How Children Cope When Home is a Hotel

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Series: Children in the City

Emergency housing in social hotels is affecting a growing number of families in the Paris region. How does this experience impact the lives of children? What are the consequences on children's relationship to space, on how they grow up, and on how they learn, make friends and play? Erwan Le Méner shows how school plays a central role in stabilizing an otherwise precarious situation.

Today, one in five people experiencing homelessness in the Paris region are children, accompanied by their parents. Because of these children, public authorities define these groups as a "family", which gives them access to specific housing assistance, different from that offered to individuals referred to as "singles." These families account for a growing proportion of the homeless population and benefit from a distinctive type of accommodation, called "social hotels", provided by the state and its agencies, or by departmental councils[1] (Le Méner 2013a). These social hotels serve as a shelter for almost 7,800 families with at least one child under the age of 13 in the Île-de-France (Paris) region (Guyavarche *et al.* 2014).

While some studies have focused on living conditions in shelters that house families, few have addressed the question of social hotels. Some research has been conducted on the life of adults in facilities such as accommodation and social reintegration centers (Thiery 2008), or centers for pregnant women and/or mothers with young children (Donati *et al.* 1999; Cardi 2010). These studies point to the difficulties of living with strangers, even for brief periods of time, in run-down spaces. They show that the temporary nature of their stay limits the possibility of settling in, and that the constant control exercised by social workers makes it difficult to fulfill their role as a parent. But investigations of children's experiences in these facilities, and in social hotels especially, are rare.[2] And yet it is not unreasonable to think that group living in temporary housing may have different meanings and repercussions for them than for adults.

What are the consequences of this temporary environment—in no way designed for the accommodation of minors—on the daily life of these children? Tellingly, professionals refer to this type of assistance, designed simply as a shelter, as "raw" accommodations. How are children's activities—homework, games, relationships with their peers, participation in family life—affected

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[1]   France is divided into 101 administrative areas called *départements* (similar to English counties), each of which has a departmental council responsible, among other things, for social care.

[2]   A few qualitative studies have been conducted abroad, particularly in Ireland (Keogh *et al.* 2006) and in Australia (Kirkman *et al.* 2010). In France, the long-term investigative reporting of Véronique Mougin (2009) is an exception, while a number of socio-historical works inform us regarding the transformations of furnished hotels and their services (Faure and Lévy-Vroelant 2007; Barrère and Lévy-Vroelant 2012).

by living in a hotel? How do they cope with poverty, cramped conditions and the lack of privacy? Are there livable spaces for children in these hotels?[3]

A room of one's own

At the hotel, each family is assigned one or two rooms, furnished with beds and some storage space, depending on the number of people being housed and the size of the room. In principle, the room constitutes a space reserved for the family, safe from intrusions and where one would expect to see some signs of appropriation. However, the term "room" has different meanings and points to certain limitations that prevent residents from settling in.

For the hotel manager, the "room" is the shelter provided to families. Rooms must meet certain criteria—in matters of security in particular—which have become more and more important in managing hotel facilities and assigning occupants, especially after the fire at the Hotêl Paris-Opéra in 2005 (Le Méner 2013b). The "room" is under the hotel manager's authority and subject to the same measures of control as the rest of the establishment, justifying, for example, unannounced visits made possible by a set of master keys. For the residents, on the other hand, the room is not only a place to sleep: it is a place to wash, to eat, but also to rest and relax, shielded from the gaze of others except family members and their guests. The room is the main space where children do their homework and play. It is a space distinct from the rest of the hotel, appropriated individually and collectively by its inhabitants, despite cramped conditions, the lack of privacy, and possible intrusions.

Children judge the quality of a room and its furnishings according to different criteria than their parents. For example, a little girl might appreciate a fold-out bed because it is adjustable—it can be used to sleep on, or it can be folded up, making more space to play or do homework more easily—whereas her parents would see it simply as a makeshift bed of poor quality.

The size of the room and its furnishings do not always determine whether a family feels at home. It is not that the surface area and furnishings of a room or a hotel are irrelevant for residents,[4] but that appropriation of the space is more generally determined by the constraints imposed on them by the hotel management.

How hotel managers view children: residents like any other?

Unlike other shelters that house families, social hotels do not offer educational services (or social services, more generally[5]). However, this does not mean that control and surveillance measures that affect livability in these establishments, especially for children, are not omnipresent.

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[3]   This article is based on several investigations of the daily life of children living in hotels (Le Méner *et al.* 2013) and more specifically on fieldwork conducted at a hotel in the first-ring suburbs of Paris, where the author lived between September 2011 and February 2013. Occasional observations were conducted in 30 or so other facilities. This work is part of an interdisciplinary research project called ENFAMS (Enfants et familles sans logement – "Children and Families Without Housing"), led by the Observatoire du Samusocial de Paris (website: www.samusocial.paris/lobservatoire) and supported by the Agence régionale de santé (ARS) Île-de-France, the Caisse nationale des allocations familiales (CNAF), the Cancéropôle Île-de-France, the Fondation de France, the Fondation MACIF, the Fondation Sanofi Espoir, the Institut national de prévention et d'éducation pour la santé (INPES), the Institut de veille sanitaire (InVS), the Institut de recherche en santé publique (IReSP), the French Interior Ministry and the Observatoire national de l'enfance en danger (ONED).

[4]   The work of Valérie Laflamme *et al.* (2008) clearly shows, for example, the daily difficulties caused by the absence of a kitchen in some establishments. Overcrowding and uncomfortable conditions are common in these accommodations.

[5]   This explains the relatively low cost of this type of accommodation—at least provided it is not considered an alternative to long-term housing (Le Méner 2013b, part 3).

For example, a hotel's rules and regulations, signed by a parent upon entering this type of establishment, apply indiscriminately to all members of the family. They list obligations and violations that refer to the running of the hotel (generally, cooking is not allowed in the rooms; neither is keeping items that are judged too cumbersome) as well as to relationships with neighbors and outside visitors. Rules and regulations are posted at the entrance of the hotel, and instructions and warnings are displayed on the doors of common areas. For example, in most hotels, the rules state that children are prohibited from decorating or rearranging their room. The restricted use of the common area for children to meet their friends is also frustrating. Adolescents and young adults feel patronized and insulted by hotel managers who inquire about their comings and goings, accuse them of certain behaviors or threaten to punish them—"You're not my father, why are you speaking to me like that?" But what bothers them most is not being able to invite friends over, which leads, more often than not, to them having to refuse outside invitations.

Video cameras, present in most establishments, in entryways and common areas, make controlling these spaces and reporting violations of the rules or customary uses easier. This is especially the case with "nuisance" caused by children in the hallways or near the hotel: noise, making a mess, damaging hotel property (walls, doorknobs, fire safety systems, etc.). As one hotel manager said on the subject of children: "If we don't wage war on them, they ruin everything!" Being reprimanded is a measure that the oldest children find childish and indiscriminate—for example, when a new receptionist, going by the book, disregards what is customary practice and chases away children playing in the courtyard on a day when there is no school.[6]

It is hardly surprising, then, that children recently arrived to France and the hotel recall that "the first word we learned was 'forbidden'": hotel managers can exercise their power against children's uses of the hotel. While the rules should not be considered the ultimate guide for living in a hotel, they serve as a resource in the hands of hotel managers[7] to reinforce their authority and enforce, if necessary, sanctions that sometimes apply to children. For hotel managers, it does not matter who is actually violating the rules. The accrual of violations applies to the "family group", in which every member is held accountable for their acts.

What might be seen as "naughty behavior" by a family is considered a "violation" of the rules by hotel managers. Children might be punished by their parents for doing something naughty when they draw on the walls of a hotel room, but it could be recorded as damage by the manager. This type of violation could count among a family's wrongdoings, when deciding, typically after an incident with the management, whether a family can stay in the establishment or whether they are to be "redirected" to another hotel. The biggest constraint that weighs on children's feeling of being at home seems to be related to the effects that their behavior has not on them (for in the eyes of the hotel they are not seen as "children") but on their whole family's stay at the hotel.

As they grow up, it becomes increasingly clear to them that they share responsibility for their family's stay in the hotel whenever they are sanctioned by the manager for "poor behavior." This is an expression often heard from hotel managers. This speaks volumes about the *a priori* vagueness and broad scope of what can be punished, and later be made to coincide with a violation of the rules. This explains why, in hotels, children monitor themselves so as not to cross the line.

The varying tolerance of hotel managers

The sum of constraints on hotel usage and on children's activities is not uniform, and the differences between establishments should not be underestimated. In particular, situations vary

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[6]   Random checks of the rooms by hotel managers complement these measures: they allow them to see what is happening, catch violations in the act (especially cooking on electric hot plates) or note damage, which can be used to exclude a family from an establishment.

[7]   What children are or are not allowed to do in these hotels varies considerably from one place to another, and from one receptionist to another.

considerably according to the level of tolerance of the hotel staff. In certain establishments, visits are authorized, or tolerated, and children can play in designated areas, or indeed in other areas. From one hotel to another, and especially from one receptionist to another, what can or cannot be done varies significantly. While some hotel owners are seen as prison guards, others are seen as being more "understanding."

For young children, being understanding translates into being "nice." For the older children, it means showing "respect." Kindness and respect apply to activities that children know are not allowed but consider acceptable and legitimate under certain circumstances: playing in the hallways on Wednesdays (when there is a half-day of school), making more noise than usual on Saturdays, staying in the hotel room alone in the case of older children, and so forth. In these circumstances, kindness and respect mean looking the other way at what would otherwise be seen as breaking the rules.

At the opposite end of the spectrum from these understanding attitudes are hotel managers who say that "putting pressure" on families is an effective technique to ensure that they "don't feel at home".

The role of the school as a central and stabilizing place

For children housed in social hotels, school is a stabilizing force in their lives, even though being part of the housing assistance system complicates their schooling and its continuance.

Part of the problem is that certain municipalities prevent these children from enrolling in their schools on the basis that they live in social hotels. Regardless of political affiliation, they insist that most of these children were sent to their municipality by Parisian helplines,[8] and therefore depend on the services of the capital. This justification is contestable, but the end result is that, in practical terms, it is nevertheless used as an effective means of dissuasion. Schools tell parents that accepting their children would necessitate opening up more classes, and therefore getting more funding to do this—an uncertain and lengthy process that means that children spend considerable amounts of time not going to school. In other cases, students from hotels are charged more for school lunches by the city (because they are not considered residents) than other children in the municipality. In some cases, public buses are deviated from their regular route, so as to not make stops near hotels to pick up and drop off schoolchildren. In other cases, these routes are cancelled during school drop-off and pick-up times. Not all municipalities, however, make things difficult for these children.

Despite these obstacles, many children continue to go to school, even when it is far from the hotel. This comes at a cost, however, namely tiredness due to lengthy travel times. In order to keep going to school, a precious and stabilizing force in their uncertain and precarious lives, they endure long journeys, often taking several forms of transportation. This travel is detrimental to their learning, which is further complicated by cramped, shared living conditions that are hardly conducive to homework.

Herein lies one of the key difficulties of life in a social hotel: residents are forced to protect themselves against the effects of residential instability. Living in a hotel means knowing that one day you will move—or, as is often the case, be forced to move—but without knowing when. Consequently, it is important to have stable places outside the hotel and the neighborhood, even if they may not survive a forced move. The school becomes the first such stable place for children in their daily lives. Parents try to keep their children in schools where they feel happy, and where they have developed attachments, even at the cost of exhausting journeys.

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[8]   In 2011, the *pôle d'hébérgement et de reservation hôtelière* (accommodation and social-hotel booking hub, which centralizes the Paris 115 emergency telephone number for homeless people and other helplines, as well as the neighboring Seine-Saint-Denis 115 service) run by the Paris Samusocial (a non-governmental humanitarian emergency service) directed 15% of people and families to housing in Paris, 55% to the first-ring suburbs of Paris, and 30% to the outer suburbs (Samusocial de Paris 2012).

School is also much more than just a place to learn, as it brings the children some respite: children are treated like children there. It is a place to learn and play, but also to be with friends whom they cannot easily see outside of school. School is also a place where they can confide in other children or their teachers about the problems they have, especially at the hotel. School gives children access to different worlds and activities that they consider important. Class trips, extracurricular activities offered by the school on off-days, often at affordable prices, or even free of charge, are highly valued. Also, woven into school life are means of mutual support involving networks of activists and neighbors, including teachers and parents,[9] and sometimes including personal help. It is not rare, for example, for children who live far from school to stay at a classmate's house during school breaks, on weekends, or sometimes even during the week.

School relationships are important for children of all social backgrounds. But they are of greater significance here because of the conditions associated with living in a hotel. Relationships that are developed and maintained are magnified as a condition of stability, even partial, in a life dominated by the unpredictability that comes with living in a social hotel.

Unpredictability defines life in a hotel; trying to limit the occurrence and impact of unexpected events becomes a family affair. To avoid the wrath of ill-intentioned hotel managers, children refrain from undertaking certain activities, sometimes at the cost of feeling cooped up. This restriction of the family space to the hotel—where they are together but not "at home"—is countered only by outside relationships, built first and foremost around school.

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[9] Such as RESF (Réseau éducation sans frontières, or "Education Without Borders Network") (Lafaye and de Blic 2011).

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