High-rise social failures

Regulating technologies, authority, and aesthetics in the resettlement of Taipei military villages

Elisa Tamburo

Abstract: This article focuses on the “social failure” of the relocation of the residents from informal historical settlements—military dependents’ villages (*juancun*)—to high-rise blocks in Taiwan. How does the relocation impact the community and restructure social relationships? I argue social failure is the product of new regulative regimes deriving from the new governance of the high-rise, rather than of the built form of the complexes in itself. New home technologies such as intercoms, elevators, and electronic keys contribute to arguments over safety and convenience, while new regulations, implemented by new forms of authority, including condominium meetings and building administrators, foster the disappearance of household informal economies. Finally, the high-rise dictates new aesthetic norms, which prevent established practices and routines, while promoting what I call aesthetic of assimilation.

Keywords: governmentality, high-rises, military dependents’ villages, sociality, Taiwan, urban relocation

“Before, you went out of home and it was full of people, very lively (*renao*). People were close and there was affection between them (*ren hen reqing*). Now, it is not the case; friendliness (*renqingwei*) is not there anymore. There is some distance. And people are not easy to find: for instance, I can’t access buildings other than the C building. The apartment is nice, but the relationship between people is not the same.”
—Aunt Pan¹

In October 2016, the residents of Zhongxin Xincun (Zhongxin New Village)—an official military dependents’ village (*juancun*), located at the periphery of Taipei—had been relocating from state-owned, two-story houses to a complex of four high-rise commercial buildings. Aunt Pan, who had lived in the settlement for nearly 60 years, described some inconveniences experienced in the new apartment blocks. Another resident, Aunt Zhao, confirmed that social relationships differed there: “If I want to go to visit Uncle Huang, he is far away in another build-

ing, distant and not accessible. So, living here is completely different (*wanquan buyiyang*).” With similar arguments, residents complained that the new environment isolated them, disrupting their bonds resulting in an overall undoing of their community. A year after the relocation, residents found themselves in a state of “social disarticulation” (Cerneja 1999: 30).

In 1949, when the Chinese Civil War forced the Kuomintang (Nationalist Party—KMT) to retreat to Taiwan, settlements like Zhongxin Village were built by the Ministry of National Defense (MND) of Republic of China to face the housing crisis caused by the political exile of about two million mainlanders to Taiwan, of which some six hundred were military personnel. Soldiers were allowed to build official temporary settlements near military “working units” (*danwei*), such as factories, arsenals, or medical facilities, on land formerly occupied by colonial Japan and later seized by the KMT, while informal settlements equally mushroomed in the housing emergency. As the KMT failed to

take back mainland China, these villages eventually became permanent home to the military families, until the mid-1990s, when government policies relocated them into high-rise commercial apartments on the grounds of eventually providing adequate housing.

In 2016, Zhongxin (see Figure 1) was a village of one hundred households, whose inhabitants were military retirees supporting their wives and sometimes their children’s families with their military pension of 20,000 New Taiwan dollars a month (about \$650). Veterans like Uncle Wang who had a large household, topped up their wages by collecting metal scraps and plastic bottle to be sold for recycling. When the elderly passing away, second-generation inhabitants with their families took residence in the village. Early on, villagers had occupied former Japanese colonial buildings, while others had built their houses by themselves. In 1959, the state built seven additional units in the village, which were split among more than one household. The retirees once had worked as low-

FIGURE 1: Zhongxin Village (© Elisa Tamburo).

ranking technicians, drivers, and pantlers in the adjacent military hospital. Until the 1960s, the settlement was about double the size as doctors and nurses also inhabited Zhongxin Village. As units were allocated on the basis of military ranking, higher officials such as the hospital director could enjoy a better house. However, following the relocation of some hospital departments to Taipei, most medical personnel moved to the city, leaving behind less well-off residents, which made of Zhongxin mostly a low-ranking village at the time of my research.

Sociality tied to the experience of the exile: while villagers had no kin relations, strangers from all over China blended in the settlement becoming neighbors. They worked together in the adjacent hospital; helped one another in hardship; dwelled in makeshift, cramped houses; and mingled in the lanes that snaked through the settlement. They shared public toilets and a public bath (see Figures 2 and 3), facilities the village disposed, until the inhabitants had built extensions to their houses: private toilets, addi-

tional rooms, and entire floors. Women cooked for other families and exchanged recipes while children played at neighbors' homes: people said "the village resembles a big family" (*cunzi xiang yige jia yiyang*). The residents described the village as was *renao* (hot and noisy, lively) and their relationship as *miqie* (close) and *reqing* (cordial, warm), something that in the literature on Chinese sociality has been defined as *hong-huo* and translated as "social heat" or "red-hot sociality" (Chau 2008; Steinmüller 2011).

In this article, I investigate how sociality among long-lived neighbors transforms after relocating to high-rise blocks in a different neighborhood together with new residents from four similar military villages. How does the settlement alter social fabric? And which factors contribute to this change? My ethnographic material shows that, following the relocation, the community enters a state of "social disarticulation" (Cerneja 1999: 30), amounting to a high-degree of "social failure." While literature on high-rise failure has charged their built form

FIGURE 2: Village former public toilets, now demolished (© Elisa Tamburo).

FIGURE 3: The public bath (© Elisa Tamburo).

with creating dysfunctional social environments, here I redirect the debate to normative regimes entailed in formalized and marketized high-rise residential estates, rather than focusing on their vertical form itself. Expanding the debates on residential high-rise in Greater China, the article considers the effects of neoliberal governmentality (Foucault 2008) on the residents' "social sensorium" (Chau 2008: 489) by comparing their life before and after the move. The material I present is in fact based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork carried out over 18 months between April 2015 and October 2016—the month of Zhongxin Village's relocation—and on a month and a half of follow-up fieldwork in 2017—a year after the relocation. New regulatory regimes, articulated with new house technologies, governance, and aesthetics challenge the inhabitants' spatial practices, routines, and habitus in the new apartments (Bourdieu 1977, 1984). This new normative order marks the transition from informality to formality, as well as from state-owned units, to

marketized, commercial housing stocks in urban Taiwan.

From vertical built form to regulatory regimes: The regulative function of the high-rise

Literature on high-rise buildings' failures has criticized the modernist project, which envisioned skyscrapers as "the miracle in the urbanization of cities of machine civilization" (Le Corbusier in Marmot 1981: 83). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, these critiques focused on high-rises' built form as the main reason for their dysfunction (Coleman 1985; Jephcott 1971; Newman 1972). Even if sidestepping substantial environmental determinism, recent works have recentered the debate on the verticality and space compartmentalization of the high-rise, highlighting its segregation and seclusion. For instance, in her ethnography of resettlement to high-rise blocks in the periphery of Cairo, Farha

Ghannam calls the alteration of the social fabric of the former residents of the central neighborhood of Bulaq a consequence of the “the physical segregation of the housing project” (2002: 73). Similarly, Andrew Harris (2015: 607), shows the possibility of high-rises’ physical and social isolation, albeit discarding dominating modernist narratives, which interpret height solely as the dominion of the powerful.

Literature focusing on the failure of the modernist project of the high-rise as a “machine to live in” (Jacobs et al. 2007: 5) has also highlighted the possibility of high-rise failures due to poor maintenance of “essential technologies for high-rise housing” (Jacobs and Cairns 2011), such as the elevator. Stephen Graham (2016: 145), for instance, has noted the malfunctioning or breakdown of these technologies can create an immediate crisis for residents, thereby transforming the modernist dream into “dystopian places of isolation and enforced withdrawal.” These contributions are crucial, as they redirect the discourse on iconic buildings and skyscrapers as symbols of modernity and prog-

ress toward the challenges these estates present. However, without denying that verticality contributes to the social disruption of the relocated inhabitants, in this article I focus on other relevant, yet overlooked, factors—that is, the regulative and normative role of the high-rise.

This new emphasis allows me to stress the social changes emerging from the shift from informal settlement to formalized housing, as well as from state-owned housing units to commercial estates. Henri Lefebvre’s concept of *habitat*—originally referred to the French modernist housing estates—is helpful to capture the abstract functional character of the high-rise as opposed to the plasticity the village houses built by the residents themselves, which are prone to creative modifications and appropriations. Housing estates have the property to “exclude the notion of *inhabit*, that is, the plasticity of space, its modelling and the appropriation by groups and individuals of the conditions of their existence” (1996: 79). While “the space of the house—fence, garden, various and available corners—leaves a margin of initiative and free-

FIGURE 4: The informal settlement: laundry hanging in the alleys (© Elisa Tamburo).

dom to inhabit, limited but real,” the rationality of the housing estates appears in a “burden of constraints” (79). The *habitat* is then for Lefebvre characteristic of *housing*, where the house absolves essentially an economic function, as opposed to the *dwelling*, “a social and poetic act, generating poetry and art work” (2014: 766), where a spontaneity of practices emerges.

Scholars of urban China have examined the socio-spatial transformations affecting housing in the post reform era (Bruckermann 2018; Tomba 2004, 2014; Zhang 2010). In China, this reorganization of sociality has been exacerbated by the shift from state-guaranteed workplace housing (*danwei*) to commercial estates changing perceptions of interpersonal relationships (Yang 1994), social trust, and solidarity (Bruckermann 2018). More generally, individualism and self-development have impacted the moral compass and sense of self of many Chinese people (Yan 2011). For instance, homeownership has considerably altered the sociality and lifestyle of an emerging middle class, now concerning about maintaining a distinctive status symbol through consumption practices, about securing their safety and interests in their gated communities (Tomba 2014; Zhang 2010). Luigi Tomba (2014) has convincingly argued that this spatialization of class is not simply the result of China entering the market economy, but more subtly an act of governance: the segregation of housing estates has been a tool deployed by the Chinese state to socially engineer a new middle class.

Although Taiwan’s political history differs from mainland China, Zhongxin residents also experience atomization by relocating from state-owned subsidized housing to commercial estates. Similar to the mainland “working unit” housing, the KMT granted villagers housing rights on state land without rent. During the postwar years, the state also distributed food rations and subsidized some of the utility fees. On the other hand, these families were loyal to the KMT, from which they depended in a complex relationship of coercion and consent (Tamburo 2018). In the 1990s, with the housing

infrastructure deteriorating, the state allocated new housing to military families in high-rise blocks. However, Zhongxin’s move being long overdue, veterans are torn about moving houses in their 90s. To relocate a village needs most of the inhabitants to agree; if a majority is not reached, the inhabitants can stay put, but they lose their rights to new housing. The relocation was therefore formally voluntary but essentially compelled by need.

From being tenants on state land, residents become owners of their apartments, thereby disposing of a valuable asset considering the high value of land in Taipei. New housing units are subsidized for 80 percent of their total cost by the MND. After a five-year embargo, set to prevent speculation on state-financed housing stocks, these can be sold as commercial estates. Yet, this interdiction did not prevent scandals involving politicians buying these units from veterans for a bargain to then resell on the market at exorbitant prices. The relocation into high-rise fostered profit maximization and speculation by allowing for the construction of more apartments than required. The high-rise as a built form fosters this speculative form of construction, as building vertically allows a maximization of surplus value (Harvey 2013). It also amplifies a chain of debt, as, given the high market value of estates in Taipei, most future homeowners are required to take out a mortgage to pay the remaining 20 percent of the unit total amount.

Instead of reducing social failure to the standardized, vertical built form of the high-rise blocks, the shift from state-unit to commercial estate allows me to consider their regulative function and the new modes of governmentality. “The new governmental reason” understands the market as “a site of veridiction” (Foucault 2008: 44). In neoliberal governmentality, “government must no longer intervene, and it no longer has a direct hold on things and people” (45). Subjects are not extrinsically limited by an entity, but rather internally regulated: it is the birth of biopolitics (10). Marketized high-rise estates work as governmental technologies as they entail different ways to govern sociality,

manage bodies, and exercise power. Under this new governance, the inhabitants considerably change the ways they experience sociality, understand trust, and perceive order. While the spatial configuration of the high-rise contributed to disrupting the community by reshuffling their neighborly relations and distancing the inhabitants from their old neighborhood, it is the new set of rule and behavioral expectations that weakens networks of social support and nurtures feelings of social disarticulation among the residents.

In particular, relationships in the old village social are described in terms of “warm sociality” (*renao*). The concept of “social heat” describes both large gatherings where sociality is heated, such as festivals and religious rituals (Chau 2008), and mundane social activities related to leisure characterized by liveliness, chatting, joking, or playing (Steinmüller 2011: 268). Adam Chau’s (2008: 489) concept of “social sensorium” helps me to stress how a “sensorium” does not simply reside in the body (Csordas 1993) but is socially “coproduced.” This new govern-

mentality entails a profound rearrangement of power and order as well as sociality, trust and intimacy. It places distance between bodies, which impinges on the coproduction of sociality. The shift is expressed through new regimes of technologies and new forms of governance, as well as through different aesthetic regimes. The normative expressions used by the inhabitants to describe their new houses (security vs. convenience; order vs. chaos; beauty/hygiene vs. mess) are exemplary of how the challenges of cohabitation in the new high-rises are brought about primarily by this shift in governance rather than the physical built form of the new estates (see Figure 5).

Intercoms, elevators, and magnetic tokens: Regulating access with everyday technologies

“Nowadays, it is difficult to visit someone in a building that is not yours because you need a magnetic token to activate

FIGURE 5: The new estates (© Elisa Tamburo).

the elevator. Therefore, our way of life is completely different (*suoyi women shenghuo fangshi wanquan buyiyang*). Affection among people (*rende ganqing*) exists when you see them often and when the space is close; when people start to be divided, one here and one there, this affection becomes distant and more distant, to the point that it does not exist anymore.”
—Aunt Yang

With these words, Aunt Yang described some of the changes her community was experiencing. While inhabitants in the old village spontaneously met on the alleys, calling each other literally giving a shout, living in a high-rise now entailed the everyday use of technologies such as elevators, intercoms, and magnetic tokens to which most inhabitants were unaccustomed (see Figures 6 and 7). This became clear to me when I first visited the residents in their new

apartments: often, after ringing the bell, residents of first and second generations descended to the ground floor to open the door instead of using the intercom. Using new technologies in the high-rise required a specific knowledge.

Lack of such knowledge led some inhabitants to avoiding movement altogether, resulting in their isolation. Grandma Sun for instance, whom I visited with her brother-in-law, Uncle Sun believed technologies were extremely inconvenient to use. When I asked her if she found her new flat comfortable (*shufu*), she told me:

It is comfortable . . . but so, so (*shufu . . . keshi mamahuhu*). At the beginning, there were many aspects I was not used to. For instance, if you want to go anywhere, now it is chaos. Before, I was used to live in a low-rise house, you opened the door and there was the street. Now, if you want to

FIGURE 6: The elevator (© Elisa Tamburo).

FIGURE 7: The intercom (© Elisa Tamburo).

go walking somewhere, you have to take the elevator. It is not convenient. If you want to go to visit someone, you need to have the token that activates the elevator. My flat in the old village was good, I liked it, I was comfortable there. So, I say, here it is comfortable, but not very convenient.

When asked about changes in lifestyle, Grandma Sun affirmed that her way of life remained the same, but also mentioned that many aspects became inconvenient. Movement was part of that:

For example, if you want to go anywhere it is a mess. Now, I really don't go out much, only in the morning. I stay home for the rest of the day. I don't go visit anyone. The elevator, the token, the bell, these things are really not convenient. And I am old now—this year, 90 years old—so for me it is not very convenient to go out.

“It is messy with the neighbors now: one here, one there,” said Uncle Sun. “You don't find them (*zhaobudao tamen*),” Grandma Sun added.

Further, these technological assemblages prompted discussions over the governance of and regulating access to the new buildings. In particular, controversies around these objects and technologies arose with regard to the new complex's standards of safety. The magnetic token, which the inhabitants used to activate the elevator, became, for instance, the object of contention between the advocates of security (*anquan*) and the supporters of convenience (*fangbian*). Arguments focused on who should possess the token and for how many each household was entitled to apply. As the complex was neither fenced nor gated, residents feared that by distributing too many tokens, the community would be unsafe. The token could be given to visitors, mostly strangers (*moshengren*), who could take advantage of their access. After this

heated debate, the building administrators had established that every household was allowed to apply for a maximum of five tokens. Yet, if the proponents of security seemed to prevail, the supporters of convenience resorted to informal ways to reach their aims, for instance, by duplicating the tokens at key shops outside the complex. Ultimately, some families possessed a far greater number of tokens than allowed. These households justified by mentioning the numerous family members and friends visiting their homes regularly, including former neighbors living in other buildings of the block, accessible with a different key.

Knowledge among close neighbors once guaranteed a strong sense of security (*anquan-gan*). Because residents lived side by side, they knew abundantly about other households' whereabouts, leading sometimes to gossip and moral judgments. However, for better or for worse, people knew each other, and the community was glued together. The former chief of the village said that while there was no entrance gate, people themselves *were* the gate. Uncle Wang who had lived next to the village entrance, had been the community watcher par excellence for more than 60 years. Lacking proper infrastructure, residents themselves acted as infrastructure (Simone 2004). The curious visitor venturing in the settlement attracted by vernacular houses would be inevitably asked the reason for his visit. People watched over each other shoulders. This was one reason why, I was told, in *juancun* there were no thieves—the other being that the intricate paths of alleys discouraged intruders who feared not to find their way out. Trust was so widespread that the inhabitants rarely closed their house doors with a key: the residents would even leave their keys hanging from twine behind their entrance doors. But in the aftermath of relocation, in the more private spatial configuration of the high-rise, this intimacy had vanished, resulting in a generalized perception of lack of safety and security among the inhabitants. Classical works on gated communities have discussed safety concerns by revealing how discourses of urban

fear push residents to live behind high walls and security cameras (see Caldeira 1996, 2001; Low 2001, 2004). Yet, these also revealed how living in fortified enclaves fostered residents' anxieties. Residents of gated communities in China are similarly preoccupied with safety, particularly in lower-income estates, where crime levels are said to be higher (Tomba 2014; Zhang 2010). These anxieties derive from the vanishing of close support groups of known comrades (*tongbao*), to the anonymity of commercial housing (Yan 2011; Zhang 2010).

In Taipei, the fusion of one tight-knit community with three military communities added to safety concerns. "People are still adjusting to this place," Mr. Liu, one of these building administrators, told me:

The inhabitants had been living in a *juancun* for such a long time. They obviously meet difficulties, as they changed flat suddenly. Here, there are four *juancun* communities, which merged into one. Even if the inhabitants are all *juancun* people, their lifestyle is different . . . So, the inhabitants are adapting to the new residents, whom they don't know. I am inviting the people of our village to say hi to these new residents, to chat with them and get to know them. Often, you see them standing in the elevator, standing still into the presence of other residents; they don't talk. I invite them to mix and become a community.

People did not know the background of these new residents contributed to increasing mistrust and cautious attitudes. Their role of attentive watchers of the community being replaced by professional guardians, and they felt unsafe.

Regulating governance: Authority and management rules

Interviews with two out of the seven building administrators gave me a better understanding

of further challenges experienced by the inhabitants in the new setting. It was with them that residents contested residential regulations and expected behaviors over space. Mr. Liu and a colleague of his guided me through the issues at stake during their first three months of duty. They stressed that following the regulations of a high-rise building (*dalou*) was for many residents a real challenge. “This is the space of a high-rise,” Mr. Liu told me:

If I start jumping in this flat, I will affect the people upstairs and downstairs. If I decide to hammer a nail during the evening hours, I will affect the households upstairs and downstairs, and if I drill, I will affect the whole building. In the village, you could do these operations at your own convenience, it did not matter (*wusuowei*).

Further difficulties arose from parking:

Despite having an assigned parking space, people park their scooters as they please (*luanting*). Some people also enter the parking lot from the exit because it is closer to the main street. Some households have a car parking lot assigned, but they don’t have a car: they thought they could use that space as they wanted and started to place a variety of things there, including furniture, rubbish, and so on.

An elderly man had even used the space of the parking lot to burn paper money (*jingzi*), something that was dangerous with all that petrol from the cars: the entire parking lot could explode. Mr. Liu explained:

We contacted him, and respectfully explained that in the new house, it is not allowed to do that. He then resolved to burn paper money on his balcony, emitting a haze of smoke, which immediately activated the fire alarm and rose up to the higher floors. So, we respectfully visited

the elderly resident once more, explaining that burning paper money on the balcony was not allowed. “Why not? The balcony is mine and I do what I want with it,” he said to us with an outraged tone. This is their mentality: it is enough that regulations differ from what one thinks to have tensions (*jushi*), people will argue (*chaojia*), and we will have conflict (*chongtu*).

Mr. Liu concluded that people could not respect whatever rule diverging from their own idea of possibility.

Key to understanding these disputes is a new understanding of power: residential high-rises meant standardized rules, market-driven administration, and democratic deliberation. In the past, the settlement had been administered by a self-help association (*zizhihui*), headed by the “chief of the village” (*cunzhang*). During the authoritarian period, this figure was pivotal in the political life of the village, as he passed on MND orders to the military families while vice versa reporting to the MND. Despite the chief being officially elected by the inhabitants, interviews with former *juancun* residents suggested his appointment was encouraged from above. Villagers obeyed MND directives and responded to political moral codes and sanctions (see Tamburo 2018). However, despite state surveillance, most everyday matters were left to the discretion of the residents themselves. No “dwelling code” prescribed where to park a scooter or where to place an external lamp, as long as the neighbors agreed. The informality of the settlement favored informal practices, a “freedom to inhabit” (Lefebvre 1996: 79). Residents creatively extending their homes by adding new rooms and floors had caused controversies among neighbors, but these had been mediated case by case by the chief, a figure of grassroots authority.

On the other hand, in the high-rise, standardized rules formalized space and practices. The management of the estate, comprising administrative and security personnel, implemented these regulations helped on the ground by two

administrators per building, who were elected among the inhabitants. An inhabitant described the different governance of the building in the following terms: “Before there was the *cun-zhang*, but actually every household looked after his own house. Now there are the administrators (*guanli weiyuan*), and they are responsible for managing things. That is why we need to pay an administration fee (*guanlifei*), together with other high expenses,” my interlocutor concluded. In the marketized estates, a management company maintained order and harmony among residents through agreed codes of conduct.

The change from informal settlement to residential high-rise also worsened the household economics of some families. Small economic activities required to be formalized and managed outside the residential estates, so shops that residents had carved out of their homes, such as Uncle Wang’s snack shop, Ms. Guo’s breakfast shop, and the Wu’s family kindergarten, all vanished. Mr. Wu told me: “We moved here to look for trouble” (*women banzheli weile zhao mafan*). Mrs. Wu smiled nervously and added:

The residents did not like us to have a kindergarten in our flat. A city government officer visited in January and admonished us that it is prohibited to do business in a residential estate. Normally the city does not care about what you do at home, unless someone reports you. Surely, someone reported us. We had to pay a conspicuous fine and find another place for the kindergarten.

No neighbor had ever complained about the Wu managing a kindergarten at home. “On the contrary, in the old village we were seen as kind people, taking care of children with many fun activities. But now people believe we are only making money here in the new flat.” The couple speculated on what might have triggered the report, blaming each other for having bothered this or that neighbor with this or that action. Their daughter argued that new residents might

have reported her parents: they might not appreciate the children’s parents often asking to open the main gate or activate the elevator, the noise coming from the flat when children were playing, or children climbing the building stairs. The tension was palpable.

Changes in regulations, governance, and authority meant that prohibitions and allowances were distributed and that residents perceived them differently. While controversies were mediated case by case by the respected figure of the chief of the village, residents were now exposed to standardized rules, implemented in a democratic way by a condominium assembly and elected administrators. Despite order being maintained through political directives, reporting, and patriotism, the informality of the old settlement also provided freedom to inhabit the settlement inhabitants had mostly built themselves. While cohabitation had not been frictionless, in 60 years they had found an equilibrium by dwelling together. For Mr. Liu, in this different way of governing cohabitation lay the source of multiple conflicts among residents.

Between standardization and distinction: Regulating new aesthetic regimes

The residents appreciated the higher living standards and new affordances their flats offered to which they often refer in normative aesthetic terms, where notions of beauty, hygiene, and order were emphasized. People found their new flats “comfortable and clean” (*shufu he ganjin*), while their old houses were “a mess, old, and everything was broken” (*luanqibazao, jiude, shen-medou podiaole*). Eli Elinoff’s (2016) material on railway houses in Thailand considers how through different understandings of home aesthetic, residents, planners, and NGOs enact different moral orders and political subjects. Asher Ghertner (2015) called dominant aesthetic orders entailed in city beautification discourses a “rule by aesthetics.” In his ethnography, Delhi’s slum dwellers internalize a global discourse of city beauty, which eventually evicts them. Simi-

larly, in his discussion of urban development in Ho Chi Minh City, Erik Harms (2012) points out that residents of the redeveloped area of Thủ Thiêm find themselves in the ambiguity of fighting against eviction and low compensation while at the same time admiring the beauty and order promoted by urban renewal projects which displaces them.

Despite appreciating their new flats, residents in Taiwan did not completely internalize their aesthetic order. Instead, since the summer preceding their relocation, the inhabitants had been complaining about the strict aesthetic codes entailed in the new buildings and their impact on their spatial practices. For instance, when Aunt Li was planning to build a glass block window in her bathroom, Mr. Meng one of the future administrators, told her this was not possible, because the wall had to be uniformed with the rest of the facade. Similarly, the administrators announced it would be prohib-

ited to hang the drying laundry from the front balconies facing the public square of the estate if the drying rack was higher than the balcony balustrade (see Figures 4 and 8). These prohibitions ascribed to a specific understanding of beauty, one attempting to exhibit neat building facades and uniformed surfaces.

While back in Zhongxin houses differed from one another by shape, materials, colors, number of floors, and additional rooms, the new apartments all looked alike. Interiors were standardized, and sizes were allocated according to the original ranking of the inhabitants, respectively 28 *ping*² and 30 *ping* (two bedroom) for lower rankings, and 34 *ping* (three bedroom) for the higher ranking. Allocation by ranking was the last provision made by the state before privatizing land and housing and consigning the villagers to a fully marketized estate and its neoliberal governmentality. Some of the inhabitants have seen their home shrinking considerably. Un-

FIGURE 8: The internal balconies of the new buildings (© Elisa Tamburo).

cle Wang for example, had been allocated a 28 *ping* flat, compared to his three-story, 90 *ping* house. He complained: “Why did they build so many flats? In the new houses, they build more flats than the households who need to move in. For whom? Couldn’t they build less but bigger apartments? My flat will be very small compared to the one I have now.” With his household comprising five family members, Uncle Wang’s bedroom had been carved out from part of the kitchen and the living room. His eating habits completely changed: he lamented it was impossible to cook in the kitchen now shrunk half the original size and consequently resorted to frequently eat out.

The high-rise complex, then, not only aimed at promoting a rationality of forms; more than that, it fostered a standardization of aesthetic and practices, what I call here an aesthetic of assimilation. With its regulative capacity, the aesthetic of assimilation not only created *housing* instead of *dwellings* (Lefebvre 2014: 766) but also was able to alter social and spatial practices through new regulations and rules. These regulations changed the aesthetic codes of the buildings, and with them, the residents’ practices of appropriation of their lived environment. A further example is provided by those families who decided to do without their ancestral altar, as incense burning was forbidden within the apartments. Besides, the white, immaculate walls would have soon turned black and smoky. Because of these safety and aesthetic norms, some families had resolved to leave without the material cultural manifestation of their family history.

On the other hand, aesthetic uniformity conversely arose aspirations of social distinction among the inhabitants (Bourdieu 1984). How to stand out in an environment characterized by standardization? The decoration of the new flats and new understandings of dressing codes played an important role in determining new perceptions of status and aspirations, as well as fostering social stratification in new ways. Purchasing new and lavish ancestral altars symbolize the wealth and status of a family. These were

also exhibited by redecorating the standardized home with personalized refurbishment according to their taste: for some it meant revolutionizing the floor map of their flats by tearing down dividing walls while personalizing their interiors; for others it meant refurbishing their living room by adding plaster decorations, false ceilings, and ceiling lights. Parquet flooring substituted the standard white tiles, while bathroom tiles and fixtures were upgraded.

New forms of consumption expressed in home improvements conferred social status and distinction in an imposed standardized landscape; family wealth and capital played a key role in the marketized estates (Osburg 2013; Tomba 2014; Zhang 2010). Li Zhang’s (2010) material on Chinese gated community has shown that in higher-income estates, where consumption levels are higher, social stratification and anonymity deepen, while residents of lower-income housing are more resourceful in entertaining social exchange and develop solidarity, suggesting higher levels of income, consumption, distinction, and social stratification reduce the possibility to recreate a community. New dressing codes exemplify this point in Taiwan. “This is a new flat! By moving here, some people became very snobbish—literally, they have their eyes up here (*tamen yanjing zai zheli*),” Aunt Zheng told me, bringing her hands over her head. “People are dismissive of you (*tamen kan-buqi ni*). Before it was not like this: we were all at the same level, we all lived in poor houses, we dressed alike. Nowadays, many people became snobs,” she said.

Aunt Zheng then recounted an anecdote to me to show what she meant: one evening, she had gone out to throw away the rubbish, as usual. She was wearing short trousers (*duanku*), and one aunt had turned to her and asked, “How can you come down (*xialai*) wearing short trousers to throw the rubbish?” After that episode Aunt Zheng wondered:

How is it possible that before we were wearing whatever we wanted and now we have to dress formally to throw the rub-

bish away? When this person scolded me in this way, I felt like . . . really? Before we could go outside dressed in any way; now it became that I have to dress elegantly to throw away the rubbish. “But now we are in the new house! (*Keshi women xianzai zai xinjia*)!” these people say. Since then, I don’t bring the rubbish outside every day. Sometimes I ask my daughter to do it. I don’t go to throw the rubbish out anymore! There are people with whom once I could chat outside, who have changed a lot. So, now I just say hello and then I leave. These are people I was close to, whom now are not close anymore . . . If they speak to you, they would say very unpleasant things to hear. We are not close anymore. It is not like before. You see, when we were in the old village, we would talk. And while throwing away the rubbish, there were also the neighbors who lived outside the village, with whom we could immediately say hello to, shake hands, and chat with. There, the social relationships (*guanxi*) were still close (*miqie*).

As with refurbishing and decoration, clothing came to signify social distinction, which was expressed through the differentiation of clothing worn inside and outside one’s own house. In the past, the public space of the village had been an extension of the private sphere of the family, and people treated each other like family members. The chief of the village had told us he used to queue in his underwear to use the communal bathroom. The space of the *juancun* counted as “within the house,” because the village was a family (*jia*). However, ownership of the new houses had become for some a status symbol, which created social distinction and amplified social stratification, which was before based on ranking. In this context, social solidarity weakened among neighbors. As a consequence, Aunt Zheng avoided the routine that previously offered her chance to socialize with her neighbors.

Conclusion

The relocation from informal military settlements into high-rise buildings tremendously changed the social fabric among military families in Taipei. It threw a close-knit community into “social disarticulation,” where the space of the high-rise fostered new routines, habits, and spatial tactics. This amounted to social failure in the new high-rise apartment blocks. However, as I have argued, these changes were brought not directly by the high-rise as a built form itself but rather by what I have called the high-rise as a regulative form. The shift from informal, state-owned housing to marketized residential estates fostered a new type of governmentality that contributed to the dissolving of warm social relationships. New technologies regulating access, new governance and authority implementing rules, and a new aesthetic of standardization all contribute to creating normative regimes which impact on sociality, altering perceptions of social trust, safety, and solidarity. Where standardization could be eluded through financial capital, social distinction and stratification emerged, further contributing to divisions in the social fabric. As Victor Buchli (2006: 263) reminds us, Lévi-Strauss observed that “the house is the site where social tensions are negotiated.” It is in the site of the home that people must constantly mediate between the ideal of dwelling, the fluidity of property and real estate investments, and the economic constraints of consumer choice.

Dr. Elisa Tamburo obtained her PhD in Social Anthropology at SOAS, University of London. Her dissertation, “Moving House: Place, Time and the Politics of Urban Relocation in a Taipei Military Village,” focuses on the temporality, the social effects and the economic factors underpinning the relocation of military dependents’ villages in Taiwan. Her interests in the urban extends to political and economic anthropology, the anthropology of infrastructure, migration,

and diaspora in Greater China and Chinese communities elsewhere.

Email: et18@soas.ac.uk

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Note

1. In this article I use pseudonyms for all my interlocutors.
2. A *ping* is a Chinese measurement unit for surface and is equal to about 3.3 square meters.

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