

Creating Better Shared Spaces in Apartment Complexes and their Local Areas

By Sian Thompson

More people than ever are living in apartment complexes in Australia, and while the pace of construction may have slowed recently due to Covid-19 and prior over-supply, the shift towards apartment living will continue [1]. At the 2016 Census, 9% of the Australian population lived in private apartment complexes, and in Victoria and NSW, one in five apartments were in large buildings of more than 100 units [2]. Living in large buildings can be an isolating experience, with poor residential satisfaction [3]. However, this is not necessarily the case around the world, due to differing cultural contexts as well as more attention to design and management for community purposes [4]. With many more people living in apartments, we need to make these great places to live, now and in the long term, which means ensuring we are planning, designing and managing apartment complexes and their local areas to ensure the best outcomes for residents.

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This research, undertaken in 2019, investigated the social aspect of living in large apartment complexes, drawing on case studies in Sydney and asking what ‘good outcomes’ look like [5]. To understand how we can improve spaces within and around apartment complexes to better support social connection and encourage use, two overarching questions were asked: what types of social connections residents want locally, and how the built environment and management can support this.

The project focused specifically on what it termed ‘shared spaces’ - apartment communal spaces such as lobbies, gardens and swimming pools - plus commercial and public spaces within ten minutes’ walk, including shops, cafés, parks and libraries. These spaces are where residents most often see each other, and can develop relationships based on ‘propinquity’ (crossed paths) [6]. In the course of this research, it became apparent that some apartment shared spaces were rarely used, which is a poor outcome considering the time and money spent on designing, constructing and maintaining these spaces.

What do current guidelines advise?

Existing design guidelines in NSW, Victoria and Western Australia, while improving, don’t go into detail on how to encourage use and support interaction specifically. Victoria has recently amended their Design Standards and Design Guidelines for apartments, linking to living experiences during Covid-19, when people spent more time in their apartments and local areas [7]. New apartment buildings of ten or more units will need usable outdoor open space, and larger buildings may also have indoor communal space. The new guidelines provide many good design ideas: making pleasant spaces to linger (sunlight, landscaping, seating, wind protection) that are easy to maintain, functional, accessible and visually and physically integrated with buildings. Well-designed circulation spaces are argued to encourage social interaction, though little explicit guidance is given on how they do this.

In NSW, apartment complexes must follow SEPP65 and its associated Design Guide, which proposes barbecue areas, play areas, pools, gyms, tennis courts and common rooms [8]. It suggests shared spaces should be “readily visible from habitable rooms and private open space areas while maintaining visual privacy” [8] though mentions only the safety and privacy, rather than social,

advantages of this. Community gardens, seating in circulation spaces and natural daylighting are suggested to increase social interaction. Western Australia’s guidelines improve upon NSW’s advice by focusing more particularly on the activities shared spaces support. The guidelines suggest shared spaces should be “accessible, useable and attractive, allowing a range of activities for all residents” including shared food preparation, gardening, interest groups and resident meetings [9].

Within these guidelines the emphasis is on safety, noise, privacy and environmental considerations such as sunlight and wind (especially where minimum standards are concerned), with only a passing reference made to features that specifically support social interaction.

What types of social connections do residents want in large apartment complexes?

While the residents interviewed as part of this project often liked the classic idea of ‘community’, it usually wasn’t what they wanted in their building and local area, with many valuing privacy and anonymity. Despite this, almost a third of survey respondents (61/200) wanted more local social connection. The chart below considers answers to ‘do you have enough contact?’ against ‘do you feel isolated?’. Residents wanting more contact were ‘Lonely’ (isolated) or ‘Contact-seeking’ (not isolated), while residents with enough contact were ‘Satisfied’ (not isolated) or ‘Private’ (isolated).

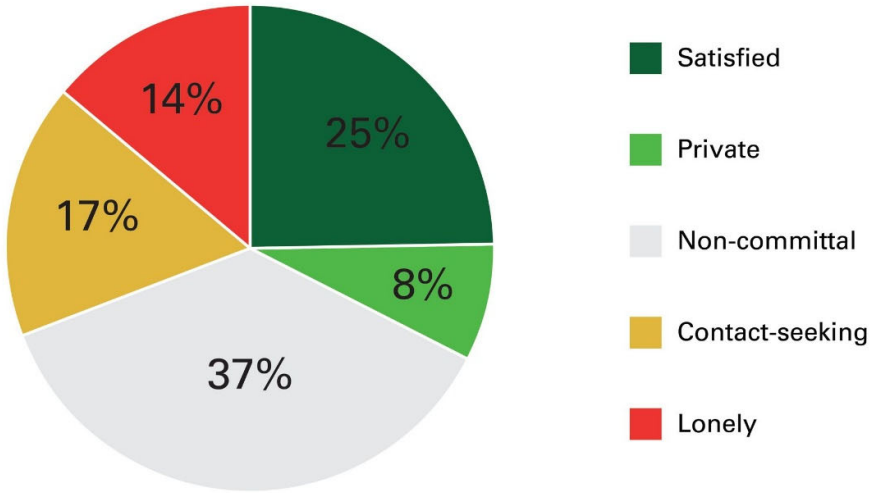


Image: Satisfaction with local social connection survey results

People wanted different types of connection in their local area, from people you just acknowledge, to people you chat with, to people you make friends with. The first two of these are ‘weak ties’ [10] or ‘casual social ties’ (CSTs) as I term them: relationships that don’t take much time or energy, but allow you to exchange favours and feel a sense of trust and belonging. The way we design and manage spaces within and around apartments can support both the development of these ties and solitary activities.

What design and management factors support use and social connection in large apartment complexes and their local areas?

Space	Encounters	Receptivity
Circulation	High	Low
Destination	Often low, aim for high	High

Image: Encounters and receptivity of circulation and destination spaces.

Social connections develop through **encounters + receptivity + catalysts** and different spaces provide these to different extents. To increase opportunities for social connection, we want to increase use of space (encounters), in spaces where people are open to interaction (receptivity), and allow or provide catalysts for interaction.

The following advice for circulation and destination spaces in the apartment complex, and other spaces in the local area, complements guidance on sunlight, safety, privacy and other principles often covered in existing guidelines.

CIRCULATION SPACES

These are spaces such as lifts, lobbies and carpark where people are on their way somewhere. These spaces are well-used and people often encounter each other here, but receptivity is low – you might say hello and comment on the weather, but everyone is on the way somewhere and interaction is brief, especially between strangers. In spaces used by many people, you'll often find 'civil inattention' – politely ignoring each other. Therefore, circulation spaces are good for supporting acknowledgement ties and creating a friendly atmosphere, but not for developing stronger chatting or friend ties. Catalysts like dogs, children or problems increase the chances of interaction, while some transparency between spaces supports visual encounters. Seating in circulation spaces is functional and welcome, but it is unlikely to increase interaction between strangers - lingering here is 'odd' and civil inattention common.

CIRCULATION SPACES: RESIDENTIAL CORRIDORS

Apartment residents often feel they 'should' know the neighbours on their floor, at least by sight, as these neighbours can best help in emergencies or when locked out. People are often more receptive to interaction in residential corridors – though these encounters may be rare. Signs of personality can act as catalysts for interaction; management could allow residents to personalise the space outside their doors, similar to Gehl's 'soft edges' [11].

Some residential corridors are large enough to provide neutral ground for residents to meet, and safe spaces for children to play. Residents of small units might also use them as break-out spaces, for

silence or enjoying winter sunlight. Spaces like this should be pleasant (natural light, well-ventilated, seating), easy to clean, and afford purposeful but flexible use.

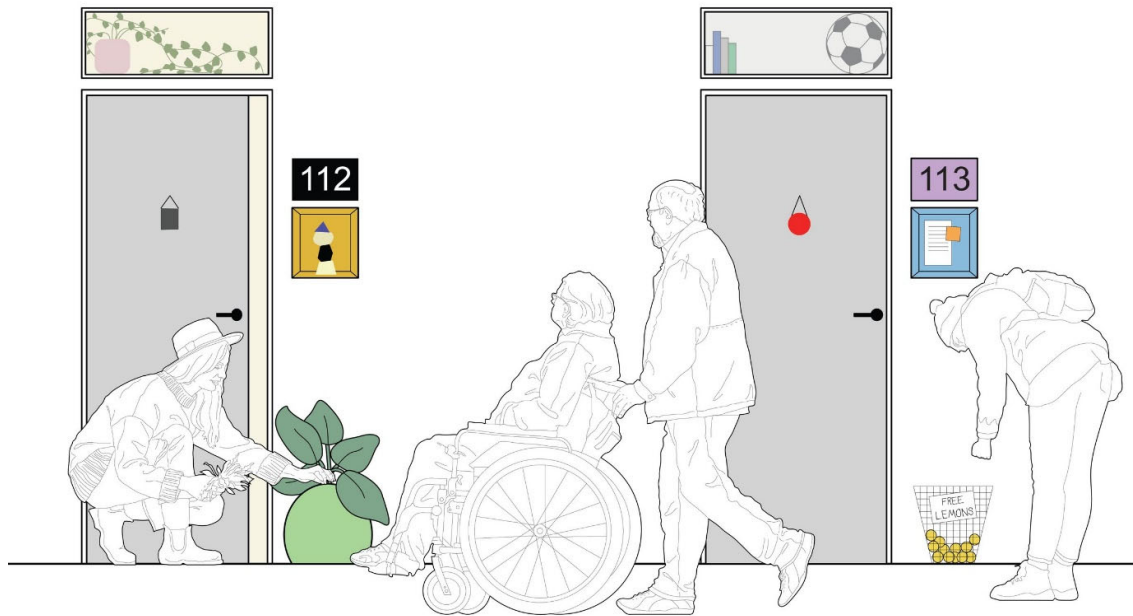


Image: Potential design features and personalisation techniques that could provide catalysts and increase hallway encounters.

DESTINATION SPACES

Purposeful but flexible use is also especially important for ‘destination spaces’ in apartment buildings such as gardens, roof terraces, or common rooms. Residents can develop deeper CSTs here, where time pressure is less apparent, shared interests are implied and future meetings are likely – all increasing receptivity. However, these spaces are often not well-used, with a lack of purpose (or purposes not matching resident interests) a major factor. For example, a roof terrace may have a beautiful view but insufficient seating, no WC and a ban on glass, which restricts activities. Health and safety is particularly important on a roof terrace, but design and management should aim to expand the activities possible in a space rather than restrict them. Functional spaces with clear purposes, such as communal laundries or bike maintenance stations, are likely to be used regularly, so could have seating to support lingering, or be co-located with spaces supporting lingering. Spaces that support multiple, complementary activities simultaneously are useful, and there should be safe play spaces to support children. Amenities should be easy to maintain and durable.

Spaces should also be easy to find – residents cannot use a space if they cannot find it or do not know it exists. These spaces should be easily accessible and visible - well integrated - while avoiding the 'fish-bowl' effect. Resident involvement in the management of spaces can increase use through better meeting residents’ needs and greater resident engagement [12]. A range of events or organised activities can provide catalysts for residents to meet others with similar interests, and these might be manager- or resident-led. Finally, consider why a resident would use *this* space over staying in their unit or going out into the city. [The Happy City](#) has further useful ideas on ‘doing things together’ in shared spaces.

SPACES IN THE LOCAL AREA

People like to connect with others at a range of scales [13], and quality spaces in the local area support these connections and get residents out and about. In busy urban areas, people are less receptive to interaction, but a number of catalysts can spark connections. Residents in this research often had CSTs with staff of local small businesses, such as cafés and newsagents, because they had a reason to interact regularly. Staff continuity was especially important here. Low-cost, visible, welcoming businesses or public spaces can be valuable ‘third places’ [14], supporting lingering and providing venues for activities, events and classes to connect people with shared interests. Some residents felt a sense of ownership and belonging for small businesses in their complex, however ground-floor commercial spaces are often difficult to fill [15]. Low-rent spaces where long-term tenants can be found, or low-cost community spaces planned in collaboration with councils or other organisations, could address this need [16]. It is also important that community spaces are visible and salient, so people know a space exists and what happens there, and that active community members’ initiatives are supported, not thwarted by bureaucracy.

Nearby green spaces were valued by those who had them, and desired by those who did not. People are more receptive in small local parks (which have a lower chance of civil inattention), however residents highly valued larger regional parks for their amenity. Parks should support children and dogs, which are both excellent catalysts for interaction, as well as general exercise and relaxation. Busy roads reduced the accessibility and pleasantness of green space, and landscaping should take dogs' needs into account.

More of us will be living in apartments in the future so we need to ensure these environments support us in connecting with others and providing useful spaces. To do this, design guidelines should provide more illustrative guidance for developing useful, socially-supportive spaces, focusing not just on privacy but also considering how spaces can increase use, leverage receptivity and provide or support catalysts. Designers, developers and planning approval authorities should take care that shared spaces are well-designed, rather than afterthoughts to meet minimum requirements, and that local areas provide a range of quality spaces. Building managers and resident committees should make sure spaces are well-maintained and support a range of activities, change spaces that are little used, and reconsider unnecessarily-restrictive rules. With these actions, we can create more successful shared spaces and support social connection, making apartments better, more enjoyable places to live.

About the author:

Sian is a Research Associate at City Futures Research Centre, UNSW Sydney. She has a background in psychology, design and urban sociology and a keen interest in the lived experience of urban housing, housing affordability, sustainability and design at the building and precinct scale. She’s worked in various roles in the construction industry in Sydney, London and Auckland, and is committed to translating research into practical advice to make great places to live.