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a case study of an unconventional housing choice of families in contemporary Denmark

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Choosing Urban compact living: a case study of an unconventional housing choice of families in contemporary Denmark

Anne Hedegaard Winther[1,2]

Abstract

In a welfare society like Denmark, deliberately downsizing on dwelling space is at odds with prevailing norms of good housing. Furthermore, the city is perceived as a place for youth or younger single adults, whereas family life is perceived as belonging to suburbia. Yet this paper explores the housing choice processes of urban compact living: middle-class households living in the city in much less space than conventionally. Existing research on this is lacking. Taking an explorative approach, the study is designed to allow this new empirical field to unfold and aims at grasping and understanding the themes and narratives at play. The study focusses on families with children living in Copenhagen, a city lauded for its liveability and high housing conditions, and in which urban compact living is thus very controversial. The paper identifies living in the city as a paramount part of imaginaries of home to an extent that dwellings are deprioritised. However, living in the city and compact living are both attributed features such as progressivity, social awareness, unruliness, and anti-materialism. Introducing a cultural and social understanding of spaciousness, the paper argues that in such narratives, the city and compact living are perceived as physically compact, yet socially spacious.

Keywords Urban compact living · Ethnography · Housing choice · Lifestyle · Spaciousness

1 Introduction

Housing sizes conventionally increase almost proportionally with the economic capabilities of their occupants. This applies to a society like contemporary Denmark too (Statistics Denmark, 2020b). Furthermore, the city is perceived as a place for youth or younger single adults, whereas especially family life is perceived as belonging to suburbia (Karsten, 2020; Kerr et al., 2020; Lilius, 2014). This too applies to Danish society (Kristensen & Andersen,

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2009; Mechlenborg, 2012). Yet recently, Denmark's larger cities have seen examples of middle-class households choosing to live on much less dwelling space, than this household type conventionally does. The spiralling housing prices in cities currently entail that middle-class households may not be able to afford larger dwellings in the city, but they *can* choose to move out of the city and obtain a much larger dwelling at the same cost, as the majority still does (Booi, Boterman & Musterd, 2020; Statistics Denmark, 2020b). Middle-class households living in very little space in the city is thus an unconventional housing choice. This paper terms it 'urban compact living'. In recent years, an increasing interest has been emerging internationally in deliberate downsizing of physical belongings and ideals of anti-consumption, based on arguments that this generates feelings of personal freedom and satisfaction. Research into non-urban forms of compact living, so-called tiny houses, has identified such motivations to be the drivers behind this particular housing choice (Anson, 2014; Boeckermann et al., 2019; Shearer & Burton, 2019). However, research into the motivations behind choosing *urban* compact living is lacking. And though urban compact living still only makes up a small fraction of the urban Danish housing market,[1] there is an increasing interest in it from policy makers, developers, architects and the media, suggesting that it might remain a part of urban housing in the future. Even worldwide interior giant IKEA has developed a "small spaces" line (IKEA, 2020). Therefore, solid knowledge about urban compact living is necessary to ensure that it is developed on qualified and informed ground. The present paper thus aims to contribute to filling this knowledge gap and accordingly asks *how the housing choice of urban compact living in a Danish context can be understood.*

Across the world, cities are currently experiencing increasing growth, to the extent that it has caused crises of housing shortage and severe lack of affordable housing (European Commission, 2020). These patterns recur in Danish cities too, especially in the capital, Copenhagen. A century ago, Copenhagen was filthy and overcrowded with poor housing conditions. Improving the general living conditions was a central part of the development of the welfare state, and suburbia was a key part of providing better housing conditions in healthier surroundings for the wider population (Andersen & Winther, 2010). However, Copenhagen was still a dilapidated and poor city until the end of the twentieth century. Since then, massive investments in physical renovation, construction and infrastructure, centralisation of the public sector and strategies to strengthen the private sector turned round the development of Copenhagen. Gradually, the population composition changed, demographically (towards higher shares of youth) and economically (towards higher shares of middle- and high-income groups) (ibid.). This development tapped into international tendencies of urbanisation, yet in Copenhagen, the strategic developments combined with the welfare-state context has created a city with very high living conditions in terms of housing, health, education, social security, environment, and safety. In 2014, Copenhagen was lauded as "the world's most liveable city" (Brûlé, 2014). Furthermore, a general popularity of urban life seems to be at play, internationally and in Copenhagen. A significant body of literature has discussed how to conceptualise the intangible, yet very distinct, character of the urban environment that seems to have an alluring effect to it; and other contributions to research have examined the influence of this character on home-making and housing choice. However, the increasing urbanisation has caused a severe housing shortage in cities internationally, generating spiralling housing prices and competition for affordable

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[1] How small has not yet been covered by research; this is a indeed new phenomenon in a Danish context.

Fig. 1 Copenhagen is becoming increasingly popular as a place of residence, especially high-density inner neighbourhoods like Vesterbro, where this photo was taken. In urban areas, housing prices are spiralling, and there is an increasing lack of affordable housing. Photo by author (also published in Winther, 2021)

housing (European Commission, 2020). In Copenhagen, these developments have accelerated due to the city's increasing share of high-income inhabitants. This challenges housing conditions, even for the middle-class, and gives rise to concerns that Denmark's high housing standards will be squandered. Dwelling sizes play a key role in this regard, as physical spaciousness has been a core element in ideals of good housing from the offset. City of Copenhagen has set minimum size requirements for housing units in new developments (City of Copenhagen, 2019), and Denmark has the second highest average for floorspace in the EU (Eurostat, 2018). Thus, introducing urban compact living is highly controversial, as experienced in many countries (Waite, 2015), but extensively in a Danish context. This paper aims to explore the role of the city for housing choice processes in the field of urban compact living, where macro-scale norms of good housing as spacious housing are on the table.

To pinpoint the unconventionality of urban compact living, this study focusses on families with children. Only one in eight Danish households with children live in flats in urbanised areas[2] (Statistics Denmark, 2020f), and families with children make up the demographic group most likely to live in suburban single-family houses (Kristensen & Andersen, 2009). These patterns reflect persistent discourses of suburbia as the appropriate environment for families. Thus, urban compact living is highly unconventional in a contemporary Danish context, but for families with children, it is even more unconventional. New housing choice research has suggested a diversification of analytical parameters due to increasing household diversification, for instance by introducing lifestyle, while however calling for further examination of the concept. Picking up this thread, this paper takes an explorative, ethnographic approach aiming to grasp and understand housing choice processes in urban compact living Fig. 1.

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[2] Of the remainder, approximately 70% live in single-family houses, and 15% in flats outside urban areas (Statistics Denmark, 2020f).

2 Literature review

The following section reviews literary contributions to analysing housing choice and obtaining a nuanced, in-depth understanding of the complex relationships between the various dimensions at play in such processes. Given the existing gap in knowledge about motivations for choosing urban compact living, the section thus builds up a framework for grasping and understanding it.

2.1 Housing choice in a diversifying world

A core finding of housing choice research has been how economy and demography are key factors (Heijs et al., 2011; Jansen, 2014). Regarding tendencies of young families remaining in cities to a larger extent than previously (as opposed to moving to the suburbs), Booi, Boterman and Musterd (2020) argue for explaining this by the fact that cities today house more high-income families, and that these are generally more likely to live in cities. Furthermore, they identify a clash between spiralling housing prices in cities and families' aspirations for larger dwellings. These studies clearly underscore why choosing urban compact living is unconventional. Yet as the concept is defined as middle-class families living on much less space than households of their type and size conventionally do, financial and demographic factors alone cannot explain this housing choice. Some parts of the housing choice literature, however, have widened the scope. Van Gent et al. (2019) have demonstrated the influence of ethnicity on the resources of different population groups and access to the housing market. Booi and Boterman (2020) demonstrate how highly educated households are more likely to live in cities, and Boterman (2012) identifies high levels of cultural capital as driving forces behind urban settlement. In different ways, such contributions introduce social and cultural factors in housing choice research.

Other branches have looked into the possible additional influence of lifestyle. However, applying this concept to housing research has entailed challenges. First, quantitative studies have questioned a substantial additional explanatory power in lifestyle, as pointed out, for instance, by Jansen (2014) or by Heijs et al., (2011) who have discarded the concept for this reason. Others have called for the use of technically better methods (for instance, Nijënstein et al., 2015). Second, lifestyle has been operationalised in countless ways. Jansen (2014) identifies the main approaches as based on (i) behaviour, (ii) latent variables like values or attitudes, (iii) a mix of the two, (iv) sociodemographic variables (against which one could argue whether this does in fact deal with lifestyles), and (v) a mix of sociodemographic and other variables. Jansen (2014) perceives values to be more stable than e.g. attitudes and to be drivers of behaviour and thus argues for applying values as an operationalisation of lifestyles. Similar arguments are found in de Jong et al. (2018) calling for an adaptive take on the lifestyle concept, that is, an approach adapting lifestyle to the specific context of a given study.

Regardless of the challenges of incorporating the concept of lifestyle, scholars argue that an increasing diversification of households and housing preferences is taking place, and that new tools are necessary for analysing the housing choices of groups deviating from large-scale patterns. Examples include de Jong et al. (2018) who have studied the differentiation in housing choices of older adults arguing against too crude sociodemographic groups, and Nijënstein et al., (2015) who point out, how Western societies today are becoming increasingly mixed and complex, that is, more people are doing different

things than the majority, more subgroups are emerging, more individualisation is occurring. In examining the housing choices of young Dutch families who have chosen to live in the city, Karsten (2010) argues that "classical studies on housing preferences are not capable of explaining why some middle-class families opt for an urban residential location". Thus, certain smaller groups might diverge from the norm because they are more affected by other factors than the majority of the population is. Kährik et al. (2016) have found influences of lifestyle factors on relocation choices in two post-socialist urban areas. Van Gent et al. (2019) do not work with lifestyle as such, but examine both economic factors, sociodemographic factors and factors reflecting domestic gender-role. They argue that value-related factors matter significantly in housing choice because people, consciously or unconsciously, seek an environment in which they resemble the other inhabitants. These contributions to literature thus suggest the inclusion of lifestyle or values in examining housing choices, particularly if aiming for nuanced answers. They demonstrate how housing choice is not a simple causal mechanism; rather, it is a matter of complex negotiation between different priorities under the given set of circumstances, as argued by Özüekren and van Kempen (2002). As research into the motivations behind the unconventional housing choice of urban compact living is still lacking, this paper argues for an in-depth exploration of the contextually embedded, and mutually influential, dimensions at play.

2.2 Urban compact living as making home in the city

A fruitful way of understanding the multiple, contextual and interrelated dimensions at play in housing choice processes is to apply the concept of home. At one end of the scale, it could be held that home is simply "a machine for living in", as Le Corbusier's (1924) classical functionalist manifest holds. The heritage from this approach is highly evident in architecture and design targeted at compact living today. However, challenging this statement, anthropologist Marianne Gullestad argued in her classic work on home that "home is more than merely a practical place ("a machine for living in"); it is a condensed symbol of quite a lot of what matters to us" (Gullestad, 1993: 51 [own translation]). Literature on the concept of home solidifies this by pointing out the difference between the physical entity of a housing unit and 'a home' which can be said to consist of numerous layers of meaning, including social, cultural, psychological, practical, economic, political and historical (Bech-Danielsen & Gram-Hanssen, 2004; Blunt & Downling, 2006). Home is not a state of things, but a dynamic process, in which home is practiced or made (Pink, 2012). Home is a relational engagement of humans to a particular part of the physical environment to which they attach unique meanings (Boccagni & Kusenbach, 2020). However, this part of the physical environment does not necessarily consist of a dwelling unit. Home can relate to a dwelling, but also to particular objects, as in Pechurina's (2020) account of the feelings of homeliness of diaspora attached to objects from their country of origin; or home can relate to a neighbourhood or a city, as in a study by Kauko (2006) finding a stronger significance of location qualities (e.g. social environment and cultural infrastructure) than dwelling qualities (e.g. square metres) in urbanised areas and vice versa in rural and suburban areas. Whereas the former may be perceived as a highly context-centred culture, the latter may be perceived as a predominantly dwelling-centred culture–an adjustment of the term 'home-centred culture' to underline the focus on physical dwelling units (Attfield, 2016: 202, among others). Ewart and Luck (2013: 41) calls for viewing dwellings as "a point of departure, as much as a destination", arguing that the dwelling unit must be seen as inseparable from its surrounding environment and can sometimes become subordinate to it.

Research presents several valuable contributions to in-depth, contextual understanding of home and home-making processes, including studies of urban families with children. Nielsen & Winther (2019) identify how vibrancy, diversity and unruliness are perceived as key assets of urban space by middle-class inhabitants of a mixed neighbourhood in Copenhagen, & Meier & Karsten (2012) show how middle-class urbanites use the aesthetical values of the urban fabric for narrating belonging to their neighbourhood. Frank & Weck (2018) as well as Karsten (2020) also identify strong attachments of young middle-class families to their urban neighbourhoods, based on highly intangible feelings of a certain ambience or atmosphere characterising that particular place, in combination with strong social networks in the local area and qualities such as proximity to work, cultural amenities, shops and so on. As pointed out by Lilius (2014) in a study of middle-class families in Helsinki, living in the city enables parents to continue elements from their lifestyles before parenthood and combine them with family life. Thus, these families have a strong sense of place (Massey, 1994) regarding the city and in particular, their neighbourhood. Literature has proposed various ways of demarcating and conceptualising this intangible character of urban space: Mommaas (2004) debated the understanding of "culture" in relation to urban areas; more recently, Kährik et al., (2016) have taken up the term "genius loci"; and Böhme (2017) applies the term "atmosphere" to describe the experienced and the sensed of an area, something that almost hangs in the air. According to Böhme, atmospheres are "quasi-objective" or "subjective facts" (2017: 2): They are not completely individual, but can to some degree be objectively accounted for, and are thus social to some extent. The question remains, however, why an atmosphere, or a synonym, may be experienced in the same way by some, but not by everyone. The purpose of this paper is not to disentangle such conceptualisations, but instead to explore the relationship between this distinct urban character and the housing choice processes of urban compact living in a Danish context. Through this, the paper may still shed some light on the relationality of such concepts.

Despite the presence of an alluring character of the city, research has identified a number of ambiguities and challenges of young families in relation to living in the city. In particular, young urban families express a constant awareness of the clash between city life and more traditional norms about a good childhood and suitable places to grow up. Frank and Weck (2018) shed light on the dilemmas of urban parents between viewing urban diversity as an asset or as a risk to the safety of childhood. Kerr et al., (2020) and Lilius (2014) point out how urban families' daily life practices are at odds with the physical character of urban space, arguing that this reflects how norms of family life as belonging to suburbia are still prevailing in urban planning today. Mechlenborg (2012) identifies such patterns in a Danish context, pinpointing how discourses portray detached suburban housing as the ideal home for the ideal family, namely, the nuclear family. Karsten (2020) identifies how differences in relationships to the city influence whether young families prefer to stay in the city or relocate to the suburbs, indicating that the extensiveness of their appreciation for the city is key. In an earlier study (Karsten, 2010: 96), she indicates that families remaining in the city perceive themselves as "true urbanites". However, as housing prices in cities are spiralling these years, the trade-off having to be made regarding dwelling qualities in order to live in the city is growing for middle-class families. Breaking with norms of living in suburbia thus also entails breaking with norms of living in a large dwelling. According to Booi, Boterman & Musterd (2020), middle-class families leaving cities due to the difficulty of affording large family dwellings is an increasing tendency. This brings into play the question of spaciousness in relation to dwellings and to their surrounding environments. Spaciousness in this regard is not a solidly defined theoretical concept, and existing research primarily deals with positivistic measurements of human experience

of different room sizes and topologies (Fisher-Gewirtzmann, 2017; Stamps, 2010). This research draws attention to one key point for understanding spaciousness in relation to living environments, namely, that spaciousness is not merely observed, but experienced dynamically, bodily and sensory (Bek, 2010). However, another key point for understanding spaciousness is missed by this literature, namely, that spaciousness is not only physical, but also social. Spaciousness is experienced by humans embedded in cultural, personal and socio-structural contexts (Pink, 2012). Altogether, this underlines how housing choice is a complex process in which a number of entangled parameters are weighed against each other. The role of area-related qualities (here, urban areas) in such processes must thus carefully be examined and related to concepts such as lifestyle and spaciousness in order to take a first step into the field of housing choice in urban Danish compact living.

3 Methods and data

The paper is based on a study employing qualitative social-science methods in the form of an in-depth case study. The knowledge produced gains its quality through its depth rather than through its breadth as well as through its explorative nature (Flyvbjerg, 2015; Thomas, 2011). The purpose is not to discuss the quantitative expansion of urban compact living and compare with current residential settlement patterns, but to offer an in-depth understanding of themes and narratives at play in this emergent field and hereby inform and qualify further research on housing choice in urban compact living. Going against a widespread perception that the purpose of social sciences is to produce representative, evidential knowledge that can be applied universally to predict actions of the social world, the case study acknowledges that all situations of the social world are unique and particular (Flyvbjerg, 2015). Interpreting them as examples in their own right, to be understood and interpreted as a whole within a specific context and experience, is both the purpose and the strength of the case study (Thomas, 2010). It accepts and builds upon the context-dependency, the ambiguity and paradoxicality, and the complexity and thickness of detail inherent to the social world. This does not render interpretation beyond the particular cases invalid, as they are never isolated or detached from the rest of the world. Thus, the example or the case holds valuable potential for identifying patterns and connections that may recur in other situations (ibid.). Furthermore, given the novelty of the field of urban compact living (particularly within a Danish context), key to the methodological approach is to allow this field to unfold itself. These reflections are the background for taking an explorative, qualitative approach to the study.

The research design consists of two blocks supplementing, and challenging, each other. The first focusses on narratives and meanings: Detailed data about experiences, perceptions, descriptions, and memories is collected, as well as features like values, attitudes and practices. This is done through semi-structured interviews, home tours, and a photo elicitation task in which household members photograph their living environments. In the other block, practices are studied more directly through logging of activities taking place within the dwellings, mapping of activities of household members in the surrounding neighbourhood, and a registration of the physical arrangement and use of the dwelling. Furthermore, the data collected is discussed at the interviews to challenge and elaborate narratives and meanings. Thus, the empirical cases are not restricted to neither the dwellings nor the urban environment. Nor are they restricted to neither the physical environment nor the social world, but designed to focus on the interaction between them. Data was collected between

August 2018 and December 2019. The case study consists in three cases of families with children[3] that can be defined as compact living families in an urban context: Middle-class households living in the city in much less space than conventionally for this household type and household size. This definition is relational, in that the sizes of dwellings as well as the relationship between dwelling size and household size are compared with applying contextual factors. Thus, in Denmark, the average dwelling size is 112 square metres; for flats, it is 79 square metres (Gadeberg, 2020). The average floor area is 53 square metres per person, yet in Copenhagen, it is 40 square metres[4] (KL, 2018). Given that these averages are high compared with other countries (Eurostat, 2018), the selected cases of compact living will be more spacious than an understanding of compact living within a different context would define. In the following, descriptions of the three cases are given, including their housing situations as well as the household composition.

3.1 Cases

Case #1 (16.3 sq. m./person) A 65 square-metre third-floor flat consisting of a hall, a bathroom, a kitchen, a living/dining room, and two former rooms remodelled to now contain two children's rooms, an office, and a parents' room with bedloft above a wardrobe. The flat is located in the central Copenhagen neighbourhood of Vesterbro, a high-density, mixed-used area built in the early-twentieth century. The flat is occupied by a couple in their fourties, the woman (Mette) a communications consultant and the man (Anders) working with educational material, and their two daughters aged 14 and 18, both attending school. The family relocated to Copenhagen ten years ago after living 18 months in a 105 square-metre terraced house in a provincial town.

Case #2 (14.0 sq.m./person) A 56 square-metre third-floor flat with a balcony. It contains a hall, a kitchen, a bathroom, a parents' bedroom, and a living/dining room connected by a sliding wall to a children's room with bed loft. The flat is located in the highly mixed neighbourhood of Nordvest, on the border between Copenhagen's dense inner city and its more open suburban areas. The flat is occupied by a young couple, the woman (Johanne) who is a job-seeking biologist and the man (Emil) who is an urban planner working in central Copenhagen, and their two small children, aged one and five, attending nursery and kindergarten. The flat was purchased 12 years ago by Johanne during her studies, and the family has then grown.

Case #3 (17.7 sq. m./person) A 53 square-metre ground floor flat with a balcony, remodelled to contain a combined living room/dining room/hall/parent's bedroom/kitchen, a tiny bathroom, and two small children's rooms. The flat is centrally located in the neighbourhood Vesterbro. It is occupied by a female self-employed fashion designer (Stine) in her fourties (working within walking distance) and her two daughters aged 12 and 14, who live in the flat every second week. After divorcing her ex-husband, Stine moved from their shared home only 400 m away to this small one-bedroom flat, which she then remodelled Figs. 2, 3, and 4

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[3] Given the nature of the study, children only participated to a minor degree (particularly the younger ones).

[4] This figure applies to City of Copenhagen, making up the largest part of the city. Frederiksberg Municipality makes up the remaining, smaller, part of the city, and here, the average floor area is 46 square metres per person (KL, 2018).

Fig. 2 Case 1, plan and photo from the flat. Illustration and photo by author (also published in Winther, 2021)
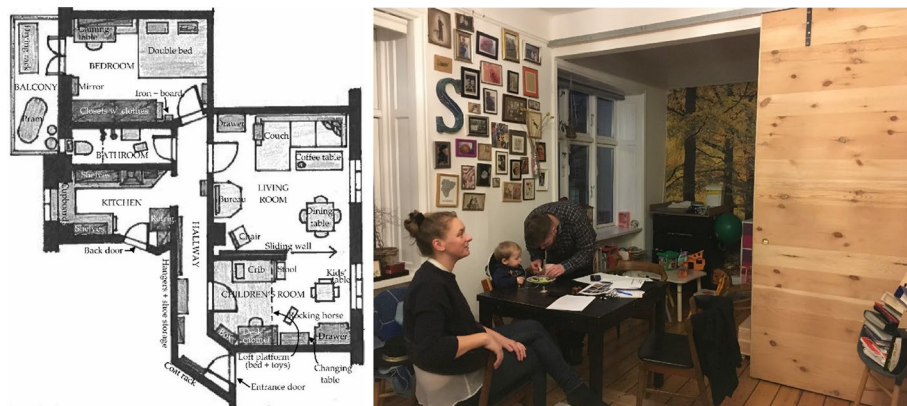

Fig. 3 Case 2, plan and photo from the flat. Illustration and photo by author (also published in Winther, 2021)

4 Analysing housing choice in the context of urban compact living

A profound appreciation for the city is evident throughout the case study. The families express a strong attachment to the city and especially the neighbourhoods they live in. Examining where this attachment and profound appreciation comes from shows that it relates to two dimensions. First, the practicality and convenience of being close to work, independently of cars or public transport, being close to social networks, being close to school, and being close to an extensive network of amenities. The families could not sustain such practices if they relocated, especially since the high housing prices in the city

Fig. 4 Case 3, plan and photo from the flat. Illustration by author, photo by household member Stine (both are also published in Winther, 2021)

would force them to move far outside Copenhagen. These findings of the case study support existing research on families' motivations for living in the city, such as Kerr et al. (2020), Lilius (2014) and Karsten (2010), among others. The families thus have a strong sense of place (Massey, 1994) regarding the urban environment. Yet as this concept indicates, such attachment to the city is not only social and practical, but emotional too. This leads to the second dimension.

Second, the families' appreciation for the city and especially the neighbourhoods they live in is related to a profound appreciation for an intangible character, ambience or atmosphere of the area. For instance, while discussing his neighbourhood, Anders (Case #1) says "I basically like the atmosphere here". Theoretically grasping and conceptualising such character, spirit, quality, atmosphere or even personality of an area is puzzling, as it is describable and social, on the one hand, and intangible and subjective on the other (Böhme, 2017). In the current study, expressions of appreciation for the neighbourhood, or the city in general, are voiced by the case study families in numerous ways: They like the myriad of amenities matching their taste, the people hanging out and socialising in ways they can see themselves in, and the diverse, casual and unruly character of urban space. For instance, the family of Case #2 lives in one of Copenhagen's most mixed neighbourhoods in terms of income, social resources and ethnicity (Nielsen & Winther, 2019). They express an appreciation for this, arguing that the more upscale neighbourhoods of Copenhagen are 'posh', snobbish and boring in contrast to their own, whereas they feel they share the values of people in their own neighbourhood. Thus, home-making to these households is about a feeling of belonging (Pechurina, 2020) and of fitting in with the surrounding environment (van Gent et al., 2019). Expressions of such feelings of belonging and attachment come across clearly, when the families describe places they would *not* want to live in, in particular, suburbia. The families depict life in these kinds of areas as traditionalistic, uniform and self-sufficient, contrasting with the views they have on their own lives, namely as socially oriented, progressive and personalised. In this way, the physically spacious

suburban environment is interpreted as socially un-spacious, so to speak. Furthermore, life in suburbia is interpreted as a stereotype of a predominantly dwelling-centred culture (Attfield, 2016), attending more to one's own cadastre than to sociability, as opposed to a completely context-centred culture in the city. This demonstrates how individuals and groups perceive themselves and their lifestyles *in relation to* others and to the context, they are in. Stine (Case #3) illustrates this in the following way:

> You do resemble your friends to some extent, and definitely in terms of the way you live. And if all your friends suddenly were to buy houses with gardens–that definitely has an impact, like "oh, maybe I should do that too". I mean, you feel quite similar to the people you socialise with, and this might even generate a certain peace of mind.

Savage (2011) attempts to construct a fruitful understanding of this relationality by updating the classical Bourdieuian approach to spatiality (1996) with the approach of Deleuze (2014), that identity does not exist in itself, but only by means of the differences between identities. According to Savage (2011), the relational transcends borders between the physical and the non-physical, because non-physical relations (or differences) will become "sedimented and etched into physical features" (Savage, 2011: 517). By distinguishing or differentiating themselves from something or someone, for instance a dwelling-centred suburban culture, individuals or groups connect themselves to something else, for instance a context-centred urban culture.[5] Hereby, they express who they perceive themselves to be. Accordingly, perceptions of a place, for instance an urban neighbourhood, are relational, that is, depending on the position of the perceiver. The social, personal, cultural and structural context in which individuals are embedded become a set of glasses, so to speak, through which they perceive their surroundings.

Building on this argument, the analyses of the case study households' narratives of and attachment to the city show that these are bound up on values, attitudes and tastes. They revolve around concepts such as social awareness, considerateness, diversity, casualness, unruliness, and progressivity, and the household members enjoy being surrounded by environments and amenities matching their tastes—not necessarily because they frequent them often, but because they feel like they fit in and feel at home when surrounded by them. As pointed out in Case #1:

> Mette: I might not make use of the cultural facilities here every single day, but I pass by my favourite shop everyday on my route home from work.

The daily activities and patterns of movement within urban space, however, are not dependent on the distinctness of the urban fabric, as would be the case, for instance, if the households relocated domestic practices to urban space due to the spatial restrictions of their dwellings. The households go to school, work and sports, and run practical errands, while leisure time is spent at home, visiting friends or family, or making trips to the city centre or the countryside. To some extent, it could be argued that their daily life activities are transferrable to other physical environments, for instance, suburbia. Arguing against this is the finding that the professional and social networks of the household members are strongly rooted in the city, however, two comments must be made in this regard: First,

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[5] Another paper building on this case study (Winther & Bech-Danielsen, 2020) examines this reverse narrative of city and suburbia and its influence on housing choice and home-making.

Fig. 5 The case study households' attachment to the city is strongly bound up on a profound appreciation for the ambience of the urban neighbourhood. This picture depicts a popular local hangout in the Copenhagen neighbourhood Vesterbro, functioning as a specialties shop, a grocerer's, a café, and the location of events like flea markets, concerts, and social events. Photo by author (also published in Winther, 2021)

networks are built up through daily life practices over the course of time. This is not to disregard of neither longer-distance networks (virtual or physical) nor the condensation of functions and people in the city. But networks are, by implication, connected in some sense to the places in which daily life is situated (Massey, 1994). Second, when substantiating their preferences for living in close proximity to work, social networks and facilities, the households draw on aversions against an image of suburbia as sleepy towns. Consequently, values are attributed to daily life practices. According to recent housing choice research (for instance, de Jong et al., 2018; or Kährik et al., 2016), such findings are examples of lifestyle influencing housing choice processes. De Jong et al. (2018) argue that values and attitudes are more stable over time than patterns of activity and movement. Such argument resonates strongly with the current context of families with children, as the daily life practices of these families are strongly dependent on the ages of the children. Thus, Case #2′s parents of a 5- and a 1-year old may rarely have opportunities to frequent the coffee shop a few streets away. Nevertheless, they regard this as one of their favourite features of the neighbourhood (see Figs. 5 and 6). Keeping an eye for such expressions of taste and values thus allows for capturing these aspects of attachment to the city; aspects, which are, currently, not reflected in the daily lives.

Fig. 6 The coffee shop Madsens Mekka in the Copenhagen neighbourhood Nordvest is one of the best features of the area according to the household of Case #2. "Nearby and child friendly. Good when the weather is nice", they say. Photo by Emil and Johanne (also published in Winther,2021)

This case study thus shows how the city is key to the lifestyle of the households, and accordingly, that living in the city becomes an essential priority. Yet due to the high-pressure housing market in Copenhagen in recent years, living in the city increasingly entails quite substantial compromises on other priorities for middle-class households. In the specific context of urban Danish compact living, it is thus worth examining whether this essentiality of living in the city is profound enough for the households to make such substantial compromises, or whether things are more complex. Examining their processes of making home and their imaginaries of what an appropriate home is, it is clear that the households are aware of diverging from macro-scale ideals of the home. Case #1 even tried the mainstream choice, as they previously lived in a suburban neighbourhood in a provincial town. Here, they could afford a spacious terraced house with all the amenities they attributed to a proper family home:

> Mette: We had this idea that the right thing to do was to move out of the city and get more space and fresh air. There was something about that the kids should be allowed to toddle about on the lawn instead of on tarmac and gravel in the city. And we got a house that was really neat and very practical, a nice big kitchen and family room combined. It was very functional and had a nice appearance.

This dwelling offered practicality, functionality, privacy and was located in a quiet low-density area. However, the case study households clearly express how the city's vibrancy, diversity, condensity, creativity and atmosphere make them feel at home and feel like they belong. Suburban areas represent nearly the perfect opposite of the city. The case study shows that these narratives do not only regard the surrounding environment, but also apply to narratives of the dwellings. For instance, in the following characteristic of interior style

and the approach to home-making, the family of Case #2 nearly personify their home and attach attributes to it that express their self-perception:

> Johanne: The most important thing for me when it comes to our home, is that it's cosy and feels nice to be in, and then never mind if the décor doesn't match or things aren't spot-on fashionable. In a way, such an old flat is cosy in itself. As opposed to new standard houses where you have to work more to give them some atmosphere.

> Emil: This flat has some charm; everything's a bit unorthodox. And we've done things like painting the floors green, putting up a 'bounty' beach wallpaper. Adding a bit of humour, the flat has a little craziness to it.

Strongly echoing narratives of the city, this quote reveals how the family perceive themselves as social, casual, humorous and non-materialistic. Thus, imaginaries of home concerning location mirror their imaginaries concerning the dwellings. In this perspective, compact living makes sense in two ways: First, in terms of attaching themselves to certain values and attitudes regarding home-making in the dwelling, and second, in terms of enabling living in a location that matches those values and attitudes. As stated clearly, housing choice is about much more than practical functions, it is about making a home, and entails weighing priorities against each other. Thus, compact living is not without challenges and compromises for the households. For instance in terms of privacy, as Stine of Case #3 sleeps on a sofa bed in the living room to let her daughters have their own rooms. The concrete practices and experiences of home-making of these households are examined in Winther (2020). Thus, compromises on physical spaciousness make sense to the case study households, because they enable them to live in the city, and because urban compact living represents values and attitudes in which they feel at home–inside the dwellings and in the surrounding environment. In Case #1, they made this experience by direct comparison:

> Anders: Basically, we didn't become a part of the community [in suburbia].

> Mette: The house couldn't make up for this feeling that it was like every square metre of space became a chasm between us and the good life. And for my part, this was in Copenhagen. […] We had been dreaming so much about getting more space… And that's exactly what we got. But that couldn't make me happy or comfortable, I realised. I was so ready to give up those square metres again.

5 Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated the complexities, ambiguities and the context dependency of housing choice processes in a new and emergent empirical field: urban compact living. In a Danish context where compact living is (still) only a small fragment of urban housing, this deliberate downsizing of living space is both controversial and unconventional. Denmark has very high housing conditions compared with the rest of the world, and Danes have the second highest average for floorspace per person in the EU. Thus, middle-class households choosing to live on much less space is highly unconventional. Furthermore, living in the city starkly contrasts macro-scale, historically rooted ideals of what constitutes an appropriate home. Especially for families with children, suburban neighbourhoods are perceived as the appropriate living environment. This paper is based on an in-depth ethnographic case study of middle-class families with children living in Copenhagen flats offering much

less space than conventional ideals of home would have. By taking an explorative approach aimed at grasping and understanding this new empirical field, this paper examines the themes and narratives at play in the processes of housing choice.

The paper finds that to the households under study, the neighbourhood–not the dwelling–is the destination (Ewart & Luck, 2013). This does not mean that the dwelling is unimportant to them, but simply that they prioritise area-related qualities over dwelling-related qualities to an extent that it outweighs the physical domestic compactness. However, the explanation behind is complex: To start with, the households are aware of diverging from macro-scale norms of an appropriate home, but parallelly on a smaller scale, they feel belonging and attachment to a lifestyle centred on values of anti-materiality, progressiveness, creativity, and liberatedness. This can be interpreted as social spaciousness, in a way, and is a core characteristic of the city in the eyes of the case study households. Living in the city is a paramount part of their imaginaries of home, and accordingly, of who they perceive themselves to be. Following this thought through, compact living *also* represents such social spaciousness, yet social spaciousness regarding the dwelling units; and in that sense, downsizing on dwelling space is not only a losing game.

The paper argues for a multifaceted approach to housing choice research that includes social and cultural dimensions, such as lifestyle. In particular, when researching processes diverging from macro-scale norms. Additionally, research must take an approach aimed at grasping and understanding when examining new empirical fields. Finally, the paper argues for introducing a broad conceptualisation of spaciousness in relation to living environments, perceiving it as more than physical, but as lived and experienced by humans within specific cultural, personal and socio-structural contexts. Urban compact living cannot be reduced to square metres and assessed on these grounds. Rather, urban compact living is about lived life and about making home in the city.

Data availability The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to confidentiality considerations towards the participants. Data consists in case studies of three households living in Copenhagen, Denmark, identified via professional or private networks, snowballing or press coverage.

Code availability Data analysed through the use of the Nvivo data analysis software package. Coding trees are available from the author upon request.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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