Introduction

Housing needs of older people

> The need to provide housing for older people is critical. People are living longer lives and the proportion of older people in the population is increasing. ... Offering older people a better choice of accommodation to suit their changing needs can help them live independently for longer, feel more connected to their communities and help reduce costs to the social care and health systems. Therefore, an understanding of how the ageing population affects housing needs is something to be considered [by local authorities] from the early stages of plan-making through to decision-taking.
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> (UK Planning Practice Guidance, Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government [MHCLG], 2019a)

What are the housing needs of older people? Must housing be designed differently to meet these needs? Should designers and developers of housing look beyond 'needs' and attend to aspirations also? What would it be like if everyone could expect a comfortable level of retirement-living, or at the very least, exercise the right to occupy a good-quality home in later life? The paragraph quoted earlier from UK government guidance to local authority planning departments implies that existing housing stock is not fit for purpose or that there is a lack of appropriate housing options. But should we be designing new forms of housing targeted at older people, or should all housing be age-friendly? How do we avoid ghettoising older people and mitigate the risks of isolation in later life? How can the design of mainstream housing be improved to better accommodate older people and help assure an appropriate quality of life?

Evidence shows that over the course of the 20th century we have succeeded in extending life expectancies around the world, particularly within the developed economies of the Northern hemisphere. However, gerontologists have also shown that living longer does not necessarily translate to longer periods of healthy life expectancy but may result in more people experiencing sustained periods of lower life satisfaction and increased dependence on social care and others. For architects, and designers of the built environment, the growing number of older people raises new questions around inclusivity – who are we designing for, and how are they understood and consulted? – alongside a need to reflect upon the means by which designed environments can accommodate the demands of older people and help sustain positive lifestyles. Nowhere is this more acute than at home.