

Creative Housing Options and Supportive Environments

Planning for the Twenty-first Century

Law Reform Commission Seminar
16th October, 1992, Contribution by Ruth Crow

1. Home Ownership and Tenancies

For a brief period in our history the majority of Australians have been home owners, but this may not be so in the future. The economic state of our country may result in a rapid increase in older people who are renting and the equity which home owners do have may be much less. The asset rich elderly people may not be a permanent feature of our society.,

However, in Australia, today, the provision of housing for elderly people tends to be skewed to meeting the expressed "wants" of fairly affluent home owners; the white Anglo Saxons of the generation which reached adulthood in the prosperous post war years. They were able to buy their homes on low deposits and inflation enabled them to pay their homes off rather rapidly. These are the people who are asset rich today and can afford to reinvest in retirement homes. Home owners are also able to take advantage of home improvement and maintenance loans and of the home equity conversion loans to adapt their family home to suit their needs in older years.

The changes in the economy necessitates that much more attention should be given to security of tenure for tenants and for people paying off their homes. But it is not just security of tenure. Elderly people need to feel secure about being able to adapt their homes to meet any changes in their abilities to cope with living independently.

In our market orientated economy fear of decreasing the resale value of the house deters both landlords and home owners from adapting dwellings to meet the special needs of those who dwell in them, but tenants are much more affected by this than are those who own or are buying their dwelling.

Therefore :-

- i. More effective rent control and tenants rights giving greater opportunities to alter dwellings to meet special needs of elderly people.
- ii. More effective rights and responsibilities for tenants' councils so that elderly tenants can learn from each other how to adapt their homes and their rights to do this.
- iii. Local Government and the State Government Housing Ministry to expand their housing programs not only by providing more rental accommodation for elderly people but also assisting elderly tenants to negotiate with landlords about home alterations.

2. Alterations to Dwellings

Coupled with such measures on tenure is the need to update our ideas on home construction so that dwellings can be more easily altered.

For example making greater general use of prefabricated walls, cupboards, windows so that living space can be adapted to changing needs at different stages in life, including changing a single dwelling to dual occupancy or other such sharing arrangements.

Such changed building practices could also be used in the construction of group accommodation, for example in nursing homes, hostels and independent living units, enabling internal spaces to be used much more flexibly.

Therefore :-

- i. Changes in building regulations to enable use of movable modules in the construction of housing, for example, using office partitioning methods.
- ii. Making it easier to finance home alterations, giving particular weight to alterations which are needed to adapt dwellings for older people or to accommodate family members with special needs.
- iii Local Government and the Ministry of Housing to give special encouragement to experiments in housing design and innovative use of building materials and to popularise the results, and to pioneer methods of providing and installing alterations of modular construction for rented accommodation.

3. Multiculturalism

There are other changes taking place for examples Kooris are healthier, living longer and increasingly seeking dwellings in cities and towns. There is an increasing number of elderly migrants and a greater mixture of countries of origin.

In planning for a multicultural society it is essential to recognise that there are various forms or stages of social mix; for example, a range from nodding, to chatting through to intimate friendship. Thus there is an hierarchy of relationships to be taken into account. But in our society we tend to mainly relate to each other as intimate friends, thus weakening the relationships, the casual relationships, which are essential for building community networks.

Our aims for a multicultural society are hindered by the values placed on community of interest and a lack of appreciation of the humanising that results from the process of creating community at the local, neighbourhood level. This over-concentration on community of interest results in the tendency to separate out those who have different life styles or who are at a different stage in life cycles. Thus elderly people living in retirement homes are too often isolated from the rest of the community. This is a double burden for migrants.

(3)

A very large proportion of elderly Kooris and migrants will choose to continue to live in their own homes, therefore we need to make sure that Home and Community Services are adapted to make this possible.

However "homes" for specific ethnic groups of elderly people are already being built. This is one answer, and a much better answer than accommodating one or two migrants in a home where there is a majority of people with an entirely different life style. But the choice for migrants needs to be widened so that there is an option which preserves their relationship with their ethnic community but which also provides opportunities for them to mix with people from different backgrounds, (for multiculturalism).

Creative planning is required to ensure that there is a balance between segregation and social mix.

Therefore :-

- i. Consider measures which provide "group homes" in small clusters; each segment of the cluster to consist of about a dozen residential units with social spaces designated for the use by the residents of that segment, but with some links to other segments through sharing some facilities which serve all residents of the cluster.
- ii. Encourage migrants and Kooris to consider planning and managing their own "group homes" as a segment of a cluster.
- iii. Encourage the location of residential accommodation for elderly people close to neighbourhood hubs where there are shops and community facilities and easy access to public transport.

4. Later Family Responsibilities and Better Education

The principle of siting of residential accommodation in the hub of a neighbourhood brings us to looking at three other changes in the elderly population in the 21st century.

Firstly, later marriages, later family responsibilities and deinstitutionalisation of people with special needs, may result in more direct family responsibilities in retirement years.

Secondly, the increase in divorces and separations is resulting in more single elderly people and in "blended families".

Thirdly improved educational opportunities, a greater recognition of passive (cultural) recreation and a greater appreciation of multiculturalism are affecting the way people spend their leisure.

These three changes will affect both the provision of neighbourhood support systems and the duration of time people choose to live in the one neighbourhood. A greater proportion of the elderly population may prefer to continue to use neighbourhood services with which they are familiar and thus opt to continue to live in the locality that they know well.

(4)

This could result in a greater sense of belonging to a neighbourhood and this in turn would result in more value being placed on community involvement in planning and managing local government services.

The Home and Community Care program has strengthened the links between municipal councils and the community. Municipal community arts programs have considerable potential for helping to develop a sense of belonging to a neighbourhood.

Therefore :-

- i. Give councils more control over services they provide.
- ii. Provide more effective access to information, particularly as regards local government services and more opportunities for community involvement in planning and managing services,
- iii. Encourage community arts programs and other cultural and educational services in the neighbourhoods.

5. More Enjoyment with Less Energy

And finally another change to be considered. There is world wide concern about green-house, the need to conserve the world's unrenewable resources, and poverty in the third World. Thus there is a greater community consciousness of the need for urban consolidation and increased use of public transport.

If we are to have a FUTURE, any sort of future, we must recognise our responsibilities for saving the worlds scarce natural resources and preventing such ecological disasters as green house. The words "think globally act locally" are not merely a slogan !

Planning for the future is not only about needs, it is very much about the abilities of people.

Therefore :-

- i. Support all steps towards urban consolidation ensuring, more efficient public transport, clustering community services in neighbourhood hubs and increase pedestrian accessibility to these hubs.
- ii. Aim at recycling buildings and constructing buildings so they can be more easily recycled thus reducing energy use.
- iii. Strengthen a sense of belonging to a neighbourhood giving special attention to community involvement.
- iv. Develop new forms of accountability that tempers economic assessments with social inputs and outcomes.

(5)

6. Shaping the Changes

The basis for the proposed changes have been already laid through the hard work over many, many years by social planners and by community campaigns. However, for too long social, economic and physical planning have been separated from each other. Now is the time to end piece-meal planning.

Older people's housing options would be greatly increased through recognising the interconnection between security of tenure, innovative construction, the relationships between privacy and community, and developing a sense of community.

The linking mechanism is community involvement. Involving people in planning to meet their changing needs will result in changing the abilities of people.

A new force, which will strengthen this linking mechanism, is the ability of the people in the third age. This ability, itself, has to be planned for.

Therefore :-

- i. Put an end to the piecemeal methods of separating out economic, physical, and social planning.
- ii. Provide opportunities for widespread community participation in planning.
- iii. Plan to develop the abilities of people in the "Third Age".

The seeds for these proposals have been well sown by the social movements, especially those that flourished in the 1970s and 1980s, not only in Australia but in many countries around the world. We have a good foundation on which to build.