



Study on building plan for enhancing the social health of public apartments

Yeunsook Lee, Kyoungyeon Kim, Soojin Lee*

Department of Housing and Interior Design, Yonsei University, Seoul, Republic of Korea

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ABSTRACT

Mass-produced in a short period of time, Korea's public apartments contributed to easing the housing anxiety of the common people. Nonetheless, they also gave rise to problems of social exclusion and conflict, becoming undesirable facilities that weakened social health. This study examined ways of producing an improved building plan that can raise the level of social health of public apartments, which were consistently built in the past but will no doubt continue to be developed in the future. For this study, the survey method was employed through a questionnaire with visual contents especially developed to raise the level of social health based on two ideas. One was to increase the possibility of social interaction among residents, and the other was to increase opportunities for residents to interact with society as well as for their social integration. The results showed that residents had mostly favorable views on the proposed plans: in particular, they favored highly the formation of a lobby in each apartment building as a venue for social interaction. They also responded very favorably to the plan of creating within the buildings spare space that will be used not only to promote a communal culture, but to open to outside society as well for integration. This study showed vital ideas to ensure the recovery of the residential function of promoting social health in the public apartments of Korea. It has significance in inspiring an innovative approach to allow social mixture in a relatively different feasible manner from the conventional approach.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Public apartments are a type of housing provided by the community as part of its social welfare policy to ensure housing stability for low-income families. This type of housing not only physically solves the problem of housing shortage but also provides a mechanism to create a society wherein those who are socially disadvantaged do not fall through the cracks but become part of the social structure instead by guaranteeing them a minimum level of housing.

Note, however, that the public apartments that have been widely distributed to date for the general enhancement of the quality of life have also given rise to numerous contradictory occurrences of social exclusion and alienation [1].

In terms of social exclusion, the fact that the policy to improve the neighborhood quality has not wielded huge impacts is hardly surprising given the persistent social and economic inequalities in the population and immense spatial segregation of low-income families linked to the patterns of housing development. One of the

reasons for the social exclusion associated with public apartments is the insufficient understanding of the residents who live in those apartments [2] during the planning process. Acting on concerns over social exclusion requires looking beyond singular effects of housing features and considering the overall relationship of the people with their physical, social, and economic environment.

For a sustainable community, creating affordable houses for low-income neighborhoods is important not just for housing market renewal but also for social health as a dimension of sustainability. In this perspective, ensuring that the right infrastructure is in place to create places where people want to live and work now and in the future is a critical key to the success of communities [3].

With the low-income class making up the majority of the residents in rental apartments, they have a relatively stronger tendency to look to the human relationships they have with neighbors who are similar to them in terms of building the basic foundation for their lives. In other words, they depend more on their geographically close neighbors who can help them, introduce them to jobs or form a money-pool than the members of their own families who are far away [4]. Note, however, that the housing for low-income families has been provided in the form of high-rise apartments; hence the high level of anonymity. As a result, they have heightened wariness against others, and increased tendency for privacy and individualism, with interactions between neighbors

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: brigida@yonsei.ac.kr (S. Lee).

disappearing [5]. Meanwhile, the physical housing environment of those collectivized rental apartments and their welfare services were not maintained. Such deterioration also weakened the spatial conditions that promote the public activities of the community, with residents experiencing decreasing self-confidence and powerlessness [6]. As rental apartments continued to deteriorate, the resulting negative image stigmatized them as an undesirable environment in the local regions and society. Thus, public apartments—which were meant to support the residents' quality of life not only failed to perform their functions properly but also ended up harming the lives of their residents.

Another reason public apartments were not successfully implemented was the communication gap between residents and developers. Even though the developers conducted surveys to try to understand the residents and take their wishes into account, real communication was insufficient; in fact, there were still limitations in discovering what residents truly desired. When residents especially low-income residents wish to express their preferences for their environment or the problems they perceive, their limited experience or lack of imagination for new environments often prevented them from satisfactorily expressing their opinions.

From an individual point of view, a high quality of life in the context of a socially sustainable community may be characterized by people-environment congruity focusing on planning, housing and neighborhoods. Therefore, effective engagement and participation by the local people, groups and businesses, especially in the planning, design and long-term stewardship of their community as well as an active voluntary community sector are required for social health [7]; hence the importance of utilizing a communication tool with a familiar format that can bring to the surface their basic demands and allow them to understand more easily what changes may take place, to voice out their opinion clearly, and to recover the function of public apartment and social health of the residents and their community in the process.

1.2. Purpose and significance of the study

This study sought to search for ways of improving building planning for the enhancement of the social health of public apartments. First, this study established core environmental and behavioral concepts involved in increasing social health through literature research, and then looked for ways to reflect them during architectural planning. Second, two-dimensional and perspective images were developed as a visual tool showing the characteristics of the improved architectural plan. Third, by visiting the residents and conducting a survey using visual aids, the responses of public apartment residents regarding the building plan were obtained. Fourth, based on their responses to the suggested building plan, design implications for future development with the potential to increase the social health of residents were proposed.

This study examined the actual improvement possibilities of public apartments by specifically proposing improvements based on the substantiated demands of the residents for the enhancement of their social health. Its significance lies in the fact that it could substantially show the differences between the new improvement plan based on residents' needs and the existing building plans assumed and proposed by developers or planners for residents.

2. Literature review

2.1. Public apartments in Korea and social exclusion

Public apartments were chosen as the means of solving the housing needs of the low-income class in Korea. Thus, beginning

Table 1

Yearly public apartment construction plan (unit: 10,000).

| Year | '03 | '04 | '05 | '06 | '07 | '08 | '09 | '10 | '11 | '12 |
|-------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Construction Plan | 8 | 10 | 10 | 11 | 11 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 |

Source: Ministry of Land, Transportation, and Maritime Affairs, Housing Welfare Headquarters (2005).

with the permanent rental apartments in 1989, a total of 1,340,000 public apartments have been constructed as of 2008 [8].

In particular, after the Asian financial crisis in 1998, and given the deepening housing concerns of the low-income class, the government announced an expanded public apartment planning policy to build one million ten-year and twenty-year rental-type public apartments that would lower the residential qualification to 25% of income. The plan called for building 100,000 public apartment units every year from 2003 to 2012 (See Table 1) [9].

These public apartments were built in the form of mass-produced apartments clustered in large complexes; although efficient in terms of housing supply, they produced unexpected results over time. The focus was on the quantity of housing supply, without sufficient attention paid to the quality of housing environment. As a result, many problems were noted within public apartment complexes such as drinking, fighting, and juvenile delinquency as well as difficulties in taking care of the elderly. Eventually, the complexes became socially branded as undesirable facilities where the poor were clustered.

In spite of such phenomena, apartment complexes are undeniably an effective form of housing supply. Thus, they continue to be built, and various ideas are being presented to mitigate the accompanying social problems. As part of such efforts, the government implemented in 2005 a strategy to enable rental apartment residents to overcome social isolation and become a more integral part of society. The method of constructing public apartment complexes as separate entities was changed to a combination of rental apartments with privately owned apartments in demonstration projects. Rental apartments were also changed from uniform apartment units to those with a variety of sizes in different buildings and complexes to promote interaction between various income-earning classes and age groups; thus creating a more inclusive living environment.

When the different classes were brought together in these combined-type apartments, however, such caused more discomfort and heightened the sense of exclusion. The sharp conflict between the residents gave rise to more serious social problems.¹ In other words, privately owned apartment residents had their own discriminatory and prejudiced attitudes that increased tenants' relative sense of deprivation, with the conflict worsening particularly among children living within the apartment complexes [10].

The government has been trying to learn from these unsuccessful experiences and come up with various plans that would enable the low-income class to live socially healthy lives without being alienated or isolated. It has yet to be able to draw appropriate ideas and alternatives, however.

There is evidence to suggest that communities do respond by participating in decision making when local governments get participation strategies and stress openness. Established in 1998 in 39 deprived areas across England, New Deal for Communities

¹ The problem of discrimination and prejudice among rental housing and privately owned housing can be seen in recent news articles such as "Rental Housing Discrimination: Bruises in Children's Hearts (mbn Maeil Business Newspaper, June 23, 2008)" and "Noise in New Town Rental Housing Allocation (Seoul Business Newspaper, September 19, 2007)".

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