

# **INVOLVING SENIORS IN DEVELOPING PLANNING GUIDELINES FOR AGED PERSONS' DWELLINGS – A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH**

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Hames Sharley WA and Council on The Ageing (WA) this year undertook a commission from the Western Australian Department of Planning and Infrastructure to develop a set of planning guidelines for the location, siting and design of aged persons' dwellings. An interesting aspect of the commission was the multi disciplinary nature of the team which included an architect and urban geographer, a social policy and research consultant, a library information specialist and an MBA. This paper provides a summary of the commission and looks at some of the issues involved.

One very important study finding to mention from the outset relates to the diverse range of issues and opinions associated with seniors housing. There are different opinions between researchers, industry representatives, government agencies and of course seniors themselves. Anyone who proclaims to have been able to distill the issues associated with seniors housing into a tidy package of information that applies across the board seriously fails to understand the area fully.

Our task in this project was to look at the psychological, sociological, physiological and economic characteristics associated with ageing and draw out the links between these issues and the siting, planning and design of seniors housing.

The time frame was extremely short and considering the potential breadth of the study we chose to tackle the project as a mixture of literature review and consultation where the two streams would run in tandem. Consultations were held with the relevant Government stakeholders and interested seniors and seniors groups. Local Governments were also invited to participate.

Information and knowledge gathered from the two streams were combined into an issues paper that described the central themes and needs associated with seniors housing. These issues have been presented at seniors' forums and distributed to stakeholders for comment.

Comments were many and varied – displaying a richness and diversity reflecting that of seniors themselves. While the Issues Paper elicited much positive comment, challenging comments included questioning why the location, siting and design of seniors housing should be the subject of guidelines at all and some extreme views on “granny flats”, both pro and con.

Information within the issues paper was then used as the basis for writing a set of robust guidelines to help planners, designers, developers, builders and individuals involved in the provision of seniors housing make better decisions about locating, siting and designing this particular form of housing. The following is a summary of the major findings.

The key factors impacting on the provision of seniors housing include <sup>1</sup>:

- Growth in the number of older people
- Rise in home ownership
- Decline in supply of social housing
- Growth of single living

As we age we grow toward a higher level of dependency, some more so than others, as our biological characteristics begin to alter. The primary areas of change and the manner in which they impact on our relationship with the built environment can be summarised in the following table <sup>2</sup>:

<b>BIOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTIC</b>	<b>RESPONSE TO BUILT ENVIRONMENT</b>
Visual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need increased levels of illumination (2-3 time higher than younger adults)</li> <li>• Reduce glare impact</li> <li>• Contrast colour to enable objects to be seen against background</li> <li>• Appropriately sized and coloured signage</li> </ul>
Auditory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Block out competing noise such as traffic noise</li> <li>• Use visual emergency warning (can't always hear warning sounds)</li> <li>• Provide visual display telephones</li> </ul>
Olfactroy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to smell diminishes over 70 years of age therefore not so easily ably to smell electrical overheating, smoke or gas fumes</li> <li>• Should use gas detectors</li> <li>• Use timers on electrical devices</li> </ul>
Tactile perception	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Owing to slower withdrawal reflex older people are at risk of burns from hot water services</li> <li>• Should use anti scalding valves</li> <li>• Stoves should have front mounted control dials (very high incident of apparel fires among older people)</li> <li>• Magnetic induction cooker tops can be used</li> </ul>
Body steadiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need grab rails</li> <li>• Provide appropriate ramps</li> <li>• Difficulty in reaching objects</li> </ul>

- Less ability to bend down
  - Pavements should be even
  - Non slip surfaces should be used
- Nueromuscular
- Have difficulty with light switches and door handles
  - Less strength to carry objects such as groceries
  - Less ability to maneuver motor vehicles
  - Difficulty opening heavy doors
- Cognitive
- Provide visual cues to differentiate houses
  - Simplified road patterns and intersections

It became evident during our study that different people react in different ways to the thought of the biological implications of ageing. The older seniors seem to be able to embrace the issue and are prepared to talk about, in fact, expect some modifications to occur to their physical environment to help them remain independent for longer. The younger seniors seem to try and ignore the issue. Many developers will not design homes or apartments that have obvious references of future adaptability to assist with independency because they believe that the younger seniors will be 'turned off' by design features that imply a less than fully independent life in later years. The home or apartment is sold by the developer to a senior and both parties agree not to mention the property's future adaptability. We were also advised that seniors will sometimes remove modifications and accessible housing features that they do not perceive themselves as needing.

While there are many issues that impact on the location, siting and design of seniors housing we consider that the following are among the most important to consider:

### **Use of motor vehicles**

Many older people will continue to use private motor vehicles because of the convenience they offer. They will continue to drive regardless of physical, cognitive and sensory abilities. In the US, 40% of people too disabled to use public transport actually drive a car. Elderly drivers modify their driving behaviour (do not drive at night for example) to account for their impaired abilities<sup>3</sup>.

Seniors housing developments must be designed to enable the residents to use their motor vehicles safely. This includes appropriate parking provisions, roadway design, intersection design and street treatment such as lighting and landscaping.

### **High rise developments**

There seems to be no outright objection to the use of high rise buildings for housing seniors. Some researchers suggest that older people prefer to be able to walk straight out into their garden but they accept that when land is

scarce this is a luxury. When high rise buildings are developed for housing older people careful consideration needs to be given to:

- Availability of public open space at ground level
- Ability to view activity at ground level from the apartment
- Ability to have individual control over services such as air conditioning
- Site planning to avoid overlooking of adjacent low rise housing that is within the same estate

Evacuation in event of emergencies is a significant cause for concern when designing multi-level housing for elderly people. The major problems that elderly people face

include <sup>4</sup>:

- Slow movement (often assisted by frames, walking sticks and even wheel chairs)
- Most are not able to use stairs
- May not respond to alarms due to hearing impairment
- Orientation difficulty, especially in an emergency situation

### **The decision to integrate or segregate**

Housing developments for older people can be, and most believe should be, integrated into the broader community <sup>5</sup>. There are many thoughts on the strengths and weaknesses of integration however the overall view is that integration should be encouraged. The concept of walled and gated 'aged segregated communities' is not regarded as good urban design or social policy.

Some studies show that age segregated communities (such as retirement communities) provide greater opportunities for social interaction. These studies are however countered by other studies that show social characteristics such as income, gender, health, marital status and ethnicity have more of a bearing on social interaction <sup>6</sup>.

### **The importance of location**

Most argue that housing for older people should not be located in the newer peripheral suburbs because this can lead to isolation and high dependence on the motor vehicle. One argument for locating housing communities for older people in peripheral suburbs is that it is in this environment that they have the best chance of living in an intergenerational environment (because many young families live in these areas). Lower land costs is of course the major driver for people living in peripheral suburbs therefore there are important socioeconomic and community support issues associated with developing communities in peripheral suburbs.

Urban design and the well being of older people are said to be intrinsically linked <sup>7</sup>. Most suggest that shops and community support facilities should be

within easy walking distance of older persons' housing developments (this is of course a very good general urban design principle, irrespective of age).

Essential service providers such as doctors, chemists and the local chaplain are the 'gatekeepers' for older people<sup>8</sup>. They are often the first port of call for advice on a whole range of problems. This is a very important part of the social interaction gained from convenient access to community services.

### **Fear of crime**

The general consensus is that fear increases with age<sup>9</sup>. Elder people tend to live alone therefore there is a higher fear of crime. The less people living in a household the less defensible the space becomes (or at least that is the perception). Attention to crime prevention strategies is seen by some as being the biggest issue with respect to housing for the elderly. This includes designing environments that take into account the principles of natural surveillance, creation of a defensive space, and target hardening.

There are arguments however that elderly people are not as vulnerable to crime because they are<sup>8</sup>:

- More likely to spend time at home
- More likely to socialize in safer situations
- Take greater precautions against crime
- Restrict their activities to avoid crime (eg less likely to use public transport after dark)

### **The concept of ageing in place**

There are two concepts associated with ageing in place. The first deals with designing and locating seniors' housing so that the gradual move from total independence to partial dependence can be accommodated without the need for a change of address<sup>10 11 12</sup>.

The second deals with a much more complex issue. The world wide trend in developed countries is moving toward providing health care in the homes of older people. The major aim is to reduce the costs associated with building large residential care facilities. Home care (usually associated with a nursing home) can now be delivered to residents in their own home and the home needs to be designed to enable this to occur.

### **Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs)**

In many older well established inner suburbs there is a naturally occurring potential to develop a retirement community of grouped housing<sup>13</sup>. Several older residents can amalgamate their properties and develop a new cluster of houses that can be occupied by others in the neighbourhood of similar age. When sufficient of these smaller developments occur it is then possible for health care providers to establish a base within the neighbourhood from which to dispense cost effective home care. The freed-up land can be used to develop other similar clusters.

One very good example is the redevelopment of government supplied social housing. The current trend is to demolish older flats and government housing and redevelop the sites into grouped dwellings. In many of these neighbourhoods the residents may have all grown into old age together and it would seem logical to redevelop the area into appropriate housing for the older residents.

This paper is a very brief overview of the study undertaken by Hames Sharley and COTA (WA) however we hope that it demonstrates that the designing and planning of seniors housing is far more complex than simply providing wide passageways and allowing for grab rails to be installed in bathrooms. To achieve a successful outcome we must recognize that the right combination of location, siting and planning is achieved. It is desirable that a multi disciplinary team be involved where the social, psychological and biological implications of design and planning decisions can be discussed and understood. It is also essential that the views and needs of seniors are acknowledged and reflected in the design.

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