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YSP Podcast Transcript: Episode 019. How to deal with pets in strata buildings - Dr Emma Power

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Amanda Farmer: Hello and welcome. I'm Amanda Farmer and this is Your Strata Property. Today, we're joined by Dr. Emma Power, a senior research fellow at the Western Sydney University.

Emma is an urban cultural geographer who researches housing, home, aging and human-animal relations. Emma has a particular focus on the everyday practices of home-making, neighbouring and the governance of everyday life within the home.

Emma is currently working on her DECRA fellowship, the project: 'aging, home and housing security among single asset-poor older women' investigates how housing policy, governance, and ongoing housing mobility inform how single asset-poor older women create and maintain a sense of home and security.

Other research examines companion animals and community making, and the governance of companion animals in urban Australia, including in strata apartments through tenancy policy. Today, I'm delighted to welcome Dr. Emma Power. Welcome, Emma.

Dr. Emma Power: Hi Amanda, thanks for having me.

Amanda Farmer: Thanks for being with us, Emma. Now, as we can tell from your bio, your area of expertise, or perhaps one of your areas of expertise, is companion animals in communities, including in strata communities. So that's the topic for today's discussion, and I'll start Emma by asking you: why is the keeping of animals such a critical issue for people living in strata?

Dr. Emma Power: Look, I think keeping pets is important in Australia generally, and that's a really good point to start with. Over 60% of Australian households actually include a companion animal – cats and dogs are the most popular of those – and it's really interesting if you look at the nature of those relationships. If we go back to the 1950s, people thought of their pets as simply pets: dogs tended to be kept outside the home and they tended to be given a name like 'Fido' or something that was very dog specific.

But if we fast-forward to today, we find that dogs and cats are increasingly kept inside the home and they're increasingly being given names that we might give a human. For example, I've got a dog called 'Louie', and I used to have a dog called 'Patty' – these are names that we could give to a person.

And there has been some research by Adrian Franklin, a Professor of Sociology down in the University of Tasmania, which shows that in Australia, 88% of households actually consider their pets to be family members. So these sorts of things show us just how significant pets are in Australia generally, and if we look in a strata context, the issue that we have is that many strata apartments actually have very restrictive laws around pet-keeping, or by-laws around pet-keeping, which make it very difficult for people to keep their pets in apartments.

For people who own apartments, it makes it more difficult potentially to on-sell their apartments, it drastically reduces the potential audience for them and people that they can sell their apartment to... there's automatically 60% of households that are potentially ineligible to actually purchase or rent into that apartment.

Amanda Farmer: And talking about those statistics, which I think are amazing, 60% of people having animals in their home: we also regularly, in the sector, talk about the percentage of people who are going to be living in strata in the future, and you hear different figures but I think at the moment, something like in 20 years time, 50% of us are going to be living in strata in New South Wales, so when you combine those percentages, it really is a critical issue for how people who have animals that are, as you say 'part of their family', are going to fit into those communities.

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Dr. Emma Power: Absolutely, and there's a lot of research that shows that pets bring many benefits both to the individuals who keep them and to the community more broadly. So for individuals, pet-keeping is associated with better health outcomes, so people tend to be happier and healthier; if they have a heart attack, for example, they'll tend to recover quicker than someone who doesn't have a pet, and part of this is because pets – particularly dogs – get us outside walking, bringing those health benefits as they go.

But pets can also bring benefits to communities as well. So my research in strata communities confirmed a lot of research that's been done in low-density suburbs in Australia and basically showed that people who have pets meet other people, through their pets. They tend to think that their community is a friendlier place; they tend to have stronger connections within their local community; and they tend to take part in more reciprocal activities, so they might help to look after other people's pets... they might be more likely to share sugar over the back fence, just simply because every time you get out and about with a pet, you do bump into people and you do start to know others in your local neighborhood.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, I can definitely see that in my own neighbourhood, and we're not a neighbourhood of strata apartments – not at the moment anyway – but there's certainly the pets in the street, you see people bonding and getting to know each other over having those pets.

Dr. Emma Power: The fascinating thing that people can't really explain at the moment is that people who have pets also tend to be more engaged civically, so they might take part in more community organising, community events, and no one is really sure why that is, but that's an interesting fact as well.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, that is interesting. So Emma you mentioned briefly by-laws that govern the keeping of pets in strata buildings, and you've talked about the real benefits that having a flexible or welcoming pet policy can have on the residents in a strata community, so what does a good pet policy look like for a strata building?

Dr. Emma Power: There are a few dimensions to a good strata policy in relation to pet keeping. One of those, at a very basic level, is that it actually acknowledges the important role that pets play in people's lives.

They're not just animals that live alongside us, they're often family members and also important confidantes for people – for children and for adults – and as we start moving towards a society where there's going to be more people living alone, pets can play a really important role in companionship within the home as well. So a good strata policy will recognise that and see them as core members of the family, rather than just as objects that we happen to own. A clear strata policy will also set out a clear approval process, so that it's very clear what people need to do if they wish to keep a pet and how you'd actually go about getting your pet approved, and it will also set out very clearly what the responsibilities are – for both people and for their pets – when they're living in a building, and that's because we need to make sure that if people are going to live with pets, that the animal gets along well with other people in the building as well. So, just like you wouldn't want a neighbor putting rubbish out on the front step or playing their radio or television too loudly, where we've got strata by-laws that help us to deal with those types of issues, we also need to have ways of managing any issues that might arise, and also making sure that people are aware of what the expectations are so that they know if their pet is doing the right thing.

Amanda Farmer: I find in my experience, those buildings that do have that clear approval process as you recommend, have far less problems when it comes to pets because, first of all, they don't have that blanket ban which at the moment is possible and is legal to have in buildings – and we can talk about the model by-laws and the new law if you want to get into that – but they have that initially, yes, you are allowed to keep a pet so “we're saying yes, we're not saying no, if you take the following steps, and these are the steps set out in our approval process: make your application, and your application should contain a, b and c”, and there's certainly a standard procedure that I know that we adopt when we're drafting those kinds of by-laws, and I think that the process then runs quite smoothly and reasonably.

Dr. Emma Powers: That's right, and there's a lot of anecdotal evidence at least, that when you have various restrictive laws, such as blanket bans, that people actually keep pets anyway, because of how important those animals are to them. And so we say to

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people when we're talking about this issue, if you have a strata policy in relation to pets, one that allows pet and sets out those rights and responsibilities, that actually provides with a way of managing the issue in a way that can benefit all parties, rather than finding that you've actually got 20 animals living in your building, you don't know who they are, and there's no easy way of actually setting out those requirements. Another thing that's important as well is making sure that there aren't the sorts of laws that are unnecessarily restrictive, or that can potentially create problems in your building, and a good example of by-laws that restrict the size of animals...

For a long time in New South Wales, one of the model by-laws has said that small dogs will be allowed, and in my research, I've interviewed a lot of people who live in buildings where the model by-laws specify that dogs must be under 10kg. Now that's a very problematic rule because there are some breeds of small dog that are actually highly inappropriate for apartment living. They can be very high energy; they can be much more likely to make noise; and if they're not living with someone who can meet those energy needs, they can actually cause problems in the building. Whereas there are some very large dogs that are very calm if they have a good run every day, and they'll be very happy to lie down and sleep for the other 23 hours.

And so setting those sorts of laws can be highly problematic, and I think it's very important that buildings are aware of that, and that they think not about the size of an animal, but about the appropriateness of that animal, and how the owner, or the person that's going to keep that animal, can meet the specific needs that that animal has.

Amanda Farmer: Yes a really good point, and something for buildings to incorporate into their approval process. So don't go asking questions like "what size is the animal, how much does it weigh?", instead asking "what type of dog is it and are these dogs suited to strata apartments?"

Dr. Emma Power: And more importantly than that, how is the person going to meet the needs of that dog? So, someone who's going to get a dog out and take them on a walk every day, that's something that's very important; that's something that will help to make sure that dog doesn't get bored, and that it's a good neighbour within the strata building.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, sounds good. Okay, Emma, could you share a story with us – and this might be something that's arisen in your research – about owners or particular buildings that are doing well in this area?

Dr. Emma Power: Yes, I visited quite a number of buildings where people were getting on really well with their pets – and I'm going to focus on dogs here because that's been the primary focus of my research – the buildings where I think it was most successful were buildings where there was a public space – a community garden or something like that in the building – where the dogs were allowed to be taken to have a walk and that type of thing.

And the reason that this worked really well was because it became a really important community meeting space. Many people said to me that before they had a dog, they didn't actually know anyone in their building at all: people would walk past each other, and ignore each other in the halls, that type of thing.

But once they had a dog, and particularly when they were using those communal garden spaces, many people would stop by and say hello. So it might just have been a simple hello as they went past, but they also often stopped to have a chat about the dog for a couple of minutes, you know: 'how's your dog going today, very cute puppy' that type of thing.

And people started to feel like their buildings were much friendly places. So lots of instances of people who didn't own pets stopping by in those gardens, to have a chat after work and actually enjoying the opportunity to meet other people that they live with and to pat a dog [laughing], that type of thing as well.

Amanda Farmer: I guess there are lessons there for developers who are planning these communities, and you said when you started that we need to think about the value of our apartments, and when we go to sell, who are we selling to?

Well 60% of people are going to have animals so the same concept applies to developers who are planning for the future and

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wanting to get the most out of their development, well let's plan these open spaces so that people can have a place to come with their pets and have that sense of community and interaction.

Dr. Emma Power: That's right, and that can happen at a building scale, so you can see a garden within a building, but it can also happen at the neighborhood scale as well, so if we look at some of the bigger communities that are being built – there's Jackson's Landing down at Pyrmont in Sydney, there's Victoria Park in Zetland, Waterloo in Sydney as well – those types of neighborhoods have also got parks that are between the apartment buildings as well, and those are great opportunities for people to actually get out and particularly to do off-leash exercising for dogs, and these are the sorts of spaces and activities that will help to make sure that dogs and people can get along well as well.

You don't need a backyard to exercise a dog, dogs that are stuck in backyards get very bored as well, so it's something that we need to be incorporating into planning more widely, so that everyone can get to those types of spaces, and there's really interesting research about how far people will walk to get to a space, and that gives us indications of how much of these types of spaces we need. So I think that it's something like people will walk 5 minutes to get to a leashed dog park, but they'll walk for up to 30 minutes if they have the opportunity of taking their dog to an off-leash park.

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Amanda Farmer: Yes, interesting. Alright, Emma, as much as we don't like to talk about problems, we need to talk about problems so that we can talk about solutions. So what are some common pet problems that you've noticed people are facing in strata and what's worked best in terms of overcoming them?

Dr. Emma Power: So the 2 big issues that people are concerned about when they think about allowing pets into an apartment building are: the issue of noise and the issue of mess. So whether it's dogs barking, or going to the toilet basically.

And the important thing to remember with both of these issues is that there's a range of strata by-laws that are relevant to those types of issues. So the same rules that mean that you can't play your television loudly are the same ones that are applied to a dog that's barking, for arguments sake.

We can also remember the other sets of rules or laws that operate around dogs are those that operate at a local council level. So in some ways, people who live alongside other people's pets in apartments are actually far more protected than people who live in a detached house in a low-density suburb, because not only do they have the local council that they can go to if there are dramas, they also have the level of strata that they can use to deal with it within their actual building.

Amanda Farmer: Just on that point of council, which I'm interested in, do you have any experience of how buildings have used the local council to help them with a pet problem?

Dr. Emma Power: No, I don't have any specific examples of that, but it does tend to proceed in the same way that it would in a low-density suburb. So if people get in contact with the council, there's usually a process that they'll go through. The council, for example, will send the person a calendar and ask them to record the times and days when they hear this noise, and then it proceeds from mediation through to other sorts of requirements and penalties that councils can place on people.

Amanda Farmer: Okay, that's an interesting avenue. Thanks for that one.

Dr. Emma Power: And one I think, in terms of dealing with these issues at a local level in a strata apartment, I had some really interesting feedback from people who live with dogs, and one of those is that often they don't actually know that their dog is

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causing an issue because the time that it does it, is a time when they're not actually at home. So one of the first steps that I actually suggest to people is that they use those neighbouring skills that we all have, to let their neighbour know that there is a problem; give that person the opportunity to actually address the issue. Yes, interesting. Alright, Emma, as much as we don't like to talk about problems, we need to talk about problems so that we can talk about solutions. So what are some common pet problems that you've noticed people are facing in strata and what's worked best in terms of overcoming them?

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The vast majority of pet owners are responsible pet owners, and they want to be able to keep their dog living with them because it is such an important animal to them, and if they're aware that there's an issue, they'll take those necessary steps to try and train the dog so that it doesn't bark, or make sure that it gets the exercise and entertainment that it needs so that it is stimulated and it doesn't cause those types of problems.

Amanda Farmer: Great, thank you, all good points. Now Emma, some of our listeners will be people living in strata, perhaps with pets or wanting to have a pet, or maybe wanting to buy into a scheme that has an unfriendly pet policy... what are some steps that they can take and maybe some quick wins that they can get on the board to get started with solving those pet problems today?

Dr. Emma Power: So if someone's looking at buying into a building that has a policy that's restrictive to pets, they're going to need to get talking with the strata committee early, because – I mean, you're the strata lawyer – I believe you require something like a 75% support to change one of the by-laws, so it isn't something that can simply be changed based on a simple request.

Amanda Farmer: Yes.

Dr. Emma Power: It's something that you need to get a vast majority of the strata owners on board to be able to change.



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If people are looking at how they can get pets approved though, I would say: talking to people about why they want to keep their pets; perhaps introducing the pets to people; talking about the benefits that pets can potentially bring into their community; how they're going to live with their pet in a way that's responsible and will ensure that they get on well with other people.

Something that works very well in a rental context, that might transfer well to a strata context, is a pet CV: where you develop a document that has got a photograph of your animal to introduce them; how you get on with them every day; they walk once or twice a day, this is the training that they've received; this is what they mean to you in your life; these are the times that you will be home with the animal; you might even have references from people who lived with that animal in the past, maybe neighbours from another building or suburb that you've lived in, that show that this is an animal that is well adapted to living in that type of space.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, I love that and I have actually seen that done very well and, as you say, when we're talking about pets and pet owners seeing their pets as part of their family, then, of course, that's what you would do: it's an application for a position, just like anybody else might apply for a position. I think it's a great idea.

Dr. Emma Power: Absolutely, and if people are having issues themselves, where they have a dog barking, for example, there's many places that they can go to get help with that issue, so one of the great sources of advice is actually people that live in strata buildings who have dealt with that issue before. They can also go to their vet and get referrals to animal behaviourists and so on, who can come into their home environment and give them tips on how they can improve the situation. Most of the time, it's a very simple issue of making sure that the animal has sufficient entertainment and stimulation throughout the day.

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Amanda Farmer: Yes.

Dr. Emma Power: But you know, I don't want to overemphasise the negative. The vast majority of animals, as we've said 60% of Australian households have animals, most of those we don't even know that they're there, and it's important to remember that when we're thinking about this issue.

Amanda Farmer: Yes. Just as an aside, I am currently the proud owner of 7 new fish in my home for my 3 ½-year-old boy, and that's a bit of a practice run for the dog that he keeps asking for, so we're seeing how he go with the fish first [laughing].

And I'm sure my neighbours have no idea that I have them.

Dr. Emma Power: That's right, and I've been talking a lot about dogs because that's where my research is focused but the pets that people keep are quite diverse: from budgies to fish, to cats, through to dogs as well, and there's very different ages, very different temperaments, very different needs. So it's really about making sure that the person, the animal and the strata apartment are well matched, rather than saying an animal just simply will or will not work.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, definitely. Okay Emma, a personal question I like to ask all of my new guests. What books have had the greatest impact on you and why? But you know, I don't want to overemphasise the negative. The vast majority of animals, as we've

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Amanda Farmer: Yes, definitely. Okay Emma, a personal question I like to ask all of my new guests. What books have had the greatest impact on you and why?

Dr. Emma Power: Well, when I'm thinking about this question, I'm not sure if you meant in relation to my research or not, but I'm going to focus on that because that's what we're talking about today.

Amanda Farmer: That's a very academic approach. I think that's exactly what Dr. Hazel Easthope said when she came on the show.

Whatever you like.

Dr. Emma Power: The book that first comes to mind when I'm thinking about that in relation to my research is actually a joke book that I was given a number of years ago. A friend was going to some of the great art galleries of Europe, and in the gift shop came across this book that was called: 'Dogs Allowed' and then it said 'No Dogs Allowed, We Are Already In', and the book is full of pictures of famous art through time that include dogs, and it shows dogs in all sorts of settings: it shows dogs used as symbols of status across time; it shows dogs also in domestic settings, so Flemish paintings from the 15th century that include dogs in very everyday settings within kitchens, within sitting rooms and that type of thing. I think this book is really fascinating – you know, it is a joke – but it's fascinating because it shows us the very, very significant place that animals have had in our lives for a very, very long time. People tend to think of this as a modern issue. You know, we're talking about strata apartments, and in Australia, we think of this as a very contemporary issue, but if we go back through time, these animals are everywhere, and if we look at countries in Europe for example, pets are all through apartment buildings.

It's not so much a matter of whether they're allowed or not, they're simply already there and they've been there for centuries.

Amanda Farmer: Yes, and it's a cultural shift really, and you say it's not something unusual: first of all, it's not unusual to be living in apartment buildings throughout Europe, they don't have that same concept that we might have as Australians of having your quarter-acre block, and going hand in hand with that is that you can still have your apartment and your animal too, and that's a cultural change I think, and it's something that we are on the cusp of.

Dr. Emma Power: Absolutely.

Amanda Farmer: Okay now Emma, how do listeners find out more about you and is there anything else you want to add before we wrap up?

Dr. Emma Power: So listeners can follow me on my Twitter page: @DrEmmaPower. I also have got a couple of articles, one at theconversation.com, one of which looks at this issue of pets in strata, so if any listeners want to follow that up, that would be a good spot.

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Amanda Farmer: Yes, I know exactly the article you're talking about, and I will certainly put a link to that in our show notes, so listeners can go to our web page and click right on that and be taken to Emma's article which is a really good outline of what we've talked about in depth today.

Excellent. Okay, thanks so much for being on the show Emma, you are a font of knowledge about animals, and animals in strata, and I'm sure our listeners have got some great tips out of what you've had to offer today. Thank you very much.

Dr. Emma Power: Thanks for having me, it was lovely to chat.

Amanda Farmer: My pleasure.

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