



Future perfect, designer labels for an ageing society

In recent months, the Housing LIN has published a selection of resources that consider in detail the built environment and the physical design criteria that can meet the housing needs and lifestyle choices of older people. However, in this thought provoking viewpoint, we take wider a look at designing for inclusion and, in particular, how by focussing on clever, accessible design, this too can accommodate the needs and aspirations of older people. In short, what is required is for designers to focus on the ageing population but not to produce products solely for older people.

Written for the Housing Learning and Improvement Network by
Philippa Aldrich, Director and Founder of The Future Perfect Company

December 2013

Introduction

The UK is undergoing an enormous demographic transition. The first 'baby boomers' born after the Second World War are now drawing their pensions and the number of people over State Pension Age is overtaking the number of under-16s. In 2003, there were 20 million people aged 50 or over and it is predicted that this will be 27.2 million by 2031.

However, despite the growth in the market, research released in April 2009¹ from charity Age UK revealed that the majority of people over 50 feel that businesses in the UK ignore them, focusing the majority of their attentions instead on the 'youth' market. This is the case even though the charity calculates older people's spending power to be worth a staggering £250 billion a year.

Historically products which have been developed specifically for older people have been Assistive Technology (AT) products and services; that is, products or services designed to enable independence for disabled and older people. As these have been primarily provided through health and social services, designs are functional rather than attractive. Adopting a largely medical model, they tend to focus on the purely physical aspects of a product and less on how design might enable an individual to lead a well-rounded, mentally and socially fulfilling life. Products are typically sold online or in specialised "mobility shops" which are relegated to secondary shopping locations, reinforcing the perceived stigma inherent in much of this equipment.

However, with increasing financial pressures on public finances, there has been a halting change towards a retail model over the past 15 years which has created a new emergent market for these sorts of products. Yet the relatively low awareness and take up of AT products² suggests a disconnect between industry perception and consumer wants and needs.

As concluded by a 2009 research project into 'the younger older consumer', 'there appears to be an industry focus on equipment or technology to address the consumer's disability, whereas a focus on solutions to fit into people's homes and lifestyles and to meet and stimulate their aspirations might be what is needed.'³

It is this gap for products designed for older people which complement their activities, homes and lifestyles and meet and stimulate their aspirations which needs to be met. Clever, accessible design can help people maintain independence, reintroduce them to practical and creative activities they may have thought were beyond them and inspire and enrich their later lives.

However, there are currently several barriers to the development of the market for good design for older people, not least that the market itself is difficult to describe or understand.

Who are you calling old?

Design for ageing is an area beset with problems of 'nomenclature'. No one wants to be perceived as 'old' or 'elderly'. Marketing expert Dick Stroud has identified what he sees as the paradox in the older consumers' market: "Older people want products and marketing that relates to them at their age but they don't want products and marketing that relates to them because of their age".

¹ *The Golden Economy, The Consumer Marketplace in an Ageing Society* - research by ILC-UK for Age UK, 2010

² *Better Living in the Years Ahead, Years Ahead*, 2008

³ *Unlocking the potential of the younger older consumer: consumer preferences and the assisted living market: Research findings from the CO-MODAL project*, co-authored by Gillian Ward (University of Coventry) and Sujata Ray (Age UK)

Moreover, older people are not a homogenous group. If 50+ is seen as the starting point, the market is attempting to encapsulate up to 50 years of life and, if anything, people become more, not less, diverse as they age. Whilst physical decline might be seen as a common factor and a way of segmenting the market, this does not mean that this is the only factor which unites this group and indeed it is the very feature that most people do not want to define them or the way they live.

What is required is for designers to focus on the ageing population but not to produce products solely for older people. People want products which are non-stigmatising and above all inclusive. As the late Bernard Isaacs, founding director of the Birmingham Centre for Applied Gerontology, said: “design for the young and you exclude the old; design for the old and you include the young.”

Good inclusive design can achieve this even with the most functional of equipment. Years ago spectacles were a disability aid which stigmatised the wearer. Now they are both fashionable and desirable.

Is it a medical device?

Some of the most useful assistive technologies cross the boundaries between product design and medicine. Aside from the challenges of combining these two disciplines, of encouraging the designers to work with the medics, any medical device needs to meet stringent regulations and be subject to rigorous testing.

One of the consequences of the provision of assistive technologies moving from a medical to a retail model is the loss of expert input into the purchasing decision. Another challenge going forward will be how to harness healthcare professionals’ expertise within the new consumer model. One way of doing this has been suggested by a rating scheme⁴ which rather like Trip Advisor encourages consumers to rate and evaluate products for the benefit of other users but with some expert guidance.

Cultural challenge of the private/public divide

Perhaps because the care of the elderly has for so long been the province of the State and the charitable sector, in the UK there is a cultural divide between public and private provision. Whilst several new companies in this sector have set up as social enterprises, entrepreneurial “for profit” ventures are less common. In a recent episode of the BBC’s “Dragons Den”, entrepreneur Richard Ernest pitched his idea for pop-up reminiscence rooms for people with dementia. The dragons agreed to invest but only on the basis that some of the profit went to charity – a condition unlikely to be imposed on mainstream entrepreneurial businesses. Interestingly, the company is now



⁴ “Raising the Standard, the final report of a feasibility study for a scheme to rate, approve or accredit Assistive Technology”, Institute for Ageing and Health, Newcastle University & Years Ahead, 2011

working with several Housing LIN members to help raise professional awareness on dementia and the benefits of 'retro' environments for people with dementia.

There are also huge amounts of knowledge and expertise about older people in the UK's Universities and the third sector, and a growing cohort of designers and entrepreneurs who are focussing on this market. Another challenge to the market is how to facilitate collaboration between the public and private sectors so as to stimulate innovation and new product development. Whilst acknowledging the role of government and the third sector in working with businesses to market the case for better design, the authors of the "The Golden Economy"⁵ acknowledge that "ultimately the act of mainstreaming inclusive design in product development has to come from industry itself".

In the United States, new for profit enterprises focussed on health and wellbeing are beginning to emerge and are attracting significant funding. Lively, a telecare monitoring product, has just raised a further \$4.8m after receiving \$2.5m initial seed funding in 2012. Sabi, another US start-up is set to launch a whole range of health and wellness products, beginning with sleek and stylish pill organisers.

Designing for the Future

One way to encourage designers to focus on the ageing market is to engage them at the beginning of their design careers. The 'Designing for the Future' competition at the Faculty of Arts, University of Brighton was originated and developed as a response to the lack of products on the market designed specifically for older people. It takes the form of a brief to product design students asking them to design an inclusive product which addresses one or more of the challenges of ageing.



When the idea of the competition was first broached, there was some scepticism about how the brief would be received amongst the students. Designing for the old was not seen as particularly exciting or glamorous.

But as the competition has developed, this perception has changed. By encouraging students not just to focus on the deficit model of ageing but to engage profoundly with the experience of getting older, the competition has

shown that designing for older people is a route into some of the most provocative, relevant and 'future gazing' challenges and themes that face modern society.

Directing the students not simply to adapt existing products but to reimagine the future has led to such diverse projects as a reminiscence hub which captures a life's soundtrack and a biodegradable memorial stone. Some products are deliberately not designed to "make life easier". The Displacement Jug by Sophia Fong challenges the user to calculate volume by subtraction – a simple puzzle to keep the mind active. An interactive play mat designed by Harry Trimble was inspired by an older mother with premature twins who all needed to exercise regularly.

⁵ Ibid.

The competition has also explored how design can be used to address some of the psychological challenges of aging such as loneliness. With between 6% and 13% of people aged over 65 saying they feel always or very lonely⁶ and research showing links between loneliness and poor health, this is a significant issue for our ageing population.

Student Jono Redden designed a series of lighting installations which evoke the shapes of domestic animals such as cats. The *'Pets'* lights are connected to social media sites and the brighter they shine, the more friends are waiting online thus drawing users to a world (albeit virtual) outside the isolation of their home.

Lucy MacDonald on the other hand was concerned with combating loneliness in a much more direct way. *'The Public Rocking Bench'* invites the users to share the gentle rocking sensation of this piece of public furniture thus stimulating interaction between people rather like Dublin's yellow benches.

Student Florence Pike was interested in encouraging neighbours to talk to each other. Re-imagining the garden fence as a meeting point rather than a barrier, the *'Tea for Two'* set draws people to the fence allowing neighbours to come together and share a cup of tea.

Increasingly, the 'Designing for the Future' projects are exploring the role of technology in design for ageing. While many older people have embraced the digital age, for others, particularly the "old old", technology is unapproachable and alien. In designing her story telling app, student Holly Alexander combined the analogue and digital realms by activating an iPad app with a traditional wooden spinning top.

Recent graduate Josh Barnes uses an augmented reality app to allow families to communicate with children whilst in hospital by sending messages via a colourful quilt.

Chloe Meineck, who is currently one of the Designers in Residence at the Design Museum, has created a beautiful, bespoke *'Musical Memory Box'* for people living with dementia which uses Raspberry Pi technology to store familiar music within meaningful objects.

At the same time as embracing technology, many of the projects are also deeply rooted in tradition and craft. Another of the 'Designing for the Future' alumni has focused her work on bringing the idea of craft to medical equipment. Hanna Mawbey's asthma inhaler covers are handmade in precious metals turning ugly medical devices into something aspirational and treasured – and thereby potentially greatly improving adherence.

The most exciting aspect of the 'Designing for the Future' competition and testament to the fact that it is possible to engage new designers in design for ageing, is the number of students who have continued with their projects, some with a view to bringing their designs to market.

What kind of new products for old?

One of the most consistent themes which has emerged from the 'Designing for the Future' competition is that the most successful products have been both inclusive and meaningful in some way – whether by supporting independence, countering loneliness, memorialising a loved one or encouraging and enriching intergenerational relationships. This is not just about new products – it is about how people want to live as they get older.

⁶ Victor, 2011

The new generation of products for older people should delight as much as assist, designers should re-imagine rather than merely adapt and together we need to embrace the new paradigm of “living with” rather than “dying from” medical conditions. The public finances are stretched. Traditional care provision for all through “old people’s homes” and residential care homes is unaffordable and for most undesirable. People want to remain at home and be independent as long as possible. It is imperative that designers seize this opportunity to make those homes beautiful as well as functional, aspirational as well as appropriate and use their creativity to imagine ways to facilitate lives that continue to have meaning and purpose.

Philippa Aldrich is the founder of The Future Perfect Company which promotes and sells good design for an ageing population. She devised and runs the ‘Designing for the Future’ student design project at the Faculty of Arts, University of Brighton.

To view images of products referenced in this viewpoint, visit:

<http://blog.thefutureperfectcompany.com/category/designing-for-the-future-competition-brighton/>

Note

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the Housing Learning and Improvement Network.

About the Housing LIN

Previously responsible for managing the Department of Health’s Extra Care Housing Fund, the Housing Learning and Improvement Network (LIN) is the leading ‘learning lab’ for a growing network of housing, health and social care professionals in England involved in planning, commissioning, designing, funding, building and managing housing, care and support services for older people and vulnerable adults with long term conditions.

The Housing LIN welcomes contributions on a range of issues pertinent to housing with care for older and vulnerable adults. If there is a subject that you feel should be addressed, please contact us.

For further information about the Housing LIN’s comprehensive list of online resources and shared learning and service improvement networking opportunities, including site visits and network meetings in your region, visit: www.housinglin.org.uk

Published by:

Housing Learning & Improvement Network,
c/o EAC, 3rd Floor, 89 Albert Embankment
London SE1 7TP

Tel: 020 7820 8077

Email: info@housinglin.org.uk

Web: www.housinglin.org.uk

Twitter: @HousingLIN