

## **Architectural Design, Designing for the Third Age: Architecture Redefined for a Generation of 'Active Agers'**

### **Customised 'Care-Ready' Living: A HAPPI-inspired design for evolutionary housing by Walter Menteth Wren Architects**

If current challenges are to be overcome, prescience is required to address issues creatively with innovative thinking and solutions. Climate change, energy security, our housing supply and specifically 3<sup>rd</sup> age housing needs are particularly pressing questions in contemporary society.

The Housing Our Aging Population Panel for Innovation (HAPPI) published two influential reports (2009 and 2012) with extensive research, analysis and a series of proposals addressing UK deficiencies in the supply of 3<sup>rd</sup> age housing and the emerging shortage. It recommends designs which reflect best practices in the domestic environments and draws extensively upon the know-how of the continental European housing industries, where apartment homes are culturally conventional. In Europe, older people experience the benefits of greater security and less maintenance, and enjoy the conviviality of shared space. The success and benefits of their mutually supportive co-ownership and co-housing with meaningful stakeholder engagement is highlighted. It affirms that the value of good design allows older people to be happier and stay at home for longer. It is essential reading that has precipitated step changing attitudes to the UK reform of this housing sector .

Walter Menteth Wren Architects' 2013 entry to the RIBA "Re-Imaging Ageing" housing competition sponsored by McCarthy and Stone was a vehicle for design research. It drew upon the HAPPI report to propose a contextual architectural design for a site in the small county town of Bishops Waltham in Hampshire. Innovative ideas for fully independent dwellings for the active elderly in a socially cohesive Lifetime neighbourhood are developed along with a delivery model capable of expanding market supply.

**Impending change: the pressing need for high-quality, private housing for older people in the UK.**

In the UK in 2007 there were 9.8 million aged 65 and over; by 2032 that number is predicted to be 16.1 million. By 2035, 23 per cent of the population is projected to be 65 and over (from 15 per cent in 1985).

Projections for 2031 have some UK regions with between 35.6 and 43.1% of the population over 65, compared to between 5.6 and 13 % in London. Whilst these such upsurges and regional variations between urbanised and rural areas also imply stresses on our economics, infrastructure, welfare and services. Life expectancy has improved with health and there are now many more fit healthy older people. For market economies predicated upon continuous growth, this all heralds significant adjustment. In any new developments an underlying question is not only about quantity and quality, but also about the future engagement of active elderly in an uncharted economy.

In the context of climate change, energy and resource scarcity 3<sup>rd</sup> age housing also needs to be more sustainable. For example the elderly frequently need warmer internal environments yet to avoid fuel poverty, seek lower energy bills. They spend more time at home, travel less, yet decreased mobility increases transport dependency. In rural areas individual car ownership is seen as an essential option of choice, yet such energy resource dependence is strategically unsustainable. If better access, more town centre housing and transport alternatives are available for the elderly, the liability of the high cost of individual car ownership is avoidable. Designing lifetime neighbourhoods, improving pedestrian accessibility, car sharing clubs, car call services, public transport networks and biking is crucial. Basic provisions such as our food supply are also a risk with the elderly vulnerable but well placed to engage in food activism.

The GLA and Health Department recently granted £300m to this sector, with Government introducing a 'bedroom tax' to precipitate downsizing. Billed as an incentivising approach, this later policy offer is an unpopular disincentive, lacking any commensurate benefits. Lifetime Homes and Lifetime Neighbourhoods concepts underpin much of British Government's current thinking about what will make the housing stock suitable for all in the longer term. But current strategies appear insufficient as our demographics make it an imperative that we address the need for further reforms now.

Architects and policy makers need to look at these convergences in a wider context beyond the confines of specific sites, so that more can be done strategically to ensure rural areas in particular deliver suitably sustainable neighbourhoods for 3<sup>rd</sup> age housing.

It is in the private sector where the greatest shortfall of general 3<sup>rd</sup> age housing is found, as only 5% of the elderly end up in semi-independent specialised housing or care homes. There is a ready market of 3<sup>rd</sup> age equity holders looking to downsize. They are mature, sophisticated and diverse, with aspirations and a culture predisposed towards higher standards of more individually distinctive homes than previous generations. If 10,000 homes a year are designed for their downsizing, and they move out of homes which typically house 15,000 people from three, four and five-bed houses these can then house 40,000 to 60,000. This releases much needed family dwellings for a younger generation.

But in most areas there simply isn't sufficient accommodation nor are the existing home designs sufficiently desirable to most 3<sup>rd</sup> agers in the private market to tempt them to want to downsize. Much of the UK's housing stock has limited access, unsustainably high energy demands, or is of poor quality and unsuitable for the elderly. This lack of choice and quality is a key.

### **The Proposal: A Competition as a polemic for change**

McCarthy and Stone (M&S) the competition sponsors are the dominant private sector developers having a 70% share of the UK specialist retirement market. Belatedly they recognise the need to *"provide greater choice for older people through more varied types of development"* .

A design competition however can only ever be a snapshot of ideas, manifest in architectural form for a specific context; so in this submission home, neighbourhood, mobility and sustainability were the key issues explored.

Surveying untapped private demand it was recognised that the current sector business models are clearly inadequate. Our departing point therefore was establishing a framework that could be empowering for such a sophisticated clientele, delivering quality and distinction with both customised and self build housing options, to suit diverse individual specifications, and located within a mixed mutually supportive Lifetime neighbourhood development.

But the elderly mainly lack the necessary support to guide them through the processes of achieving their ends within group developments.

Therefore the promoters were invited to radically review their procurement with a proposal for a new distinctively 'Branded' delivery vehicle that could improve both their own consumer access whilst expanding buyer choice and engagement. Rather than continuing in their traditional development role, McCarthy and Stone would initiate a development support arm; specifically providing development organisational and enabling functions that can be customised to the needs of individual customers, whilst continuing to provide them access to contracted long term care support.

This opens up new opportunities by relinquishing to individuals capitalisation and far more choice across development stages, yet draws upon other facets of the company's existing strengths and resources. Whilst helping unlock private equity and positively incentivising the market, this would reduce development risks and expand their own housing market testing.

Site finding, parcelling, acquisitions, co-ordination of collective services, energy and infrastructure, planning, design, technical and legal issues, and preferable terms for bridging loan finance, might be packages envisaged within any such offering; depending on the degree with which individual consumers sought empowerment. Mc Carthy and Stone's expertise, size, and scale of supply chain, backed by their extensive financial, care support and maintenance packages, give an opportunity to envisage how viably they could restructure and redeployed this offering to meet consumer demand.

This model enables the designed provision of a terrace of self build houses to the north, supplemented by customisable apartments around courtyards to the south. On completion the site would be divested to a Community Land Trust (CLT) allowing for the management of the communal provisions (combined heat and power plant, other energy sources, transport, landscape, composting, maintenance). This transforms residents into lifelong stakeholders shaping the long term sustainability of the development. The design is a basic structure offering an aspirational environment and framework for active and evolving 3<sup>rd</sup> age participation.

Town centre connectivity would be strengthened for example new pedestrian crossings into the town centre and widened access lanes. The site could be made publically pedestrian permeable, with access through the site, beyond the escarpment to the south. A hierarchy of shared circulation spaces is arranged across the site. From north to south in street, alleys, courtyards, passageways, allotments, common, meadow, woodland paths - creates complimentary degrees of intimacy and openness for activity and interaction.

A perimeter of simple mono-pitch shelters provides servicing and parking, allowing covered access from vehicles to front doors. Areas beneath can be flexibility converted into a variety of additional facilities, such as workshops or studios, through evolutionary change; allowing for economic and social activities. Parking is limited in anticipation of increased adoption of shared transport, car clubs and mobility scooters.

A rich dwelling mix of generously sized Sustainable Code 5 "Care ready" apartments above Lifetime homes standards is proposed including, specialised disabled dwellings, guest, warden accommodation, and a min of 2 family houses within the terrace of 9 self-build houses. Apartments have kitchens opening into covered courtyards providing a convivial and intimately sheltered environment (reducing fabric heat loss). Two bedroom units cater for extended living space, study or occasional (carer) bedroom.

Almost certainly the necessary responses to the confluences of issues arising in UK housing will require new economic models of supply. In the case of 3<sup>rd</sup> age housing specifically it is unlikely this can be achieved without providing opportunity to open up individual engagement and choice. This could provide far greater local diversity and the liberation of more innovative, sensitively responsive and distinctive architectural design tailored to the needs of the occupants.