



# What would an age-friendly city look like?

As the world's population grows older and more urban, cities around the world must decide how to adapt

by Alice Grahame

Main image: Respect for the Aged Day in Tokyo. According to UN figures, the number of over 60s worldwide is set to double by 2050, rising to 2.1bn. Photograph: Franck Robichon/EPA

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Wed 10 Oct 2018 02.30 EDT

he first year was a bit like the first year of a marriage - but with 25 people rather than just one." That is how Jude Tisdall describes joining a co-housing development purpose-built for women over 50.

**T**isdall, an arts consultant in her early 60s, moved into the New Ground complex in north London just over a year ago.

“I had been mulling over how I wanted to live,” she says. “I’m divorced - my daughters and grandchildren were grown up. I didn’t want to get older on my own. It can be harsh living in London as you age.”

Tisdall, an arts consultant, was lucky to secure one of the 26 apartments in the development, just a short stroll from the high street and tube station. Its L-shaped design, with a single entrance that takes residents past the common room, is intended to foster casual social interaction, and there is a communal garden and space to cook and share meals together. Residents are aged between 50 and 90.

The development is managed by the Older Women’s Co-housing Community (Owch), set up to bring the principle of co-housing communities established in Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands to the UK. It took 18 years to secure a housing association partner and a site, by which time many of the original group had found alternatives or died.



A design session for New Ground, left, and the communal kitchen of the completed project. Photographs: ©PTE/Caroline Teo

“There are not many options for the old in the UK,” says Maria Brenton, a founding member. “One-third of over 65s live on their own, which can cause loneliness and ill health - and two thirds of those are older women. Older people I have researched don’t want to live in institutions like a care home. And often say they don’t want to end up like their parents - isolated and lonely.”

With the world's population getting older and more urban, the needs of older residents will play an increasingly important part in the shaping of cities. According to UN figures, the number of over 60s is set to double by 2050, rising from 962m in 2017 to 2.1bn. Already in Akita, Japan, one in three people is over 65. All cities will need to adapt to meet this massive demographic change.

Currently more than 700 cities in 39 countries are signed up to the World Health Organization's global network of age-friendly cities and communities to promote healthy active ageing and improve the quality of life for people over 60. Membership doesn't necessarily denote an age-friendly city, but that it is committed to listening and working with its older population to create one.

Prof Chris Phillipson, of Manchester University's Institute for Collaborative Research in Ageing and co-editor of *Age-friendly Cities and communities: A Global Perspective*, works with WHO to evaluate the programme's progress, and says ageing populations need to be part of the debate about urban development: "New approaches are needed which link the advantages of living in cities with the needs and aspirations of older people themselves."



## Building homes to grow old in

One imperative is building new houses - or upgrading existing ones - to meet the needs of older residents, says Julia Park, a lead architect with Levitt Bernstein and co-author of *Age-friendly Housing*. "We have traditionally defaulted to retiring to the suburbs or the coast, but better public transport and more local facilities make cities a more logical choice. Apartment living makes a great deal of sense for older people too."

The vast majority of homes were not built with the needs of older people in mind. "Wherever you go in the world, there are small houses with lots of steps. Ageing hasn't been factored in; older people had to accept it that they couldn't go out and participate in civic life or visit friends and family."

Just under a decade ago the UK government published the first housing our ageing population panel for innovation (Happi) report to set design principles for older people, based on examples of best practice from across Europe. Since then there have been some major advances in the quality of UK housing design, partly in response to demand from older people themselves. "The new generation of over 55s are baby boomers who are



much more vocal than their parents and grandparents were,” says Park. “We don’t expect to be ignored or told that ‘it’s bath-time’.”

People approaching old age now are also more design-aware. “They are staying younger in outlook for longer. Until recently, specialised housing for older people was a last resort; we are finally starting to see options that are tempting us to move from choice.”

Park points to the Ørestad development in Copenhagen as an example of stylish, practical age-friendly housing that caters for high levels of need. Classed as a retirement home, the living costs of Ørestad’s residents are subsidised by the municipality. The prominent and colourful building contains flexible social spaces, as well as a ground-floor cafe, hair salon and dental surgery that are open to the public. “People like to mix and feel connected. As many of the residents are living with advanced dementia, getting out is difficult - inviting the public in is a logical and positive response,” says Park.



The Ørestad development in Copenhagen is classed as a retirement home but is also an example of stylish, practical housing. Photographs: Alamy/Torben Eskerod

The interior is designed to help with wayfinding and apartment entrances are customised so people can easily identify their own homes. Classic Danish furniture from the 1940s-60s give a familiar feel. “The architects [JJW Arkitekter] have created a light, clean, contemporary environment that avoids any sense of stigmatising or patronising its residents, instead making it clear that they are valued,” says Park. “We all fear dementia - this is a place that shows how good design and good care can reduce that fear.”

Most people won’t move in old age, meaning adapting existing housing stock is also important. Programmes to insulate and improve the energy efficiency of homes benefit

older people. Schemes like Homeshare bring together people with a room to spare and people needing accommodation, in return for companionship and around 10 hours a week of agreed tasks. Accessory dwelling units, formerly known as granny flats, are another way of creating multi-generational accommodation without having to move house.

Lighting and heating can be controlled remotely, and smart toilets are increasingly being specified to improve hygiene and increase independence. Ceiling-mounted cameras can detect changes in an elderly person's walking pattern, which can be an early indicator of stroke, while devices fitted to toilet bowls can detect urine for diabetes. Older people may be among those who benefit most from smart city innovations such as the Kalasatama Smart City project in Helsinki. The Kotisatama senior housing community and its 80 residents serve as a testbed for new and pilot age-friendly services before they are rolled out to the rest of the district.



The quality of the environment outside the home has a huge bearing on an older person's quality of life. Joe Oldman, Age UK's policy manager for housing and transport, says paying attention to the built environment can make the difference between someone participating in life, and them being isolated at home. "Accessible public transport, level pavements, places to sit, the removal of trip hazards, good street lighting and public toilets are all vital components to encouraging older people to stay engaged with their local community."

New York City has added 1,500 new benches and 3,500 new or improved bus shelters in the last decade, in consultation with senior centres on their placement - such as within 250 metres from hospitals or community facilities. In the UK, 300 businesses in Nottingham have signed up to the city's Take a Seat scheme, identifying shops where older and disabled people are welcome to rest with a "We are age-friendly" sticker.

In Nottingham, 300 businesses have signed up to the Take a Seat scheme, which identifies shops where older and disabled people are welcome. Photographs: Clare Routledge/ Nottingham City Council

With older people less likely to drive, affordable, accessible public transport is crucial to an age-friendly city. In January a UK study of 18,000 over-50s found that free public transport resulted in fewer cases of depression, after researchers tracked changes in mental health before and after people became eligible for free travel.



Natalie Turner of the UK charity, the Centre for Ageing Better, believes cities need inclusive transport strategies. “Good transport links help everyone, whatever their age, to access vital services such as doctors and social and cultural amenities, so that they can be involved in city life, stay independent and keep up social connections.”



Many cities, including Washington DC and Bilbao in northern Spain, have identified improving access to transport as a cornerstone of their ageing strategies. Proposals include making bus drivers aware of the needs of vulnerable community members, maintaining bus stops and pavements, and ensuring route information is accessible.



Wheels for Wellbeing offers sessions on specially adapted bikes, encouraging users to keep mobile, independent and fit. Photographs: Ben Gold/Wheels for Wellbeing

Innovative schemes are making cycling more accessible to older people. In south London, disability charity Wheels for Wellbeing offers sessions on specially adapted bikes, encouraging users to keep mobile, independent and fit. For those who no longer



have the physical ability, Cycling Without Age - piloted in Copenhagen and now in 40 countries - enables the elderly to go out in tricycle rickshaws pedalled by volunteers.



**Participation**  
An age-friendly city should provide opportunities for people to participate in public life and contribute to their communities, through paid or voluntary work. Evidence shows doing so increases social contact and good health. In Hong Kong the elder friendly employment practice helps older people to continue flexible employment post-retirement, through initiatives such as employment fairs and an online job-matching.

Roger Battersby, an architectural consultant to PRP Architects, specialising in age-friendly housing in China, says many members of the country's growing population of over-65s are employed by local government in landscaping services. "One sees armies of older people tending the urban landscapes which, as a consequence, are generally of a high quality."

But Professor Chris Phillipson says an age-friendly city needs to go far beyond work, housing and infrastructure to take in global factors such as climate change and pollution, to which older people are particularly vulnerable.



Unless the bigger picture is tackled, Phillipson says, we are likely to see an increasingly unequal society in the future, with the elderly among those bearing the brunt. "There will be a significant number of people in their 50s still renting. One-third of over 50s don't own property. They will have rented for a long time and won't have equity or savings. Gentrification has also had an appalling effect on older people."

One example is Berlin, where low-income flats are being sold to private developers, leading to rent increases that have made many areas unaffordable to older people.

“We need policies that have a real impact on the urban development that is taking place,” says Phillipson. “If the environment is hostile to people on low incomes, that impacts disproportionately on older residents. Cities must not think about housing and town planning policies in isolation. Age-friendliness needs to be part of the debate about urban development.”

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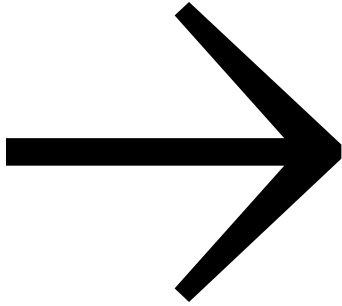
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