



HAPPI for Hippies: What sort of homes are baby boomers looking for?

A personal viewpoint written by Julia Park

Are we missing something?

Increasing general awareness, boosted by the HAPPI project¹, is making a huge difference to our attitudes towards housing for older people. Extra Care has moved on in leaps and bounds over the last five years but for me, and many other 50-75 year olds, it still doesn't feel like the answer. Something is missing.

Today's younger olds are the hippie generation - it's not immediately obvious - we're not wafting around in long, floral dresses or tie-dye tee-shirts and sandals - in fact we're more likely to have been wearing a business suit for the last thirty years, but we maintain many of the values and aspirations that shaped our lives, and we know what we like. The problem is that when it comes to housing, we can't find it.

Levitt Bernstein is keen to work with others to explore this gap in the market. We want to develop (virtually and physically!) a housing model which appeals to these sociable, active and creative getting-olders who appreciate style and quality, care about others and the environment, but above all, want to continue to have a good time.

What does this housing look like?

It's certainly contemporary and it's also stylish, but not flashy or opulent. Materials and finishes are natural and neutral, (bamboo flooring, wool, cotton and linen fabrics, low VOCs paint etc.), bathrooms are big and beautiful (for pampering now and the wheelchair later) and kitchens are sociable spaces (designed for foodies and their friends). There's space for hobbies (his and hers, hers and hers, or his and his) and plenty of storage - even a 'wine cellar'. The spaces are interesting three-dimensionally; flexible and open plan but with some sliding walls and plenty of light. Great soundproofing is a must because all the neighbours party too.

We're talking more urban than rural so it's likely to be a flat or duplex with a large, private balcony or roof terrace in a group of say 20-35. Well insulated and with renewable energy technology and under-floor heating. It goes without saying that everything is wheelchair friendly and there's at least one lift (though most prefer to use the stairs...).

What goes with it?

There is no 'hotel reception desk' and not much communal space. There probably is a small 'fitness suite' (more yoga than treadmill), possibly with a sauna, and there's definitely a party room with a kitchen, big table and access to outdoor space. There's a small, furnished flat for overnight visitors - up to five free nights a year and after that, you pay, or they take their chances outside in the tepee. There's play equipment, a buggy, high chair and travel cot (to borrow for visiting grandchildren) and maybe a recording space/practice room too. But absolutely not a hairdressing room or assisted bathroom thank you. We'll get by with a little help from our friends - and friends are why this works.

You'll find some car parking and maybe a car-club. Good cycle storage, space for a couple of Harley Davidsons and basement storage for bulky things that we're not ready to part with. Designed as a live/work environment (definitely in that order) so there are a few studios to rent if you're still coming to terms with retirement. One or two largish 'workshop style spaces' suitable for painting, pottery, wood-carving etc. and the rest about 10m² (the size of a spare bedroom) - perfect for desk-based work, sewing, book-binding and the other lovely things that we yearn to do but haven't for the last 30 years... These are grouped (around a light well maybe?) with a shared loo and tea-point (or close to the party room) and designed to be convertible to an extra flat or two if take-up is low. We'll do life-drawing, watch films, have a book club and drink a bit more than we should.

¹ www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/Design_building/HAPPI2/

Outside space is shared and so is the gardening. You'll find another big table, a barbeque and deckchairs - maybe a hammock for those with a point to prove and the tepee. Trees, bat boxes, a veggie patch (oodles of rocket and beetroot) and a shed. Planting is more miscanthus than marigold and the ethos more organic than organised.

Who lives there?

A complete mix of working, partly-working and not-working singles and couples. The sixties weren't about long-term commitment so expect a number of divorcees. Interesting, fairly affluent, and left of centre; the sort of people who believe they'll never grown up, but know only too well that they will grow old.

And that's the point - we don't mind losing our hair as long as we don't lose our identity.

What's stopping us?

Co-housing is the obvious vehicle but it's hard work and not everyone lasts the course. Before you know it there's a 'steering group' (because democracy and decision-making rarely go together) a 'project leader' (because someone needs the final say) a 'secretary' (because memories aren't what they used to be) and so on. Suddenly it all starts to feel a lot less like fun and still not a JCB in sight.

Better therefore to find a developer and a design team who get it and are prepared to take a bit of a risk.

Aside from the very real practical issues of finding the land, raising the cash and getting planning permission, two big questions are among the biggest barriers. The first is deciding what to call this housing; the second is deciding whether or not to set an age limit - and, if so, what it should be. These are not unrelated and both have an emotional/psychological effect as well as planning implications. In a world that seems obsessed with 'branding', do we actually want our home to have a label or our lifestyle summed up in a catchy strapline? Does an age constraint put off more people than it attracts? Would a modest discount for the over 50s be helpful or exemption from stamp duty? It would certainly do no harm but it would be nice to think that if the product is right, the right people will buy it.

One final, selfish thought. I love being an architect but we do spend our lives honing our skills to please other people and swallowing the compromises that often implies as gracefully as we can. Just for once, perhaps all we need to do is become our own client - design for our 'older selves' and trust that there are enough people out there who want the same thing. I'm fairly sure there are.

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