

New insights into growing older

Authors Julia Park and Jeremy Porteus introduce an important new book: *Age-Friendly Housing*.

Age-friendly Housing: Future design for older people
Julia Park and Jeremy Porteus

176 pages; RIBA Publishing
£40.00



Julia Park is Head of Housing Research at Levitt Bernstein. She has worked in the housing design industry for over 30 years. She is chair of the RIBA's Expert Advisory Housing Group and a Mayor's Design Advocate for London



Jeremy Porteus is Managing Director of the Housing Learning and Improvement Network (LIN), and vice-chair of the Housing and Ageing Alliance. He chaired the Homes and Communities Agency Vulnerable and Older People Advisory Group 2010-2016



LEFT: Convivial outdoor space at Pilgrim Gardens in Evington by PRP

Age-Friendly Housing: Future Design for Older People aims to shed new light on one of today's most pressing, global debates - how to live well as we live longer.

Written by Julia Park and Jeremy Porteus, it builds on the influential, government-commissioned 'HAPPI report', (Housing our Ageing Population: Panel for Innovation) published in 2009. That too, was design focussed. Stunning examples of specialised housing for older people across Northern Europe woke us up to fact that good design is not just legitimate; it is a significant part of the solution. Almost a decade later, we now have home-grown exemplars that rival the best of those in Europe.

As well as specialised housing options - including extra care, retirement living and developments that cater specifically for people living with dementia, *Age-Friendly Housing* features more bespoke, smaller scale solutions, including various forms of co-living and multigenerational housing. Closer to mainstream than to specialised; these less institutional alternatives are gaining traction; tempting us to move from choice rather than necessity, and making it possible to live with friends, not just with family or strangers.

Notwithstanding its design focus, the publication is relevant to a wide audience. As well as offering practical advice and illustrated examples, it is reflective and forward-looking - touching on the success of almshouses, the psychological and physical effects of ageing, the importance of neighbourhood, the value of community hubs, the increasing role of technology and some of the ethical issues that raises. Many of these issues are explored by external contributors; eminent experts in diverse fields who, by sharing their insights and ideas, challenge us to think differently.

We also touch on national and local policy, suggesting that all new housing and neighbourhoods should be 'age-friendly', and that this is not difficult or expensive to achieve. Recent government policy has prioritised the first-time buyer and paid

scant attention to the last-time buyer. The planning system is also behind the curve. There has been little attempt to keep pace with changing demographics, evolving lifestyles or the growing range of housing typologies and tenures. While it is self-evident that extra care housing fits somewhere between Planning Use Class C2, 'Residential Institutions' and C3, quaintly named 'Dwelling Houses' (which makes it subject to affordable housing contributions), the system has no in-between. This binary choice, which has a significant impact on viability, depends entirely on the preference of the local authority.

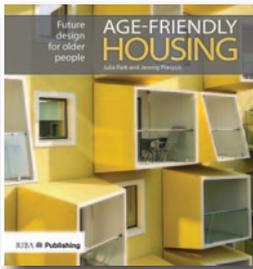
Today's older people are the baby boomers, typically more vocal and more social than their parents and grandparents, and neither shy nor retiring. Discerning and relatively wealthy, they are not keen to be labelled and certainly not happy to be told that 'it's bath-time'. The next generation is unlikely to come quietly either. Already accustomed to apartment living, to renting and sharing space, and to using technology, they will face similar physical and cognitive challenges, but may manage them differently.

Design - of products, systems and the built environment - is always likely to play a leading role in our lives, but while products and systems tend to be replaced fairly regularly, we rightly expect buildings to last much longer. Despite enormous progress over the last ten years our collective failure to plan for our longer lives means that this long overdue debate is still in its infancy. The next time you think about housing for older people, instead of picturing your mother or grandmother, picture your future self.

Julia Park is Head of Housing Research at Levitt Bernstein. She has worked in the housing design industry for over 30 years as a designer and researcher, and written numerous design guides, reports, articles and books. She is chair of the RIBA's Expert Advisory Housing Group and a Mayor's Design Advocate for London. ■

SEE review on the next page

Age-Friendly Housing: Future design for older people



Reviewed by
Brian Waters

As Julia Park and Jeremy Porteus conclude, things have moved on in the 10 years since the first HAPPI report and design has played a very significant role. Even so, they point out that, too few of us consciously think about how we want to lead our ever-lengthening lives. When we do, far fewer of us actually do something about it.

As they say, there are many unanswered questions but the fact that the questions are being asked – by our politicians, our institutions, academics and housing professionals and all of us – is progress in itself. “And answers are beginning to emerge: new approaches to health and social care as well as housing, are likely to make the next decade even more interesting than the last.”

This book is the latest word on housing for the older generation in the UK. It would have been impossible 10 years ago for all but two of 15 illustrated case studies to have been from UK.

The authors say that if it was ever a worthy ambition to spend a whole life in one home, we now know better. The housing shortage and rising levels of under-occupancy have focused attention on the need to use existing housing stock more efficiently and to encourage a better fit between the home we find ourselves living in and the home we need. “While ‘Lifetime Homes’ may not, with hindsight, have been the ideal name, it’s underlying principles of accessibility and adaptability remain sound as long as we are open minded about moving as our circumstances change.”*

Park and Porteus point out that inclusive design, accessible housing, ‘Lifetime Homes’ and age-friendly houses are all relatively new constructs, despite the fact that we have always grown old. The concept, and value, of age-friendly housing is now being recognised globally. This recognition is a cause for celebration, but while policy is starting to move in the right direction it



has so far failed to provide coherent thinking on the inter-relationship between housing, health and social care.

Until this happens, progress will continue to rely on local authorities to identify and justify the need for housing for older and disabled people and on individual providers to choose to address that need.

The authors point out that while mainstream housing is subject to planning policy standards and building regulations, it is more difficult to set rules for the growing range of specialised housing products now available.

Similarly, the need to recognise housing for older people as a distinct use class has to be weighed against the importance of age-friendly housing becoming a mainstream concept, and the value of integrating older people into mixed age communities rather than ‘ghetto-ising’ them.

These policy matters need urgent consideration and the insights and guidance contained in this book are therefore essential reading for practitioners, developers and regulators. ■



Brian Waters is an architect-planner and executive editor of *Planning in London*



**This reviewer didn’t get a good response when, at a meeting in Savills’ boardroom, he quipped that Lifetime Homes was motivated by the wish to abolish estate agents.*

ABOVE:

Extra care homes at Heald Farm Court in St Helen’s by DK-Architects

LEFT:

Quiet courtyard at Hazelhurst Court in Lewisham by Levitt Bernstein

All photos by Tim Crocker