

Self-Governing Mini-Municipalities: The Role of Private Strata Developments in the Public City

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Strata property gets a bad rap: defective buildings, neighbor disputes, short-term letting and rules, rules, rules. So, when I tell people that condominiums (as strata is known worldwide) are important but overlooked institutions that have the potential to contribute to positive urban change, it's no surprise that I'm often met with rolling eyes and looks of disbelief. My argument isn't that condominiums provide some utopian vision for the future, but that their poor reputation has more to do with the political, economic and social systems in which they were introduced than it does with their inherent potential. While the condominium is a child of the neo-liberal city, it also has the potential to rebel against its parent.

Condominium living is not equivalent to houses stacked on top of each other. The need for collective decisions, the different vested interests of all of the stakeholders involved in delivering, managing, living in and redeveloping condominiums, and the tensions and contradictions involved in condominium ownership combine to make the condominium an incredibly complex institution. This institution provides a ready-made structure for political engagement and action at the local level that can facilitate public participation. In this presentation, I draw on examples from Australia and overseas to demonstrate that condominiums have the potential to enable local-level resident action, mobilize place-based politics, and facilitate the creation of local social ties.

The condominium needs to be recognized for what it is (an important institution) and not just what it was created to be (a way to encourage home ownership and property development profits). It is not enough to simply recognize the work done by condominium owners and residents, volunteer board members and their managers in the everyday governance of cities. They also require support in these endeavors. Many challenges faced in the everyday politics and practices of condominiums have their roots in a lack of information and understanding of just how important the institution of the condominium is. Governments at all levels, but especially at the municipal level, can benefit by moving beyond a dissolution of responsibility for local politics and practices to condominiums and towards recognizing and supporting their important role as an additional tier of urban governance. It will take a concerted effort to reimagine and reactivate the condominium in this way, but now is the ideal time to do it.