



The challenge for designers is to show that the most sensible housing for older people can also be the most desirable

Laura Wigzell runs The Pretty, Good Project, a social enterprise which champions design that helps to make life easier as we get older and our living spaces a little bit nicer for everyone.

Here, she writes a review of *Age-Friendly Housing: Future Design for Older People*, by RIBA Publishing, out last month.

Written for the Housing Learning and Improvement Network by **Laura Wigzell**, The Pretty, Good Project.

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It is a truth universally acknowledged that no one really likes thinking about getting older. Problem is, we really need to think about it, if we are going to make our homes places we are able to grow old in.

Almost all of us say we want to stay in our own homes in our old age. But [only 7% of our homes provide even basic accessibility features](#).¹ This seems like a slightly worrying mismatch. The only way we are going to make our homes more suitable as we get older is if we renovate the way we talk about them, as well as the physical bricks and mortar. At best it's presented as a dreary, deeply uninspiring chore, signaling our decrepitude and imminent demise. At worst we don't talk about it at all.

That's why I was so excited to see a new book out last week by RIBA, Levitt Bernstein and the Housing LIN titled: *Age-Friendly Housing: Future Design for Older People*.

The authors, Julia Park and Jeremy Porteus, call on designers to be braver and wiser and to think about the needs of older people right from the outset of the design process across all housing stock. They also provide a comprehensive set of principles to help ensure age-friendly-housing becomes the norm, not the exception as it is at the moment. As the book beautifully articulates, doing this is just plain common sense: "Given that every home we build today should last at least as long as we do (roughly 100 years) it is inevitable that the vast majority will at some point be occupied by someone over 75". So why aren't we designing more homes to ensure they accommodate these needs?

And what are these needs exactly? Defining the experience of ageing can be a bit like nailing jelly to a wall. No two people's experiences will be the same and they will be the product of a mind-boggling number of variables: genes, lifestyle, health, and often just good or bad luck. However, there are a great deal of pretty universal physical changes that happen just as a result of us naturally wearing out and fighting gravity every day, year in, year out. Natural decline in muscle power, some degree of sight loss and changes to our ability to balance are all pretty standard, for example.

Spoiler alert: we are all getting older. Indeed, we actively go out of our way to make sure it happens to us.

Shouldn't we be designing for these realities earlier instead of waiting until things get unbearable before putting our homes in order? I work with older people and this almost always happens after some kind of crisis - a fall, a stay in hospital or a worsening of a condition. The majority of adaptations I see people making are last-minute add-ons for this reason - bath seats, ramps, grab rails and so on. All incredibly useful, but all a desperate attempt to make an existing set-up more suitable and help them to maintain their independence in their own homes for as long as possible.

Have you noticed that many adaptations like this are temporary too? We are so bothered by the idea of them that we seem desperate to make sure they can be removed at a later date and pretend they were never there. If something absolutely has to be screwed to a wall then we leave it until the very, very last minute, often too late for us to adapt to it or for it to be much use. The effect, unsurprisingly, is that it can also end up looking exactly like it is: a very useful but ugly thing screwed to a wall in haste.

Take grab rails: these are among the most useful things you can have in your home at any time of life. Did you know that 53% ([US statistics](#)²) of people who hurt themselves in the bathroom

¹ <https://www.habinteg.org.uk/>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JhxKBaPcsAk>

are actually of working age? Bathrooms are wet and slippery at the best of times, let alone when we get older and reflexes, eyesight, mobility and flexibility may not be what they once were. However, grab rails do not come as a standard bathroom fitting in the same way as we might put in a toilet roll holder or towel rail. There are [many great looking ones these days](#)³ if you are prepared to shop around, like these ones by [Moen](#).⁴ But better still is if they can be creatively incorporated from the outset as an integral and beautiful part of the design of a well-planned bathroom, then things can actually be quite delighting, [like this bathroom](#).⁵ I am always waxing lyrical about [Motionspot](#)⁶ for this reason.

This last-minute approach results in great emotional, financial and logistical cost when we may not be at our physical and mental peak. The impact is not just on ourselves, but on our families and friends and on health and social care services too. Critically, it has also stunted innovation – preventing subtle, beautiful, quality design that considers our different and changing needs not as a problem, but as a fact of life.

This is the great strength of this book: that it doesn't just talk about age-friendly housing as a theoretical concept concerning 'other people', but something affecting each and every one of us. I was particularly pleased to see a whole chapter on the importance of 'home' and our strange and complicated love affair with our individual surroundings. How "our head often says one thing, but our heart another" is something previously lacking in conversations on this topic. We know we need to adapt things earlier - we have seen family and friends leave adaptations too late - yet sadly many of us will make the same mistakes.

This book makes it very clear that it is not a lack of knowledge that is preventing age-friendly housing being built as standard. Many brilliant individuals and organisations like [The Helen Hamlyn Centre](#)⁷, [Habinteg](#)⁸, [the Centre for Ageing Better](#)⁹ and [The Housing LIN \(Learning and Improvement Network\)](#)¹⁰ have been influencing on these topics for more than 20 years in some cases. We have had many innovative and comprehensive reports, recommendations and toolkits such as the [Lifetime Homes Standard](#)¹¹, [HAPPI 1-4](#)¹² (Housing our Ageing Population: Panels for Innovation) and the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Housing and Care for Older People.

What we lack is inspiration.

To paraphrase the book, the challenge for designers is to show that the most sensible housing for older people can also be the most desirable. The authors have pulled together an impressive collection of great case studies from across the UK and further afield that do just that and appeal to our aspirations.

³ <http://www.prettygoodproject.org/products/grabrails/>

⁴ <http://www.prettygoodproject.org/product/toilet-paper-holder-and-grab-rail/>

⁵ https://www.houzz.com/ideabooks/107277339?m_refid=us-ocnt-reg-ocnt-stories-bathroom-107277339

⁶ <https://www.motionspot.co.uk/bathroom-inspiration/>

⁷ <https://www.rca.ac.uk/research-innovation/helen-hamlyn-centre/>

⁸ <https://www.habinteg.org.uk/>

⁹ <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/>

¹⁰ <https://www.housinglin.org.uk/>

¹¹ <http://www.lifetimehomes.org.uk/index.php>

¹² <https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/Design-building/HAPPI/>

I would love to see a future edition of the book tackling retrofitting. This edition only really applies to new builds and the professionals building them. Around [80% of the homes we are going to be living in as we get older](#)¹³ are already built, leaving millions of existing homes in need of retrofitting - a more costly and stressful option for everyone. [Disabled Facilities Grants \(DFG\)](#)¹⁴ are great, but tend to only kick in when your needs are super high, verging on crisis. So, while new builds have a huge part to play in improving future housing stock, influencing policy and raising standards generally, we need to be dealing with the housing stock we've already got too.

And what about you and I? The layperson who just wants to make their home a bit more age-friendly without a Grand Design or breaking the bank?

Truth is, adapting our homes is just interior design by another name. We do it all the time; changing our surroundings to make them work better for our current needs and aspirations – whether having children, updating our colour schemes, or trying to be the next Mary Berry in the kitchen. We pick out products that reflect our interests and make us feel good. At any other time of life, it is called home improvement, redecoration, renovation, upgrading. Yet when we put in a banister, a ramp, or a stairlift as we get older suddenly it becomes very unsexy; a pitiable malfunction of mind, body and style. Yet there are so many creative, beautiful, practical things we can do ourselves, bit by bit throughout our lives, to make things easier right now as well as in the future, and for all our lovely guests. It is also a lot cheaper and less stressful to do it incrementally as part of any home improvements we might be planning anyway; it's just about thinking a little differently.

The main reason I really love this book is because, like The Pretty, Good Project, it makes it abundantly clear that “if we design with the future needs of older people in mind we are likely to produce housing that is desirable and useful for everyone” along the way. Most of the features that make a home age-unfriendly (poor lighting, narrow doorways, stepped entrances etc.), don't really work that well for anybody anyway (think buggies, luggage, bad back, twisted ankle, kids and rusty knees). We just accept them because that's the way it has always been done and rarely give it any thought unless we find ourselves or our loved ones disabled rather than enabled by a design choice. In fact, I challenge you to even notice the additional design features presented in some of the fantastic case studies in this book unless you directly need them right now. To most people they will just mean a more spacious, pleasingly efficient and well laid out home.

At The Pretty, Good Project we're not about doing this sometime in the future either. We're all about doing this right now, for ourselves, no matter age or ability, right from our first homes. We're all about showing that changing our homes as we ourselves change is anything but dull.

Here's hoping more books like this will inspire us all - designer, architect, builder, dweller - to have a go too.

Note

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

¹³ <http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/33945/>

¹⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/disabled-facilities-grants/overview>

About the author

Laura Wigzell runs The Pretty, Good Project, a social enterprise which champions design that helps to make life easier as we get older and our living spaces a little bit nicer for everyone.

To find out about practical changes you can make to your own home right now visit: prettygoodproject.org.¹⁵ You can also follow Laura on her [own adventure to make her rented home a Lifetime Home](#)¹⁶ that will work for her and her family at the age of 83, but starting right now at the age of 33.

About the Housing LIN

The Housing LIN is a sophisticated network bringing together over 40,000 housing, health and social care professionals in England and Wales to exemplify innovative housing solutions for an ageing population.

Recognised by government and industry as a leading 'knowledge hub' on specialist housing, our online and regional networked activities:

- connect people, ideas and resources to inform and improve the range of housing choices that enable older and disabled people to live independently
- provide intelligence on latest funding, research, policy and practice developments, and
- raise the profile of specialist housing with developers, commissioners and providers to plan, design and deliver aspirational housing for an ageing population.

For more information about designing for an ageing population, visit the Housing LIN's dedicated pages at: <https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/Design-building/>

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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 & @HousingLINews

¹⁵ <http://prettygoodproject.org/>

¹⁶ <http://www.prettygoodproject.org/featured-blog-post/remind-me-never-to-move-again/>