne 2008: Appendix 19).

As Woolcock and Gleeson (2007: 6) point out, metropolitan strategic planning in Australia is becoming increasingly consumed with creating "high density urban futures" to meet the needs of singles, DINKs and empty nesters, and this way, "contemporary strategic planning has become almost child-blind". Given that planners, developers and designers appear unprepared for families with children to take up residence in high rise areas, what is the impact on children who end up living there?

Methods

In 2008, we developed an 18 month research project, funded by the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth), which explores how children and their parents residing in high rise housing in inner and central Melbourne perceive their local environments and how their perceptions impact on children's independent exploration of public spaces. For the purpose of this paper, high rise housing has been defined as buildings comprising four or more storeys, a standard definition (ABS 2004: 166, DSE 2004). We focus on children aged eight to 12 and their parents, corresponding to upper primary school grades four to six, as research indicates that this is the age group whose independent mobility has been curtailed most severely in recent years (Hillman et al 1990, Timperio et al 2004a). We are working with 39 children (17 males and 22 females), comprising 18 and 21 participants drawn from public and privately owned high rise housing respectively in the CBD and adjacent inner suburbs: Docklands, Southbank, North Melbourne, Flemington, Carlton, St. Kilda, and Port Melbourne.

The project employs a mixed method approach, applying earlier work by Australian and UK public health and planning researchers to the under-researched area of children in central city high rises (Mackett 2001, Hume et al 2005, Duncan et al 2007, Carver et al 2008). The children have a 'week with a camera', wherein they photograph spaces they like and dislike in their neighbourhood, and using these photos, create annotated collages of their neighbourhood. They fill out a four day travel diary which records where they went, who they travelled with, and what modes of transport they used to get to their destination. They are also loaned a combination Global Positioning and accelerometer devices (no larger than a pedometer), which records where they have actually travelled and the intensity of their physical activity for these four days. Their parents fill out a survey asking when and how often their children play and at what age they allow their child to travel on their own, along with what concerns they may have about allowing their child or children to travel independently. The research team has also conducted audits of physical environment features of the participants' neighbourhoods, such as traffic volume and

speed, and the number and quality of local destinations for children, to supplement the data collected from the participants.

Finally, local and state planning policies are compared with international best practice supporting children living in high rise housing. There is an advisory committee, consisting of representatives from VicHealth, the Cities of Melbourne and Port Phillip (where the research is being carried out), the Heart Foundation, and the Department of Human Services. Concurrently, ARC Linkage and Discovery grant applications, with researchers from Curtin, Griffith, Central Queensland, and New South Wales Universities, are intended to roll out this research project nation-wide.

This paper will specifically concentrate on the preliminary findings derived from the photo collages of participants. Although the sessions where the children created the photo collage were scheduled to take one hour, about one third of these sessions ranged 90 minutes to 120 minutes because of the children's enthusiasm for the project. The children were asked to keep four questions in mind when they made their collages: What is this place and what do you do there? Why do you like or not like this place? How do you get there? And who do you go there with? The research team also encouraged the participants to describe or draw additional places, draw and annotate maps of their local area and develop 'wish lists' of things that they would like to change in their neighbourhood.

Preliminary Results: Where Vertical Living Kids Go and Why

Of the 18 children residing in public high rise housing, the photo collages of 15 participants (or 83% of the sample) suggest that their 'play geographies' are dominated by the estate grounds, specifically green open space, basketball courts and play equipment. Adjacent recreation centres (particularly Carlton Baths, which contains an outdoor pool and indoor basketball court) were also popular. None of the 13 children we interviewed in Carlton housing estate walk 500 metres to Carlton Gardens, with its large and new adventure playground and the Melbourne Museum, both of which are free to children. Instead, they cluster in the rather tired

playground equipment on their public housing estates and play in the leftover spaces between residential buildings. Despite frequent use, of the 15 participants who use spaces on their estate, 53% were frustrated with the quality of these spaces. The most common complaint, expressed by 75% of those who were dissatisfied, was that the play equipment was boring, lacked facilities for children their age and/or that the equipment provided was broken. A 12 year old girl from Flemington housing estate was particularly adamant that “parks should be more interesting!” suggesting that there should be “more group play equipment ... [including] see saws and other balancing things”.

Public spaces and public transport do not figure prominently in the geographies of children living in public housing. This is likely owing to the relationship between legitimate user status and affordability, although we are still teasing out what extent this is a price barrier or an issue related to comfort zones. Only eight children residing in public high rise, or 44% of the sample, described commercial spaces that they frequent regularly, and none described other nearby public spaces such as Federation Square, the large parks fringing the CBD, or even Swanston Street. The commercial spaces mentioned were local shops (such as milk bars) with only three children identifying larger shopping centres of Lygon Street and Highpoint. Two of the participants in the Flemington housing estate complained about the limited variety of shops in their local area, adding that the major shopping centres were too far from the estate for them to access independently.

In contrast, only 11 children living in privately owned high rise housing, or 50% of the sample, identified children’s play spaces in their photo collages. In addition to local parks and playgrounds, they also emphasised tennis centres, skate parks, adventure playgrounds and public libraries. Like the public housing children, despite the wealth of large open green spaces fringing the CBD, only Flagstaff Gardens was explicitly mentioned by one participant from the private high rise sample. In addition to the public play spaces identified by the private high rise sample, seven children commented on the importance of the private spaces or amenities within their apartment complex including communal green spaces, pools, or tennis courts. However,

three children described some form of regulation on their use of these spaces. These were either in the form of formal restrictions based on age or adult supervision, or comments regarding the general culture of the apartment complex, such as residents who complain if children make too much noise or 'hang out' in communal courtyard spaces.

In contrast to the limited spatial geography of housing estate participants, children residing in privately-owned high rise housing frequent a variety of public spaces. Eighteen of the children (comprising 86% of the private high rise sample) identified commercial spaces that they liked in their photo collages. Of these 18 children, 12 noted local shops (milk bars, local fast food outlets, video rental stores, supermarkets etc.) that they frequent regularly, with six children specifically commenting that they like that they are allowed to travel there independently or with friends. Twelve participants cited major shopping centres as places they liked because of the range and quality of shops, including Harbour Town, DFO Spencer Street, Melbourne Central, the Art Centre Sunday Market and CBD laneways and arcades.

Moreover, 17 participants residing in private high rise housing (or 81% of the sample) spoke positively on a wide range of such spaces. The response here were varied as some children described in general terms of how they liked the city "because it has more things to do and play" (8 year old girl, Southbank) while others identified specific destinations such as Federation Square, the Southbank promenade, Degraes Street or pocket spaces between buildings where they can 'hang out' with friends. Other private housing children were impressed with particular features of central and inner city living, such as the architecture, the Melbourne skyline or buskers. Seven of these children noted particular train stations or tram stops that they liked, because it allowed them to get to school or other destinations or because they enjoy the tram or train ride experience because they are able to travel independently or with friends. However, six participants (including three that spoke positively of public transport) expressed concerns about using public transport. These concerns related to: overcrowding at tram stops and train stations during peak hours; the lack of appropriate shelters at tram stops; that stations and tram stops are dirty, "scary" and that they are approached by beggars; and that they had to suffer from cigarette smoke from other passengers at train stations and bus stops. In this light,

they see themselves as consumers or citizens, not potential victims, with legitimate concerns about amenity and maintenance.

Perhaps reflecting the limited travel range of the public high rise sample and the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants living in public housing, their safety concerns revolved around personal safety issues related to 'estate life'. For instance, all four children in Flemington were concerned about the "druggies" or "hobos" on the estate. As a twelve year old girl explains, "I wish....they kick out bad people and help them be good (so then I could go to places alone)". The only exception to describe safety concerns beyond the estate was a 10 year old boy from North Melbourne housing estate who explained "I don't like the city when I go by myself because I get lost and I don't feel safe".

In contrast, the sample from private high rise housing expressed multiple safety issues which were not specifically focused on their immediate surrounds, perhaps reflecting their larger travel range. One third of the sample cited traffic safety concerns by either identifying major roads or intersections that are difficult for them to cross or by noting particular safety issues in relation to public transport (which have been outlined above). Six participants (29% of the sample) reported general personal safety concerns pertaining to "scary" or "angry" people in the city or identifying particular spaces that weren't adequately lit at night.

The photo collages suggest the importance of and access to social spaces as critical in defining the exploration parameters of all children. For instance, 67% of the children from the public high rise sample reflected that they liked to use the local purpose built destinations (either on the estate or nearby) because other children on the estate use them too. Likewise, the children residing in privately owned high rise housing also stress the significance of social spaces, with 48% explicitly citing the appeal of some destinations in terms of being able to 'hang out' with friends. However, this issue of 'child density' also results in spaces children do not like. Three children expressed that they felt socially isolated because they do not see other children in their immediate neighbourhood. As one 11 year old girl in Southbank complained, it is "very hard to cope not living near my friends". Moreover, 11 of the children residing in privately-owned

housing (52% the sample) do not live within self-defined walking distance of their school, and are likely to have friends residing in different suburbs. Unlike the children from public housing, they can't develop a social space with their nearby school friends. In a positive sense, this may contribute to their larger areas of exploration; but in a negative sense, it makes them feel like aliens in their own neighbourhood.

Conclusions: Why Kids Matter

Our preliminary results suggest that the findings of King's (1974) comparative study of children's experiences in public and private high rise housing in Sydney are still relevant. In particular, the findings with respect to differences in travel range still apply (see also Gould and White 1974: 17). However, our findings also suggest that differences between children residing in public and private high rise housing are also apparent in the types of spaces they frequent; with children from privately-owned high rise housing frequenting a greater variety of spaces.

The research also reinforces the importance of social spaces, which are not necessarily purpose-built playgrounds, for children. For instance, children continue to frequent the play facilities at the public housing estates despite their dissatisfaction with the quality of the play equipment because of its function as a meeting place for children on the estate. This concept has been raised earlier by Gehl (2006: 117) who, in discussing the appeal of the playground, argued that the equipment itself is only of limited value; rather it is in the playgrounds' role as "meeting place, as a starting place for other children's activities" that it becomes an appealing destination for children. This suggests a new planning approach is required which recognises children's needs for "*social* space – the demand of the city's children to be a part of the city's life" (Ward 1977: 31).

Unfortunately, the current planning policy for children is one of "setting aside child spaces" such as parks, fenced playgrounds or skate parks (Freeman 2006: 76). Our findings suggest that this does not accurately reflect children's actual likes and dislikes, which encompass a much wider range spaces than purpose built 'cages'. Fincher and Iveson contend that planning

responses that concentrate solely on developing child or youth specific spaces do not create child friendly environments; they merely become an “archipelago of ‘safe’ spaces in a sea of adult centric space” (Fincher and Iveson 2008: 107). As Fincher and Iveson argue (2008: 112), the shift to a citizenship approach to planning that acknowledges children’s rights to the city generally “is not to deny the importance of play to children and young people”; rather, it seeks to broaden the concept of play space to “think of the city and the urban realm in particular as a space of play rather than restricting play to designated spaces”.

The Vertical Living Kids research project emerged as a response to the recent development of high rise residential neighbourhoods, planned to be child-free but in fact populated by children and their parents. Despite high rises being seen as unhealthy and inappropriate for children, Australian metropolitan planning strategies continue to encourage a high density urban form, which, in turn, is likely to increase the number of vertical living kids in Australian cities. Our ultimate aim is to encourage the recognition of children as citizens, with equal rights to appropriate housing and public space. Planners have the responsibility to take their views, and their needs, into account in our brave new cities.

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