

Architectural Reflections on Housing Older People: Nine Stories of Retirement-Living

This thesis presents and interprets the stories of nine actors involved in the design, construction, management and inhabitation of third-age housing in the UK. It comprises a PhD by Creative Practice, integrating original storytelling with architectural survey, analysis and design techniques; bringing together the social science practice of participant observation with architectural post-occupancy evaluation. The research foregrounds 'designerly' modes of inquiry, resulting in design-relevant feedback for those involved in the production of retirement-living environments. Specifically, the study benefits from the researcher's unique position in and in-between architectural sectors – design, research and teaching – enabling an expanded field of practice and reflection. This dynamic researcher positionality, involving multiple personas, has resulted in unexpected interactions between sectors, making connections between unrelated actors.

Aspects of this research were commissioned by a UK property developer, providing 'independent' retirement-living apartments, and are necessarily applied in scope and approach. The underlying research context is the major societal challenge of housing a 'super-aged' UK population, and the particular needs and aspirations of active third-agers. The research contributes to the field through (i) a synthesis of design research and social science research methodologies, with examples of techniques applied in new contexts; (ii) an original study resulting from a unique situation and shifting research positionality; and (iii) new knowledge on a little-studied building typology. A diverse range of tactics were used, including short residencies at retirement developments; staying overnight and engaging in the social life of the shared lounge, as well as recording show-and-tell home visits, contingent on the hospitality of informants. Furthermore, the researcher made creative use of a befriending programme, leading to rich observations of an older person at home.

Altogether the research stories make up a multi-sited ethnographic study; each story presents the position of an actor (or actors) encountered within the field. The *Baby Boomers* story indicates a resistance to developer housing products, partly based on misconceptions of retirement housing and inappropriate associations with residential institutions. *The Befriended* gives insight to the benefits of ageing in place and long-term relational meanings of home. *Developer Director* questions the popular stereotype of developer as 'villain', revealing work undertaken at risk and uncertain challenges within the planning system. *Resident Owner* shows how older UK consumers lack

exposure to high quality housing and are committed to making their purchases work; reporting an enthusiasm for the social architecture, over-and-above the physical environment. *Chalet Manager* portrays the central role staff play in the promotion and maintenance of this social architecture; ‘untapped’ experts in the lived-experiences of the products they share with customers. *Architecture Student* shows how undergraduates had a role within a situated research practice, involving dialogic work with emerging products of architecture shared with professionals. *Company Architect* found the developer’s staff to be shaped by a strong business context, with multi-layered management and production-oriented processes designed to maximise profit. Similarly, *Town Planner* considered a disempowered actor, lacking ‘voice’ and the necessary resources to play a more central role in the delivery of housing choices for older people. Lastly, the *Creative Practitioner* story highlights how an interdisciplinary position can contribute to the advancement of research-informed design propositions, helping to evolve housing for older people.

Keywords: ageing; housing design; retirement living; multi-sited ethnography.