

Co-Living to meet Housing Challenges for the 21st Century

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By 2030, the United Nations organization predicts that almost 60 per cent of the world will live in cities. City populations are swelling through natural growth but also by new migrants coming to live in cities. With the impending growth in urban populations, how will provision of housing cope with the expanding numbers?

Could co-living be an option? With pressures on space and shifts in lifestyle among the under 40s, co-living or shared housing is becoming increasingly attractive, combining private space with communal facilities. During the 1960s, to deal with a shortage of inner-city dwellings, Copenhagen authorities introduced this method using social housing blocks dedicated to young families. The success of this experiment has led to an established culture of shared homes in that city that prevails today. Another aspect of modern living is that many young people choose to remain single but, despite the rise of social media, encounter record levels of loneliness through inability to form real-life relationships. Unsurprisingly, research has found that some are interested in the co-living model as it creates new ways of socialising. Other research by the Royal Institute of British Architects backs up this point suggesting that the introduction of a wide range of co-living models could not only help cope with rising levels of loneliness but also the increasing need for assisted living in ageing populations.

An award-winning project in Alicante, Spain, took this thinking to reality in setting up 240 affordable intergenerational housing units in the city's central urban areas for older persons over the age of 65 and young people under the age of 35, both of low-income levels. Priority was given to those advanced in age and with the greatest socio-economic disadvantage and to young people based not just on low income but also motivation, empathy and suitability to work in social programmes. On the basis of a 'good neighbour agreement', each young person took charge of four older people in the building, offering a few hours of their time each week to spend with the older residents.

Could such practices work in Hong Kong? We have one of the densest concentrations of population in the world - ten times that of London and fifteen times that of Shanghai. A vertical city, Hong Kong holds the world's record for most inhabitants living at the 15th floor or above and if we laid all of our skyscrapers on their sides, we would have approximately 334 kilometres of buildings, about a sixth of our total length of roads and highways. Wouldn't it make sense for us to consider co-living in our city as we have so much potential to share facilities?

Sadly, we have already inadvertently stumbled on this model through the situation of sub-divided flats. There are over 93,000 subdivided flats housing roughly 210,000 residents in this city. Low income families have no choice but to co-share often in squalid and unsafe conditions. A co-living model for Hong Kong therefore has to incorporate features that are special to our needs.

Firstly, living space must be generous and forthcoming. In compact living quarters, we should redesign facilities to be versatile such as beds doubling up as furniture when not in use, and Lego-style furniture that can be assembled into tables and chairs when needed and stowed away when not. Stress busters are important. Having interesting murals or aesthetic views is one aid, another is the use of green spaces located within bustling areas to soothe troubled minds. The World Health Organization reports that green spaces can contribute to addressing major public health issues related to non-communicable diseases. such as mental illness, obesity, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes and cancer.

Affordability - it goes without saying - is paramount. Can co-living be a means of offsetting sky-high rents by sharing the costs as well as the facilities? From a commercial perspective, COVID forced

many companies to insist that employees work from home. The social precautions aligned with good connectivity showed that not only can this method of work be effective but high office rental costs could be averted. With these conditions likely to last post-COVID, it is time for us to rethink about what living and working in our homes should look like together with saving costs through co-sharing. In our model, the addition of technology hubs in housing estates where access to IT is difficult is an important feature to bridge the digital divide in low income households.

Lastly can we engineer a community spirit for Hong Kong? NGOs in Hong Kong are working on incentives like good neighbour credit systems whereby community activities like minor repairs, escorting elders or looking after others' children can be rewarded with shopping tokens or services in kind - but more importantly it serves for neighbours to get to know one another. Helping the aged and the vulnerable is always a must in any society, so is it that onerous for us to make the leap to co-live together? It is a paradigm shift that could redefine Hong Kong's identity as a world class caring city.

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