

Chapter 45

Shelter Options for Elderly Women: An Overview

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The multiple discourses on gendered approaches to shelter and development naturally converge at a common reality: all women, if fortunate, will grow old. Age exacerbates the crises they face, accentuates the difficulties of linking shelter to income-earning opportunities, emphasizes the supportive infrastructure. At a time when women should be able to review their struggles for personal and societal development with a sense of satisfaction, they are forced to keep up the fight for decent, enabling shelter, and often to fight alone. It is the struggle of our mothers and grandmothers, and eventually of us all, which the authors of the following papers consider.

The sequence of these pieces reflects the systematic approach the "Shelter Options for Elderly Women" panel took during the conference. Speakers moved from examining broad themes which cut across cultures to suggesting specific shelter alternatives for older women. Each panelist brought into sharper focus the challenges facing elderly women and the options available to them.

Sharon M. Keigher comprehensively outlines the difficulties older women have in finding decent shelter in the United States of America. Her paper, "In Search of the Golden Girls: Why Is Affordable, Adaptable and Assisted Housing for Older Women So Hard to Find?" reveals the reality of aging in America—as women grow old they are more likely than men to live alone, and the housing they can afford will likely be unsuited to their needs. The U.S. shelter environment fails older women in three key respects—lack of affordability of housing for a significant proportion of older women, lack of housing adaptability as women's needs change, and lack of in-home assistance options.

In "Crossing Oceans: A Cross-Cultural Look at Elderly Immigrant Women in the United States and Elderly Women in India," Rama Sethi focuses on the needs of foreign-born elderly women in America and their counterparts in industrially developing India. Rapid modernization, driving both rural-urban and international migration, can rend the fabric of the extended family. Older women may find themselves in unfamiliar situations—some are left behind in Indian villages as sons and daughters seek employment in the city, while some immigrant women find themselves stranded in the auto-dependent environment of U.S. suburbia. Rama Sethi urges shelter practitioners to conduct research on the needs of older immigrant women, drawing upon experiences of other nations as models.

Crossing continents to Africa, Barbara R. Stucki adds the voices of Ghanaian matriarchs to our increasing awareness of the links among housing, development, and well-being. Her paper, "Housing and the Creation of Security in Old Age by Rural Women of Ghana: A Development Perspective" examines the side effects of modernization on rural housing shortages. The author, who has first-hand field research experiences in Ghana, describes how housing shortages may benefit the elderly in general by reinforcing their traditional role of providing shelter for their families. However, elderly women may have fewer opportunities to secure the necessary resources to build a family compound. Housing as a determinant of women's old-age security should be incorporated in the design and implementation of housing policy—a lesson applicable throughout cultural settings.

The final two papers describe ongoing efforts to provide enabling shelter for older women. The experience of an advocacy organization is described in "Housing Needs of Elderly Women: The Washtenaw County Experience," by Carolyn Hastings and Maria M. Yen. The Housing Bureau for Seniors of Washtenaw County, Michigan, assists older women especially in their search for appropriate shelter. In the paper, the authors describe an array of housing options available to older women, from relatively independent to relatively assisted living environments. They highlight the powerful attachment many older women feel toward their family homes and describe a HomeShare program which attempts to make aging in place a viable alternative.

Leon A. Pastalan and Benyamin Schwarz likewise explore the importance of home to psychological and physical well-being in "The Meaning of Home and Ecogenic Housing: A New Concept for Elderly Women." Faulting institutional settings as being antithetical to a home-like environment, the authors present the Ecogenic, shared housing option as a design alternative which enhances autonomy while easing loneliness. Affordable, adaptable, and assisted—the three shelter criteria established in Sharon Keigher's paper—are found in this innovative design concept.

Several themes emerge repeatedly in addressing the unique housing issues of older women, regardless of whether it is a First or Third World view. First, women have distinctive needs that can be met by appropriate housing design and resources. It follows that older women's best housing would be somehow connected to the ideal housing they had as younger and mid-life

women. However, we must acknowledge that housing needs change over the life course. How, then, can we get housing that is appropriately adapted? Or perhaps even better, how can we assure that our housing will adapt as we age?

Second, as women have relationships with each other they seem also to have very real relationships with their environment. Themes that come up repeatedly in discussion of housing that are meaningful for older women are familiarity, preferences, and attachment to place, and the ability to control these or have mastery over decisions about the space in which we live. Security is a critical notion as is the idea that we are socialized into the housing patterns we experience. What we seek in or expect of housing can be fractured by the need to relocate or by significant dislocations.

Third, proactively establishing or building the kind of housing we might perceive as ideal, or even just adequate, costs money. It requires expertise which relatively few women have: architectural and design skills, financial management knowledge, legal knowledge of real estate, etc. Such skills are absolutely vital, however, for any communal action or organized efforts to develop new housing options in communities.

Thus, several areas of research were suggested by our discussion. Research in these areas might facilitate and heighten further development of housing options for older women.

First, we need better to understand how women relate to their immediate environment and the power of that and other relationships in their lives. We need to understand how relationships with other people, vital social support, are sustained and facilitated by space and place. A critical dimension of this would include where relationships take place in the household itself, and also in the immediate neighborhood and the larger community. How important are qualitative factors such as familiarity, predictability, security, and choice in the preferences older women express when faced with adapting their homes or relocating?

Second, what are the effects of social class and especially poverty on density and relocation choices? Co-residence and proximity to others are often viewed as disadvantages or necessities for lower class or poor persons, yet they provide built-in advantages in access to care and reciprocal support. Home ownership and the locational choices that accompany it can evolve into the isolation and lack of security women fear in old age.

We must better understand how women's preferences interact with their resources, and how both function as constraints as well as present opportunities.

A related issue might be to explore how notions of private property have shaped these expectations. What does "ownership" really mean for women? Does it have to mean "private property" (mine) or is there also a sense of legitimacy in the idea of shared ownership, of living in "our" home, of sharing communal space with others?

Third, how do women use their physical space and what are considered to be the real resources needed? Is there a kind of minimum and maximum limit in the accouterments that a home should have, say in a given community, to make it appropriate and also acceptable to women?

Finally, we must recognize that, as women, we need to understand the ways older women wish to live for self-interested reasons. A basic dimension we can and should keep in focus is how we wish to develop housing options for ourselves. How options are developed now for women will very much shape what is available to us as women in thirty to fifty years from now. While on one level this makes shelter development a most self-interested investment, what could be more legitimate? We all certainly have a vital stake in where we will live.

Taken together, these papers serve to clearly define the need for enabling shelter for older women and to propose ways to meet this need. Whether calling for detailed research, better informed policy, or more sympathetic design solutions, each author shares the conviction that older women, in searching for a place to call home, should not have to fight alone.