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## Small mirales

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## SMALL MIRACLES

A new book that explores the homes of ordinary Hong Kong families reveals that the city's residents have designed intriguing solutions to the challenges of living in tiny apartments. SUMMER SAO talked to the book's authors and discovered that necessity can be more than the mother of invention.

Is Hong Kong a livable city? Many residents who struggle through crowded streets with high pollution levels to get home to tiny apartments with sky-high rents would probably say no, but the city ranked top of the Economist Intelligence Unit's livable city rankings in 2012. The ranking was based on the city's available green space, natural assets, sprawl (or lack of) and isolation levels combined with scores on indices that measure stability, healthcare, culture, environment, education and infrastructure. The UK-based lifestyle magazine *Monocle* was less complimentary. When it published its *Most Livable Cities Index 2013* in July, Hong Kong missed the top ten, ranking eleventh but even that result might surprise some people who see the city as an unforgiving urban jungle.

Hong Kong's status in *The Economist* and *Monocle* studies aroused heated debates in the city's traditional and social media but now a new book *Patterns of Living - Hong Kong's High-Rise Communities* promises to take readers inside Hong Kong's family homes to shed some light on whether the city's average residents have livable home space.

"Outsiders are only able to look at exteriors," says Hilary French as she pointed to the book's cover with its picture of a typical residential building in Hong Kong. "This could be in Paris or Berlin. From the outside Hong Kong's apartments are not that differentiated from other big cities, but when you start looking more closely, you realise that the city's flats are half the size of those in Paris or Berlin and there are twice as many people living inside."

French is the co-author of the book, a researcher in housing design from the Royal College of Art in London and a visiting fellow at HKDI. She has relished the opportunity the book presented to see Hong Kong from a vantage point that few foreigners have enjoyed.

"As a visitor all you know is how comfortable it is to be here," she says. "The transport system works extremely well. Everybody is helpful and polite. There is hardly any crime. It feels easy to be here."

French's initial impressions could be those of any visitor



ABOVE THE COVER OF THE BOOK  
*PATTERNS OF LIVING - HONG KONG'S  
HIGH-RISE COMMUNITIES*

to the city and after a short stay they might return home thinking the city's high livability ranking is justified. However, French found a different story when she penetrated normal Hong Kong family homes with the help of 60 HKDI students studying Architecture, Landscape Architecture and Interior Design.

"Almost everyone in Hong Kong lives in tower blocks," French says. "But actually Hong Kong residents live in tower blocks in very big numbers with very small flats, which is something I certainly did not know until I looked at the situation more closely. It's the extreme density that makes Hong Kong unique."

The book gave French a rare opportunity to study how Hong Kong's generic tower blocks work inside. Almost 50 per cent of Hong Kong's population (3.5 million people) lives in public housing. These Hong Kong citizens occupy space that has a high population density, their small apartments having been built in a standardised, serialised, pattern to maximise construction efficiency.

"What makes this study



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interesting is that there is one big landlord," French says. "We send the students out at random and of the 120 flats where they collected information, they were all family homes except one. They were all of a type, and 95% of them were Hong Kong Housing Authority designs. They are immediately comparable because they are the same apartments that have been developed in different locations."

The book includes snapshots from 120 homes collected by students who were asked to focus on the architecture and interior design of their own homes, and then their neighbours' and friends'. Based on this raw information, French and

her co-author Dr Yanki Lee drew the interior and floor plan for each home.

For Lee, a native Hong Kong citizen who is now director of the HKDI DESIS Lab, a new initiative for social design and research, the book was an opportunity for students to experience the kind of integrated community that was more common three or four decades ago when people would frequently visit each other's homes.

"If they were not part of this project it seems likely that the students would not visit their friends' homes or even the flats of family members," says Lee. "The homes of Hong Kong family are very private, although people live so close with each other, all packed together. When people make an appointment to meet with somebody else they usually choose to rendezvous in a café."

"It is not a part of our culture to meet someone at home any more, although it is very important for a socially responsible citizen to understand how others are living their lives. But people don't want to interact with

« IT LOOKS LIKE PEOPLE ARE ABOUT TO MOVE OUT... BUT WHEN YOU LOOK MORE CLOSELY, THESE ARE THINGS THEY ARE USING AND THEY ARE VERY ORGANISED. »

their neighbours in apartments that are tiny and packed with possessions and other family members."

Lee doesn't see her book as a forceful counter-argument against Hong Kong's ranking as a highly livable city. "We have avoided making any judgments," she says, "This is a factual survey to show what is actually happening. We really wanted to know how people actually live rather than being guided by *The Economist's* definition of 'livable'. That's why we called the book *Patterns of Living*, because it's about how people really live."

In their study, the two authors discovered the habits, ingenious methods and contraptions that people have adopted in order to live comfortably in small spaces.

"Hong Kong people really understand how to use three dimensional space," Lee says, as she leafed through snapshots in the book, "They build up the interiors bit by bit in a very logical way to take advantage of all the available space."

"If you have a more spacious apartment in Paris or in London, you set out your things like objects on a stage in a theatre, for display, putting a bed here, a light there. People in Hong Kong arrange things in functional order, along the walls and up to the ceilings, using every inch with maximum efficiency."

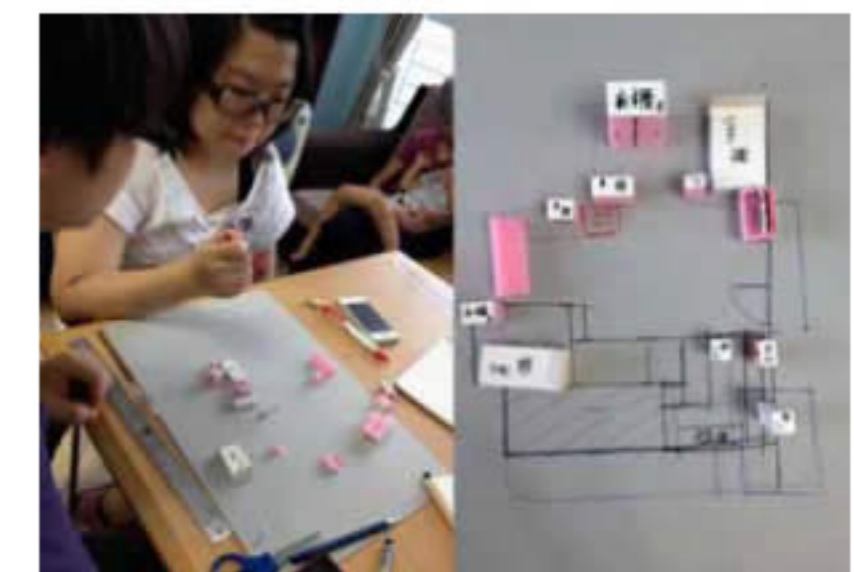
French agrees, "It looks like people are about to move out or just arrived and emptied the suitcase on the floor. But when you look more closely, these are things they are using and they are very organised. They are not neat, but everything is in the right place."

French thinks that the way Hong Kong people hang clothes on the inside of their apartments is an interesting invention used by a lot of Hong Kong residents. "It is a form of permanent clothes storage," she says. "This is something that you wouldn't find in England."

Bunk beds are also common in Hong Kong homes. "The bunk bed is placed next to the wall, and the bottom part is used for storage," French continues, "You have to jump on the table or climb the ladder to the bed on top."

French and Lee believe that other cities can learn from the experience of Hong Kong and that the book is more than just a way to satisfy people's curiosity, but also offers ideas about interior and furniture design. And they believe the interiors and small contraptions recorded in the book have broader significance for architects. "The book looks into the relationship between what architects think of the way people live and the way they actually live," says French.

*Patterns of Living - Hong Kong's High-Rise Communities* was launched at the Hong Kong Book Fair, and will soon be available on Amazon and major book stores. The insights it offers could be valuable to communities all over the world as they struggle with soaring population levels and seek to make their own spaces more livable. 01



ABOVE HKDI STUDENTS WORKING ON A FLOOR PLAN