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Observed Social Activities around Low-Cost Flats

Azhan Abdul Aziz

Senior Lecturer, University Teknologi MARA, Perak Branch, Seri Iskandar Campus, 32610 Bandar Seri Iskandar, Perak, Malaysia

Abstract

While policy efforts of social integration focus heavily on provision of big public spaces and amenities, the actual impacts on social engagements remain uncertain. At the same time, the social potentials of outdoor spaces surrounding the homes, has been neglected. Everyday activities in these spaces have been highlighted to affect social encounters, casual surveillance, and shared norms. In attempt to look at these potentials, the present study compares the influence of three common flats layouts on outdoor activities among residents. Data derived from systematic behavioural observation of social activities is statistically tested to analyse for variations across three different types of flats. Findings reveal that the different outdoor near home spaces contain varying domestic, social and retreat activities generating liveliness in the low-cost environment. These appeals of outdoor liveliness, differently influence social encounters and engagement, in relation to the ways by which flats are being laid out.

Keywords: Low-Cost Flats, Outdoor Space, Social Interaction

Introduction

This study compares observed outdoor social interaction within the surroundings of three different types of flats. It explores how potent the outdoor spaces are as social arena. Building layout and configuration determines the conditions of the circulation spaces that are presumed to support casual encounters and interactions of the residents. The way people socialize in the near home outdoor space is determined by these corridor configurations. The study seeks to supply empirical evidence on how social activities around the homes area affected by the different flats design. The main premise of the study is that the different physical environments may differently affect the ways in which the residents use the outdoor space and the potentials for them to socially engage with each other.

Literature Review

There is a growing concern over liveability of low-cost multi-storey flats. Studies have repeatedly point to the importance of housing design to be more sensitive towards its social implications (Mohit, Ibrahim, & Rashid, 2009). Some scholars even emphasized instrumental function of housing as one of the tools for social integration (Carmon, 2009). One recurring potential that

has been sidelined however, is the notion that the constrains in dwelling space of flats usually transform the outdoor into vibrant social spaces (Forrest, Grange, & Ngai-Ming, 2002) and these spaces, in turns, becomes vital place for social and non-social activities (Abdul Aziz, Ahmad, & Nordin, 2012). Kazemzade and Shakouri (2017) recently attributed essential, selective and social activities that support and facilitate social interaction among residents. People also prefer to sit around and chat in small common spaces close to home rather than in a larger centralized common space (Abu-Ghazze, 1999). Sense of community was also found to be positively associated with such outdoor activities that allows neighbours chances to meet each other (Abdul Aziz, et al., 2012; Wood, Frank, & Giles-Corti, 2010). Those outdoors with trees and canopies may further enhance social ties among neighbors (Holtan, Dieterlen, & Sullivan, 2015). In low income community, social ties and networks are very instrumental as they mediate access to support and resources (Marques, 2012).

Numerous comparative layout studies have illustrated different outcomes. Brandon, Hirt and Cameron (2008) found that residents of traditional double-loaded corridor halls interact with others more often than do those in cluster suite-style layouts of residence halls. Even though there is a greater proportion of common space provision for the later (i.e. 6 rooms per common space compared to forty rooms to one in the traditional types) the design of suite-style halls seems to limit frequency of interactions. Michelson (1993) compares four innovative housing and four conventional housing areas with apartment blocks design to demonstrate how different housing designs have influence over observed social contacts. In an attempt to illustrate the impact of residential layouts on social interaction, Abu-Ghazze (1999) extensively compares six different types of housing and demonstrates that plan manipulation and arrangement of open space within the housing areas could determine how people use the outdoor space for social activity and interaction. While this is an extensive study on physical impacts on social interaction, the wide range of housing types compared impose multiple factors such density, building heights and mixed demographic background that blur the actual impacts of residential layout and configuration. Raman (2010) examines the relationship between proximity and the actual social interaction in urban neighbourhoods. Low-density areas were found to be associated with wide social networks and activities but remarkably few strong relationships. Conversely, high-density neighbourhoods had smaller networks but stronger social ties.

Few studies relate layouts of urban higher density housing to social outcomes. Even in those studies the social outcomes are varied. The studies that focus on homogeneous community rely on certain types of institutional housing. Among the most recent study on objective, observable social behaviours is that of Zhang & Lawson's (2009) which assess the potentials for social activities in the outdoor space of residential areas. They illustrate how the facilities of daily need provided may affect the attract people to engage in the outdoor social activities around the housing areas. Outdoor spaces of three different urban high density housing layouts were scrutinized. It suggests the lack of privacy and sense of being under surveillance in the outdoor space as influential factors in low level of outdoor social activities. Others illustrated the relations between visibility of the outdoor housing area and local social networks (Abdul Aziz & Syed Mahdzar, 2016). Improved quality of outdoor space also affects liveliness and well-being activities (Anderson, Ruggeri, Steemers, & Huppert, 2017).

These near home spaces are the outdoor void formed by the flats block configuration. The latter influences the proximity of dwelling units, as well as visibility of common space (Aziz & Mahdzar, 2016) which, in turns, affect co-awareness and co-presence among residents. These co-awareness and co-presence in are key ingredients that promote and regulate social encounters (Beckwith, 2010). Other studies advocated such notion by arguing that social networks in the neighbourhoods can be influenced by the visibility and spatial connectivity to common open spaces determined by building type and layout (Raman, 2010). Nonetheless, more research is needed to explain the role of residential layout and design, in facilitating opportunities for encounter and social network development. This study attempts at describing how the three most common flats types in Malaysia relate to the frequency and distribution of social interactions among the residents.

Methodology

A dataset of behavioural observations in three types of flats was analysed to ascertain how social interactions are distributed around the outdoor near home spaces. The analysis includes uncovering any significant variations of findings across flats types. For the purpose of comparability, the observation data were normalized according to the estimated actual population considering the empty units in the respective housing areas during observation. The actual population figures were assumed to affect the occupancy of the outdoor spaces and influence the actual observed activities throughout the outdoor near home spaces. The three types of flats were categorized according to the circulation configurations (Figure 1).

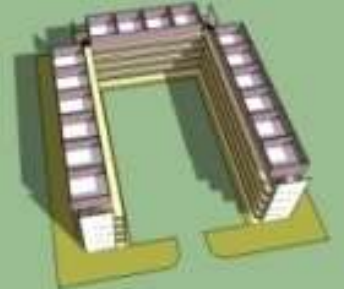
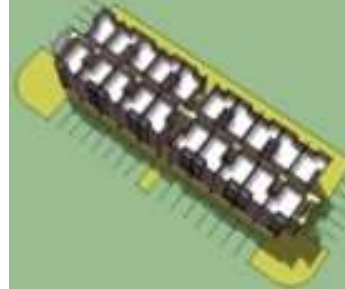
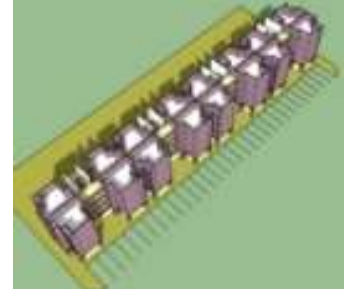
Type 1: Units aligned along open single-loaded corridor	Type 2: Units aligned along internal double-loaded corridor	Type 3: Units clustered around staircases with small landings
		

Figure 1: Three Types of Flats

The observation recorded four common activity types: 1) general, 2) domestic, 3) retreat, and 4) social (Abdul Aziz, et al., 2012). Domestic activity involves routine tasks related to the functioning of the households including cloth lining, looking after children and care towards the exterior space. Retreat activity comprises solitude activities in the outdoor to fulfil personal needs to get away. Some common retreat events include sitting, relaxing or having a nap outside, playing alone and watching the surrounding. Social activity encompasses all group activities, contacts and interactions with fellow residents including prolonged group sitting, playing or conversation, as well as brief gestural or verbal greetings.

Results and Analysis

	Type 1			Type 2			Type 3			TOTAL	
	n	% within type	% across types	n	% within type	% across types	n	% within type	% across types	N	%
Domestic	1009	35%	37%	813	33%	30%	913	35%	33%	2735	35%
Retreat	637	22%	39%	488	20%	30%	508	20%	31%	1633	21%
Social	1220	43%	34%	1176	47%	33%	1162	45%	33%	3558	45%
	2866	100%	36%	2477	100%	31%	2583	100%	33%	7926	100%

Table 1: Overall observation

Overall event observation showed that Type 1 flats accumulated the highest count of activities (36%, n=2,866) (Table 1). This was followed by Type 3 flats (33%, n=2,583) and Type 2 flats (31%, n=2,477). One sample t-tests conducted showed that the high frequency of events recorded in Type 1 flats was significant when compare to those of Type 2 (t=5.448, p=0.0000) and Type 3 flats (t=3.217, p=0.0013). The higher percentage scored in Type 3 flats, when compared to Type 2 flats, was only significant at p<0.05 level (t=2.226, p=0.0262). This was contributed by the high domestic (37%) and retreat (39%) events recorded in Type 1 flats. On the other hand, social events were fairly evenly distributed among the three types. This showed that it was still more likely to see people using the outdoor space in Type 1 open corridor flats when compared to both Type 2 and Type 3 flats, even though there are ample play spaces and commercial lots in the ground level in the two latter types.

	Type 1			Type 2			Type 3			TOTAL	
	n	% within type	% across types	n	% within type	% across types	n	% within type	% across types	N	%
Domestic	170	27%	14%	429	32%	35%	644	32%	52%	1243	31%
Retreat	86	14%	12%	244	18%	34%	382	19%	54%	712	18%
Social	371	59%	18%	681	50%	33%	992	49%	49%	2044	51%
	627	100%	16%	1354	100%	34%	2018	100%	50%	3999	100%

Table 2: Overall observation in the ground level

Housing sites with large ground perimeter, playground and commercial lots displayed more uses of the outdoor space. While Type 3 flats had the highest count for all domestic (52%), retreat (54%) and social (49%) events recorded, Type 1, with only one small playground, scored the lowest count (14%, 12% and 18% respectively)(Table 2). Compared to the scores in Type 2 Flats, the counts of events in Type 3 flats were significantly higher for domestic (t=6.535, p=0.0000), retreat (5.823, p=0.0000) and social (t=8.116, p=0.0000) events. Nonetheless, all it was more likely to see people engaging in social events in the ground levels of all types, showing that, in spaces further away from homes, more outdoor activities were observed because either facilities were provided or there was insufficient space near the homes.

	Type 1			Type 2			Type 3			TOTAL	
	n	% within type	% across types	n	% within type	% across types	n	% within type	% across types	N	%
General											
Domestic	766	36%	64%	241	29%	20%	193	49%	16%	1200	36%
Retreat	538	25%	66%	184	22%	23%	93	23%	11%	815	24%
Social	812	38%	61%	409	49%	31%	111	28%	8%	1332	40%
	2116	100%	63%	834	100%	25%	397	100%	12%	3347	100%

Table 3: Overall observation in the corridors

In the upper levels, near the units, Type 1 flats recorded the most events observed (63%) compared to Type 2 and 3. All domestic (64%), retreat (66%) and social (61%) events were also recorded the most in Type 1, while the lowest scores were found in Type 3 (16%, 11% and 8% respectively)(Table 3). The scores showed that the upper levels of Type 1 flats support more frequent outdoor space uses by the residents. The open type corridors which provide ample lighting and views to other units, including those on other levels, met the spatial need for outdoor space activities including domestic, retreat and social ones. In Type 1 flats, both the domestic (36%) and social (38%) events were similarly found to be the most frequent type of activity observed in the upper level corridors. While all types of events were most frequently observed in Type 1 flats, retreat events scored the highest percentage of 66% compare to 23% in Type 2 flats and 11% in Type 3 flats. In Type 2 flats, social events were the most frequently observed events compared to domestic (29%) and retreat (22%) ones. On the other hand, domestic events were the most frequent events observed (49%) in the corridors of Type 3 flats. However, this only contributed 16% to all domestic events observed in all three flats types.

	Type 1				Type 2				Type 3				TOTAL	
	n	% within type	% across types	% overall	n	% within type	% across types	% overall	n	% within type	% across types	% overall	N	%
OBSERVATION IN THE CORRIDORS														
Domestic	766	28%	64%	10%	241	11%	20%	3%	193	8%	16%	3%	1200	16%
Retreat	538	20%	66%	7%	184	8%	23%	3%	93	4%	11%	1%	815	11%
Social	812	30%	61%	11%	409	19%	31%	6%	111	5%	8%	2%	1332	18%
OBSERVATION IN THE GROUND LEVEL														
Domestic	170	6%	14%	2%	429	20%	35%	6%	644	27%	52%	9%	1243	17%
Retreat	86	3%	12%	1%	244	11%	34%	3%	382	16%	54%	5%	712	10%
Social	371	14%	18%	5%	681	31%	33%	9%	992	41%	49%	14%	2044	28%
	2743	100%		37%	2188	100%		30%	2415	100%		33%	7346	100%

Table 4: Comparison of overall observation between ground and upper level corridors

In Type 1 flats, the high total events observed was mainly contributed by social (30%) and domestic (28%) events that were recorded in upper level corridors (Table 4). Both event types in the corridors comprised 21% of total events observed in all three flats types. Events recorded in the upper level open corridors comprised the majority 78% of all events recorded in Type 1 flats. In type 2 flats, the total events observed was mostly contributed by the high social events (31%) recorded in the ground level particularly the covered common courts which contributed 9% of the total events recorded in all studied sites. The ground level spaces of Type 2 flats provided 62% of all events observed compared to 38% in the upper level double-loaded corridors. In type 3 flats, social event (41%) recorded in the ground level open and covered courts dominated the total events observed. This amount also contributed 14% of the total events recorded in all housing sites. The ground levels were the most active spaces with 82% of the event recorded in these flats types. Only 18% of all events were observed to happen in the limited upper level corridor spaces.

	Type 1				Type 2				Type 3				TOTAL	
	n	% within type	% across types	% overall	n	% within type	% across types	% overall	n	% within type	% across types	% overall	N	%
Upper Levels	812	69%	61%	24%	409	38%	31%	12%	111	10%	8%	3%	1332	39%
Ground Level	371	31%	18%	11%	681	62%	33%	20%	992	90%	49%	29%	2044	61%
	1183	100%	35%		1090	100%	32%		1103	100%	33%		3376	100%

Table 5: Overall locations of social events observed

Discussion

Comparisons between the flats types revealed a number of indications. Firstly, there are significant differences between the total amounts of observed outdoor events between the three housing types at least at $p < 0.05$. This shows that, while all major variables being equal as controlled through the selection of sites, the different types of flats afforded different level of observed outdoor activities. In the open corridor types, where the indoor-outdoor visibility was high, and the visibility to outdoor near home space was better, the observed outdoor, domestic, retreat and social activities increased.

Secondly, the three flats types differed in the distributions of outdoor events when the ground and upper levels observations were compared. The open corridors in Type 1 flats allowed more outdoor activities near the homes; they comprised up to 69% of all events across all flats types. In contrast, the reverse is true for the double-loaded corridor type. Events were mostly observed in the ground level locations (61%), particularly in the covered common court. This percentage was even greater in Type 3 flats (90%) where activities observed near to home corridor spaces were limited. Overall, the ground level of Type 3 flats contained the most events (29%) followed by the upper level corridors of Type 1 flats (24%), and the ground level of Type 2 flats (20%).

Thirdly, even though the total number of events recorded differs among the flats types, the percentage of social events remained at remarkably consistent level of 33% to 34% in all types. Regardless of the building forms, at the block level, the residents in low cost housings showed similar frequency of engagement in social activities around their blocks. The variants could be attributed to the different spaces afforded by different housing types. Social events comprised 43%, 47% and 45% of all events observed within the respective housing areas (Table 1). The only significant difference was found between the scores in Type 1 and 2 flats ($t = 2.932$, $p = 0.0034$). This, however, is particularly contributed by the significantly high percentage of retreat events observed in Type 1 flats (39% as compared to 30% and 31% in the other two types). The percentage of social events was also consistently highest (45%) when compared to the other two event types which indicated the popular use of outdoor space around the housing blocks as a social place for the residents. Thus, while the comparisons across the three types of low-cost flats types pointed to the similar frequency of residents' engagement in social activities around their housing areas, the amount of available near home outdoors spaces (the corridors) influenced the distribution and concentrations of those social events across the different ground and upper level locations.

	All events all locations	All events in Upper Levels	All events in Ground Level	Social Events all locations	Social Events in Upper Levels	Social Events in Ground Level
Type 1	36% (1)**	53% (1)**	24% (3)	34% (1)	51% (1)**	25% (3)
Type 2	31% (3)	32% (2)	31% (2)	33% (2)	38% (2)	31% (2)
Type 3	33% (2)	15% (3)	46% (1)**	33% (2)	11% (3)	45% (1)**

** Difference is significant when compared to **both** of the other housing types

() Ranking

Table 6: Comparison of activity locations between flats types

The findings do not support direct comparison between the different locations across the different types since the concentration of events varies across the different types (Table 6). For instance, while Type 1 flats afford high frequency of social events in the upper level corridors, those events in Type 2 flats were concentrated in the ground level covered courts. Direct comparison of corridors affordances for social events across the two flats would then be asymmetrical. Similarly, in Type 3 flats events are highly distributed in the ground level. Comparing the corridors between this type and the other two would obviously result in the third type being inferior. This calls for a more specific comparison within the type by defining the specific differences in the near home space configurations. Thus a more spatial difference between the flats could be made to reach a more valid comparative conclusion.

Conclusion

The outdoor near home spaces contain varying domestic, social and retreat activities generating liveliness in the otherwise barren low-cost environment. Locational distributions of these social encounters and engagement are significantly affected by the varying layout of the three flats types. The flats with outdoor near home spaces that afford uses by the residents generate more possibilities for encounters and interactions. The current trend of reducing spaces close to home, despite the positive intention of providing more privacy, would negatively affect potentials for these social encounters and engagements. Overall, while low cost flats layout designs have been predominantly determined by availability of space and the economic efficiency, this study highlights the potential social impacts of the type selections. While recognizing the trade-off between privacy and interaction as two ends of residential needs, design innovations that facilitate these social potentials of these near home spaces might possibly save what would have been spent on big public amenities to encourage local social interactions. With proper understandings, providing appropriate physical conditions near the homes could provide important neighbourly places.

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Corresponding Author

Azhan Abdul Aziz, PhD. Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Architecture, Planning and Surveying, University Teknologi MARA, 32610 Bandar Seri Iskandar, Perak, Malaysia.
Email: azhan850@perk.uitm.edu.my or azhanaziz@gmail.com

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