

# Designing and Living in a Residential Condominium

Hatice Sadikoğlu\*<sup>1</sup>, Ahsen Özsoy<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Bahçeşehir University, Faculty of Architecture and Design  
İhlamur Yıldız Caddesi 10, Gayrettepe, 34353 Istanbul, Turkey; hatice.sadikoglu@arc.bacu.edu.tr

<sup>2</sup>Istanbul Technical University, Faculty of Architecture  
Taşkışla, Taksim, 34437 Istanbul, Turkey; ozsoya@itu.edu.tr

## Abstract

In recent years, a variety of housing types has increased in Turkey. Since the 1990s, gated communities and residential condominiums have been the new typologies for high-income user groups. Today, in Istanbul, there are several residential towers (gated and five-star hotel-serviced buildings) that were designed by various architectural firms in different locations of the city. Architects have designed these buildings using their experiences and design ideas; but users may have different expectations than what the architects' thought of these buildings. While designing, architects may not have sufficient knowledge of the requirements and the changing behaviour of the user groups. This study aims to understand similarities and differences of users' and architects' approaches related to the use of space. A residential condominium building for a high income group was chosen for field study and a questionnaire was conducted with 164 users in order to understand the characteristics of the user group. Then, in-depth interviews with 3 users including the observations of their use of space were realised. Along with collecting the information about living experienced in the building from users, an in-depth interview was also made with the architect of the building to be able to learn the design decisions. The study focused on change of use and flexibility in dwelling places. With the comparison on users' experience and architect's design idea, a conclusion was made to show how architects and users imagine and experience the dwelling space differently.

**Keywords:** High-income user group; User's experience; Residential condominium; Gated community; User's needs and requirements; Use of space

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## 1. Introduction

Housing is very complex issue in terms of social, cultural actions and practices. Not only use of the house, but also meaning of it varies from group to another group in society [1].

Social, cultural backgrounds, economic status and consumption habits of the users play important role on housing design [2]. Dwelling units are strongly related with users' behaviours alongside architects' offers/suggestions with design. So an architect needs to learn about users' lifestyle and their ideas about dwellings.

This study focuses on the differences of users' and architects' ideas/behaviours for residential condominiums, which have been (one of) the preferences of high income groups since the 1990s. High income group users have different characteristics from others with their consumer tendencies such as symbolic and conspicuous consumption. In recent years, the consumer culture has changed; signs and images have become important for user satisfaction [3]. According to Veblen, for high income group users, consumption is an act to show their belonging to another one [4]. These people live in a consumption-focused world, and it gives them great pleasure to represent their status through their belongings. According to Cross [5] and Lury [6], consumption cannot come out of necessity, it has become a cultural phenomenon in which the people express themselves with their meanings, and it is important to feel a belonging to a social group for consumers [7].

As residential preferences of high income groups, villas and apartments in gated communities and high-rise residential buildings/condominiums have become widespread. Design and construction processes of these luxury residential examples have peculiar characteristics, which are interesting to examine.

The housing design process consists of a complex relationship between architects, users and dwellers. In

this consumption world, dwellings can be considered products and users occupants (consumers). In the relationship between occupants and architects, architects have a responsibility to educate and direct the occupants for using and experiencing the space. Designing a dwelling for an architect is not only creating a place for dwelling but also offering and providing new possibilities to experience their places. They are creating another relationship between the occupant and the space. To understand this relationship, it is important to analyse the user's profile. Since the 1990s, with the increasing gated community trends, dwellers can be grouped according to their income levels.

This study focuses on the dwelling experiences of high income user group. The research is concerned with how the expectations and perceptions of the users overlap with the design idea/thinking of the architect. The common objective, both for users and architects, are the dwellings. While architects design a life (environment) for users with their knowledge, users tend to use the places according to their own needs. Sometimes, the places cannot be used as the architect designed them. As consumers, users are free to use their homes as they wish while the architects should make designs according to users' general characteristics. The main aim of the study is to understand both pre- and post- occupation behaviour of high income users.

In this study, dwelling units in a residential condominium were examined in terms of plan revisions/personalisation according to users' needs. The research has three parts: in the first part, relations between architects and users are examined, secondly high income user profiles and their houses in Istanbul are discussed, and finally the findings of a field study conducted in a residential condominium in Istanbul are summarised.

## 2. Architects and users

Architects are responsible for creating a relationship between users and their environment. A dwelling is a vital space for people as they spend a big part of their lives in these private places. A dwelling design requires significant consideration of users' characteristics and their needs in the design process [8].

Who decides what and for whom is a central issue in the housing process. In most societies, a house is more than a physical structure. It has a social and cultural value, whose shape is often determined by cultural tradition [9]. According to Turner [10], when people are in control of decisions about the design, construction, and management of their housing, the process and product will enhance their social well-being. When people have no control over the housing process, the housing

produced may instead become a barrier to achieving personal fulfilment and a burden on the economy [10]. As dwellings are often designed to be standard, families who differ greatly in their socio-cultural needs live in houses designed for average family needs. In recent years, studies have discussed the importance of socio-cultural factors in housing design and the failure of present housing policies to meet users' socio-cultural needs. According to Habraken [11], a house is not a thing that can be designed or built. It is the result of a housing process. The important act in this process is that of the user who lives there. The act of living there is the only act that makes a house something special [11].

In recent years, with the increasing consumption phenomenon, housing units have started to be seen literally as '*productions to sell*'. Also they are the most important and private, individual spaces of people. Customer satisfaction has been related with the communication between architect and users. Today, some construction companies of high income group residential projects have started to involve the users into the design process to allow them to change their dwelling units according to their preferences. This approach can break the communication gap (disconnection) between architects and users.

The gap between architects and users has developed historically [12]. In primitive societies, anyone could build his own house, "designing" according to a model which was developed and adjusted over generations to satisfy cultural, climatic, physical, and maintenance requirements [13]. Users were building their own dwellings, they knew their own needs and demands and they were touching the materials. It can be understood why the vernacular houses still survive. Since the Industrial Revolution, new ways to design and construct buildings have been developed. In the marketplace, users affect decisions through selective buying. The gap between designer and user has grown, but market research and the sensitivity of builders to market conditions can narrow it, resulting in open-market buildings that embody commonly held values even though users did not participate directly in the design [13].

To able to create a successful relationship between the dwelling and the user, the participation in the design process is important. The majority of the design can be determined by the expectations of the users. Participation is mostly defined as '*taking part in*' and different participation types are possible: providing information, consultation and negotiation [14]. Concerning process and product (dwelling unit), as decision-makers users are powerful actors as much as architects.

Even though users were the most effective actors as both architects and occupants in the past; this

relationship has broken and the main actors of the built environment have become the construction companies and the architects in modern societies. With the increasing marketing phenomenon, construction companies have noticed that involving the users as consumers in the design process is essential for both creating useful places and obtaining companies' revenue.

### 3. High income group users and their residential experiences

Increasing consumption habits and changing economy policies, social status has been linked mostly with income groups. Social status can be understood from social stratification as the communities that have common economic life opportunities and the communities have similar or common positions and economic interests [15], [16]. Social status can be changed with several factors. Especially after 1980 with neoliberal economy policies, capital has been mobile. With this mobility, new lifestyles and user profiles have been created. The high income residential group in Turkey has undergone great changes in terms of educational, social, cultural aspects from the past. Today, the users have special and exclusive lifestyles in their residences. While high-income groups are changing, the housing sector, its dynamics and design factors are changed along with all the factors affecting the relationship between architect and user. User preferences related with their economic situation have become important determiners for supply and demand of the housing market.

By the 1990s, new user groups emerged that could not be identified by their social, cultural characteristics. It can be only estimated about their income level that provides them with the ability to buy such a luxury housing unit. With the changing social structure, new technological developments and conspicuous consumption habits, this new group has started to live in 'gated community settlements' and 'high-rise condominiums' that can be considered by the users to be prestigious, luxury, secure and technologic housing communities.

In recent years, construction companies have been serving individual plan organisations for different users in one settlement. They have realised the importance of personalisation of the design for each user. Individual architectural design service has been an important marketing tool for construction companies because *haute couture* design for new high-income group residential users has become an indispensable factor.

### 4. Field study: High income residential users and architects

In this consumption era, a 'house' has not been seen just as a dwelling unit. It has become a symbol for the characteristics of the dwellers. It gives informative clues about user profile, personality, social, cultural and economic status, it shows lifestyles of users. Especially, for high income residential buildings, users need strong collaboration with architects while creating spaces. In recent years, construction companies that are developing high income residential buildings have provided participation into the design process of the dwellings. Although their main aim focuses on successful marketing and profit, they provide an opportunity to create more qualified and sustainable dwelling units. On the other hand, sometimes users tend to give harm to the design with their unlimited demands on buildings.

This study aims to understand the relations between residential users and architects in terms of their ideas on design and use. The field study was conducted in a vertical gated settlement in the city centre of Istanbul. This high-income residential condominium has two vertical buildings with 35 floors and 240 flats. There are several facility areas such as tennis and basketball courts, open and closed swimming pools, spa and health centres. This study was realised so as to examine the similarities and differences of the ideas of users and architect.

The research has 4 phases: questionnaires with 164 users, examining the plan organisations, in-depth interviews with 3 of the users, and an interview with the architect of the building. First, the main characteristics of the users and their ideas on housing units' design were researched. Then, in-depth interviews with 3 users who agreed to talk about their preferences and experiences were conducted. All these findings and users' comments on participation ideas were discussed with the architect of the building.

#### 4.1. Questionnaires with users and plan examinations

The questionnaires were conducted with 164 users who have been living in the settlement, and the plan organisations of their dwellings were examined to understand high income user profile characteristics and their tendencies on housing design and participation idea.

**User Profile:** According to results, in the settlement, while defining the user profile, there are many different professions such as traders, bureaucrats, journalists, lawyers, sportsmen, actors etc. Recent high-income

users cannot be classified according to social, cultural, educational status. Therefore the only economic classification that is possible for this profile is for those who have the opportunity/capability for buying such a high priced flat. According to the results, 78.8% of the users are married and 21.3% are single.

**Aim for buying/reason for choosing the dwelling:** When we looked for the main aim of buying/having a flat from the settlement, it was seen that 63.4% of users have bought their unit to live in, while 36.6% of them see it as an investment and plan to rent (out) their flats. It is seen that, for this user profile, having a housing unit points to two main aims: living and investment. The aim of buying is an important factor for the design process. If people buy the flat to live in, they have a strong tendency to personalise their dwelling spaces.

**Involvement in the design process:** During design and construction, all users had the right to be included in the process. The construction company has two standard plan organisations; one for 1-bedroom units and the other one for three-bedroom units (Figure 1).

If the users wanted to change their flats' plan organisation, then they could do it with participation in the design process and they could change the standard plan into individual, personalised plans according to their own demands. So, many users demanded plan organisation and material revisions (Figures 2, 3).

Personalised plans were 39% of all the plans while standard plan schemes were preferred by 61% of the users. It can be said that high income group residential

users want to participate in the design, and they tend to change their environment according to their own needs.

**Revisions on standard plan organisations/personalisation:** Home is an individual concept for all users. Each profile needs different spaces, different dimensions or different plan organisations. While developing a mass housing project, developers and designers generally use focus group research that helps to determine the user profile. First the user profiles are determined and examined for their characteristics, common needs and demands, and then the project is developed. The same technique is used for high-income group residential buildings. Although these flats were designed for common characteristics of high-income user profile, users want to make some individual changes on plan organisation and materials. It is sometimes related with their basic needs according to their lifestyle, and sometimes it is caused by conspicuous consumption habits.

Users in this settlement made certain changes in their flats; servant rooms on the standard plan were modified into dressing rooms or walk-in closets. Bedrooms were separated according to three main functions: sleeping, studying and dressing. In one bedroom flats, some users wanted to change their open kitchen into walled ones. They changed their wall colours and ceramic tiles in bathroom areas (Figures 2, 3).

These revisions show us that the architects cannot present one typical plan organisation nor select materials in one building for all users. Especially high



Figure 1. Standard plan organisations of 1+1 and 3+1 residential units



Figure 2. Individual 3+1 plan organisations

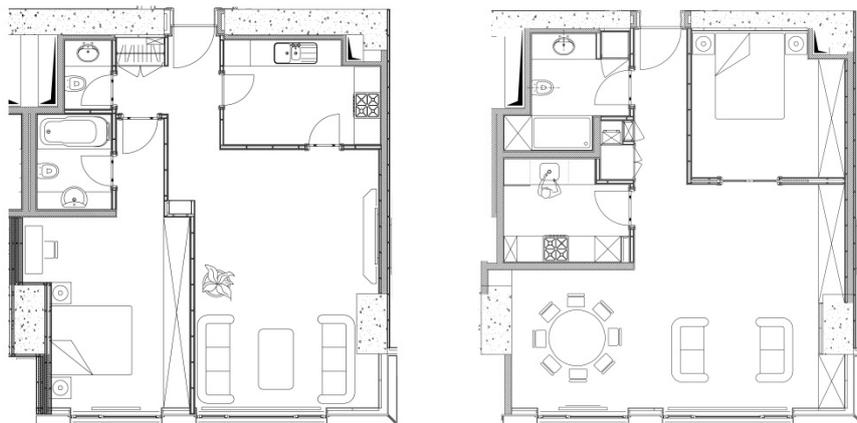


Figure 3. Individual 1+1 plan organisations

income users have more expectations than others because of having economic power.

#### 4.2. In-depth interviews with users

Along with the questionnaires and examination of plan organisations, in-depth interviews were conducted with 3 users of the flats in the settlements. The main topics of the interview were *high-income group housing preferences* and *participation tendencies into the design process* and *spatial and social segregation*.

During the interviews, users answered the question of 'why they wanted to live in a gated community

*settlement*'. They listed the reasons as being prestigious, having security and having different facilities in the settlement.

**The first user said:** 'This gated settlement makes me happier, feels better and safer and the settlement provides me several activity areas. This luxury lifestyle reflects my social status.' On the contrary, **the second user said:** This building cannot reflect my socio-cultural status. Everybody can have a flat in this gated settlement if they are rich. So it is all about economic opportunities'.

**The third user said:** I think it reflects my economic status, because all the people living in this community have the opportunity to buy a flat'.

In this settlement, users cannot be classified or grouped according to their social, cultural profile. Their common point is having a flat in the same settlement and they are in the same income group. It is very hard to design one typical dwelling unit (plan organisation) for all users.

Users interviewed commented on the participation idea as a vital tool for qualified design. According to them, the residential users cannot be determined as one profile. Since all flats were designed as standard plan organisations, users wanted to change their places, they need to personalise the spaces. In fact, because having more economic opportunities, high income group users want to personalise their spaces more than other income groups.

**The first user said:** *'I am very happy to participate in the design process, because the standard plan organisation was not suitable for me and I made changes in my bathroom and kitchen according to my own taste.'*

**The second user said:** *'We changed one of our bedrooms into a study room, I and my wife need to be alone for studying, that's why we need a special study room.'*

**The third user said:** *'I am living in a 3-bedroom flat. When I saw the standard plan organisation, I wanted to make changes on it and asked the construction company. They replied to me positively for making it with the architect of the building. We met the architect and changed one bedroom into a dressing room and enlarged the kitchen area. The architect warned me about some details on kitchen revisions but I did and now I am happy to make them.'*

Users were happy to be included into the design and construction process. Since they pay a lot of money for their flats, they wanted to have certain rights to change their areas. As consumers, users expect more from their flats as products.

When we analyse the third topic, spatial and social segregations of gated community living, they are not interested in the negative effects on urbanism and society. According to the interviews, high income group residential users who preferred the gated community living do not cause a disconnection between users and other people and also between their site and urban areas. They mostly think it is a kind of housing typology that similar user profiles prefer to live in.

#### 4.3. Interview with the architect of the residential condominiums

An in-depth interview was made with the architect of the buildings. The main topics of the interview were the same with the users' interview: high-income group housing preferences and participation tendencies into the design process, and spatial and social segregation.

According to the architect, gated communities are new trends among high-income users. These people think that they are different from other people. That is why they want to live in a special site that is separate from other parts of the city and gated against to crime etc. The architect pointed out that in this kind of residential unit, the people cannot be grouped according their social-cultural status, and can be only possible for economic status. It is obvious that for high income people, involvement during design and construction is important to satisfy from their residential environment.

In recent years, gated communities are being criticised for causing segregation and disconnection, by many architects, sociologists, and urban planners. As Blakely and Snyder [17] have pointed out: 'gated communities are microcosms in their towns, they are town in the town, and they will cause urban problems'. The architect of the settlement also agreed with this idea. He said: *'In the city centre, some people who have economic opportunities and more money than others want to live with people of the same status. I don't know the reasons but they are frightened by the others. Especially in city centres, they want to feel secure 7/24; they feel secure in gated areas. I think this lifestyle cannot provide living the complete life in the long term. It separates everything but it causes not only spatial segregation but also causes a kind of alienation and social segregation in the society.'*

The architect and the users do not have the same vision and do not have similar ideas about their dwellings' meanings and use.

## 5. Findings and conclusion

In this study, the ideas of high income group residential users' and the architect of their dwellings' were discussed. The main aim of the study was to point out the differences between the ideas (users' and architects') on dwelling and urban design. The high income group user profile has changed over time. While it can be classified according to economic opportunities, it cannot be determined with social, cultural and other characteristics. That is why the users need different types of plan organisations. Sometimes they need to use the spaces; sometimes they just need to show their prestige through their dwellings, decorations, furniture as conspicuous consumption. Before the design it is important to understand individual characteristics of users and focus on their needs and demands.

Although the architect efforts to design a common plan organisation, because of the differences between users, it could not be successful. This type of project for high income users, a free plan organisation, can be a solution to revise and modify places easily and economically. For example, if service and circulation systems are organised

well, they can provide flexible design possibilities. The best thing an architect can do is to design flexible spaces for high income group users.

High income users are not very interested in urban problems that emerge by their dwellings as much as architects are. Architects as building and urban professionals feel more responsible for the environment. Users tend to focus on their own dwellings and their own life in gated settlements. Perhaps the relation between architects and users can be created again through responsibility ideas. While they participate in designing a built environment, they should be feeling responsible as much as the architect because users are one of the determiners.

The last point of this study is the importance of architects' knowledge and communication with the users. It is possible that high income users can demand revisions/personalisation that are architecturally failures. But one of the missions of the architect is making negotiations with the user. It is important to explain to the user the advantages and disadvantages of the modifications. The user should know the positive and negative effects of these kinds of revisions when they choose new/revised plan organisations.

This study was made so as to understand the relationship between high-income group residential users and the architect. If this relation can be created correctly and more transparently, it has the potential to provide a sustainable design and a built environment in the future.

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