

Housing Living Arrangements For The Elderly

Some Ideas From Northern Europe

Bruce M. Pringle

Should older people live scattered among people of various ages, or are they better off in housing that is only for the elderly? Social scientists like Margaret Mead (1971) and Leontine Young (1973) feel that separating the older generation from younger families makes life less rich for those of all ages, and many social workers agree. Yet most housing developments are designed for people who are all at the same stage of the family life cycle. In addition, research by Rosow (1967) and by Lawton (1976) indicates that the elderly have more social life and feel less lonely, more secure, and more satisfied when they are housed together rather than spread out in the community. The success of places like Sun City and Leisure World indicates that age segregation has appeal for many people who are over sixty.

In Northern Europe, there has been considerable concern over this issue. In recent years public policy in several countries has moved away from providing segregated housing for older people to-

Bruce M. Pringle is an associate professor in the Department of Sociology, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas 75275.

ward supplying services and assistance that encourage them to live in the community at large (Kahn and Kamerman, 1976). The European experience thus provides many examples of ways in which housing situations affect the quality of life of the residents.

The following report is based on visits in the Spring of 1977 to Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, and England. My method was informal — I made arrangements with government officials, university departments, and social service organizations to meet knowledgeable people and to see places of interest. I will use my observations to discuss three topics: (1) the advantages and disadvantages of large housing facilities for the elderly, (2) home care as an alternative to institutionalization, and (3) ways to increase the extent to which extended families house and care for their elderly members.

Segregated Housing

An outstanding example of a large, well-equipped and well-staffed facility for aged persons is Peter Likke Center in Copenhagen. It

was designed and is operated by a national charitable organization called Lonely Old People's Aid. Both sheltered housing and nursing home care are provided. Services include physical therapy, chiropody, and dentistry; barbershop and beauty parlor; grocery and drug store; classes, discussion groups, and outings; hobby shops and a store to sell what the hobbyists make. The staff is so large that the center has its own day-care nursery for its children.

There are obvious advantages in having all these things available at the place where one lives, but problems, too. The residents may get dependent upon others doing things for them rather than doing them on their own. They may even develop an "I want one, too" kind of status competition over services. Having large numbers of people around gives a wide selection from which to choose friends, but it is easy not to spend enough time with any one of them to really become acquainted. There is much illness and death is frequent. The staff, in dealing with so many people, develops rigidity in organization, regulations, and advanced scheduling. Long hallways are unattractive and confusing. And, when it is time for 180 residents of a high-rise to take the elevators to lunch, the congestion can be exasperating.

Facilities like Peter Likke are segregated not only in the sense of having only one age group in residence. By providing so many services internally, they decrease motivation for the people in them to go out into the rest of the community. Large projects also require expensive land, so they often are located on the outskirts of town, where it is hard for outsiders to visit. Good bus service and special transportation for the handicapped can help alleviate some of these problems, but a central location is highly desirable.

The problems of largeness showed up in another way in a housing complex in Amsterdam. They had a system for checking by telephone to see if the people in each apartment were all right. To aid in this, there was a chart on the wall to indicate who was not at home and shouldn't be expected to answer. The chart had to be taken

down, however, because someone started using it as a guide to the apartments that would be easiest to burglarize.

In nearly every home I visited, there was great congestion around the main entry. This seems to reflect a wish by the residents to stay in contact with the outside world. They sit where they can see who is coming and going and ask them about their destinations. In one house in Sweden, the architect had put a room for storing bicycles next to the entrance; the residents converted it to a sitting area.

Perhaps there are ways of having some of the advantages of bigness without all of its drawbacks. One way to provide a small-group atmosphere is to design a large facility so that it is divided into units. Hungerford House in Wiltshire has five segments. Each of these has nine apartments arranged around a common sitting room. There was a kitchenette for preparing refreshments and a guest room so that out-of-town visitors could be accommodated. Some of the sitting room furnishings had been donated by the residents, giving a home-like atmosphere. The group I had tea with seemed to have developed a good deal of tolerance for each other's idiosyncrasies and a concern for each other as persons.

Small units help to avoid bureaucratic impersonality. So does democratic participation in decision-making. At one sheltered housing facility in Örebro, Sweden, I was accompanied on the tour by six staff members. Everything seemed to be efficiently run and the recreational activities to have competent leadership. They have had meetings to ask the residents what kind of programming they would like, but there was very little response, so activities are planned by the staff. Across town was a similar home. There I talked with several staff people individually and visited by myself in the room of a man who had both good and bad things to say about the place. The residents of each floor meet at least once a month to plan activities and to make suggestions to the management of the house. Wood-working equipment had been ordered because the men

complained that most of the craft tools were for traditionally feminine activities. The residents had sent letters to the municipality requesting better bus service and to the postal service objecting to a change in mail delivery. Somehow I'd much rather live in the second home than in the first.

The ultimate way to insure that housing is well suited to the residents is to have them in charge of it. "De Zeven Akkers" in Habervijk, the Netherlands, consists of 124 apartments in two adjoining buildings. A private corporation formed for the purpose designed, obtained government financing, built and now operates the complex. Its board consists of several persons with professional expertise in different aspects of housing plus a number of representatives of the older people who live in the apartments. The residents have direct access to the people who make the decisions about their dwelling.

It is not always easy to develop self-help organization, however. One problem grows out of admissions policies. Public institutions tend to allocate their space on the basis of need. This means that new residents are those among the applicants who will need the most attention from the staff and will have the least to offer their fellows. Meanwhile, the persons previously admitted continue to grow older and less competent. One administrator in Norway confessed to bending the rules in order to bring in new people who were well and alert enough to provide leadership for the other residents.

To summarize about segregated residences — they can efficiently provide services, companionship, and security. They are expensive to build and operate. They have a tendency to be impersonal and bureaucratic unless efforts are made to promote small-group interaction and democratic participation. They also isolate the residents from the rest of the community unless their location is central or transportation is provided.

Scattered Residences

An obvious way to keep from segregating the elderly is to help them stay where they are. While

they may be somewhat concentrated in certain parts of town, most of the neighborhoods in which they live are mixed in population. Both in this country and abroad, it is becoming obvious that it is often cheaper to repair a house and help with the housekeeping than to keep a person in an institution.

A case in point is that of a 70-year-old widow in Lørenskog near Oslo. She has grown blind, and it has become increasingly difficult for her to manage alone in her little house. At the same time, she would hate to leave her home where everything is in its accustomed place and try to get used to an unfamiliar room in an institution. It would also be more difficult for her friends to drop in to see her if she moved. Services from the municipality make it possible for her to stay in her own house. A home helper comes for two hours a day, six days a week, to cook a hot meal and do the chores that can't be done by feel. She has been provided with a specially equipped telephone, a radio, and a cassette machine to play talking books delivered by the public library.

A survey in Belgium of 3,000 elderly persons indicated that the majority of them preferred to stay in their own homes. When asked what would be needed to make that practicable, they listed rather minor things — a rail for the entry stairs, repair for the plumbing, a telephone so they could call for help if needed. Trying to meet such self-defined needs might be a more effective approach than trying to bring things up to housing codes or to some abstract middle-class standard.

A problem with encouraging old people to live scattered around town is they can become isolated and very lonely. A taxi driver in England told me about an old lady passenger he had one day. They got to her house and she invited him in for biscuits and marmalade. When he politely declined, she asked if he wouldn't just take the top off the jar for her. When he did, he noticed that the label was one that the manufacturer had stopped using five years before. For five years, there hadn't been anyone in the woman's house that she could ask to open the jam for her!

Obviously, providing the taxi service was a step in breaking the loneliness of this person. But where is there to go where you can feel really a part of things?

The many therapeutic and recreational activities offered at a facility like Peter Likke can also be provided in day centers for people living in the community. Such centers have become quite common in the countries I visited. Of course, the services and social events provided in a residential center can be made available to old people in the neighborhood. Several of my informants, though, indicated that attendance is better among people from the community if the social and service center is not located in a home. The non-residents may feel like outsiders and they also may not want to risk being identified with the less fortunate people who require special housing and care.

There were interesting cultural differences in the programs that were popular in centers for the elderly in different countries. Dancing was very popular in Finland but was considered not quite respectable in Norway. In the Netherlands, many of the centers are organized by denominational groups for their own members. In Belgium, both the government ministries and the leading private organization for the elderly have separate parallel structures for dealing with their French-speaking and their Dutch-speaking clientele. An important service in Finland is a central sauna bath for those no longer able to chop wood to heat theirs at home.

Services to help the elderly maintain their independent existence are of no use unless potential clients know about them. A center in Oslo obtains social security lists of persons in their district who are turning 70 years of age. Each person on the list is sent a pamphlet telling about available services and activities and is invited to a get-acquainted visit to the center.

Pre-retirement programs being experimented with in several countries provide an excellent opportunity for providing information about services — along with their main job of encouraging

values clarification and assessment of opportunities for the later years of life.

Troisième Age of Belgium has developed a clever way of making information and assistance available to the newly old. They provide a senior citizens' information desk in a downtown department store. A social worker is there to answer questions on old-age pensions, taxes, where to go for medical treatment or help with emotional problems, how to join a social club, or other matters of special interest to older people. The location makes it very easy to casually drop in.

In Sweden, though, they don't just wait for the citizen to fill out the requisite number of application forms. There the municipalities are required by law to actively seek out any elderly person who may be in need of services.

The isolation of the elderly may be particularly serious in rural areas. In one Norwegian community, all of the younger people had moved out, leaving 12 households of older people. The government has recruited a young couple with nursing and social-work training to move into the town and provide services. Post, telegraph, and general store combinations are being subsidized to keep rural areas from being cut off from communication and necessities. And, in a remarkable crossing of jurisdictional boundaries, the Norwegian Ministry of the Family and Ministry of Welfare have joined to finance an experiment in which postmen deliver groceries and drugs to the elderly people on their route and report to the social service office if any of them need assistance of any kind.

In summary, older people, even when they become somewhat handicapped, can be helped to stay in their own home and familiar neighborhood by repair and upgrading of their residences, by supplying home helpers to perform tasks that become too difficult for the old to do for themselves, and by providing services and social activities at centers for the elderly.

Care by Extended Family

This discussion shouldn't neglect the ancient

and honorable method of providing older people with housing, care, and social relationships — the extended family. We mourn the weakening of ties among relatives without always realizing the extent to which business and governmental practices — particularly those regarding housing — force the different generations to live at a distance from each other. Family subdivisions, apartment complexes, and public housing facilities tend to be designed for persons of the same income level, age, and family size.

The Norwegian Building Research Institute investigated why there are more three-or-four generation households in rural areas than in cities. They discovered the simple answer — country houses often have room enough for extra relatives, city apartments do not. There is a Norwegian proverb: “Where there is room in the heart, there is room in the Home.” Sociologist Dagfin Ås says that the truth is the other way around.

I suppose that these days most older parents and their adult children don't want to live in the same household, but in some cases at least they would like to be near to each other. One way to make this possible is through an English innovation called the “granny annex.”

The name is more than accurate — “grandpa” might live there with or instead of his wife. The idea is to build a self-contained apartment suitable for an older person or couple behind, above, or next door to family quarters. This permits the generations to associate and perform services for each other while assuring independence and privacy for both. Anthea Tinker, in her study of these “linked houses,” found that after a few years, it often turned out that granny or grandad had died, or job transfer had caused the son or daughter's family to move. Even in these cases, however, the unrelated new tenants often joined in an exchange of services with the adjacent household (Anon., 1976).

In the Netherlands, a relative can be paid for giving care that otherwise would be performed by a government employee. The British Red Cross has a training program for persons who want to

learn home nursing techniques for care of relatives. There is also beginning to be an awareness that regulations for allocating housing need to be modified so as to facilitate rather than prevent relatives living near each other.

Families are more willing to take on care of relatives when there are back-up services to take over in difficult situations. In Lørenskog a retired man was caring for his wife in their little house. She was bedridden and had had a colostomy. He was getting worn down by the work and responsibility, so arrangements were made by the visiting nurse for the wife to check into a nursing home for a few weeks so that he could rest up.

The borough of Barnet in London has a homemaker service, originally designed to make it possible for children to stay in their own home when the parents were temporarily unable to look after them. The service has now added some homemakers who can step in when an emergency arises involving the care of an old person. They have recruited personnel who are able to serve at night or on weekends when necessary. Their supervisor is on 24-hour call in case one of the homemakers runs into a serious problem.

Thus, there are a number of ways to aid extended-family care of the elderly. Housing arrangements, compensation for giving up other employment, and back-up services all can contribute.

Conclusions

The northern European countries which I visited have not found any one best way to provide housing for the elderly. They do not even have a simple answer to the narrower question of whether older people should be housed with each other or scattered throughout the community. Their experience, however, suggests the following considerations:

Personal choice — some people want, need, and benefit from housing that caters exclusively to the old; others flourish when surrounded by people of other ages; both kind of facilities are needed;

Integration — depending on the individual's desire, opportunity should be available for satisfying

contact both with age peers and with the rest of the community;

Family ties — some people can't stand their kinfolk, but the caring concern that many relatives have for each other is a great resource that ought to be fostered as much as possible;

Involvement — facilities and services work best when they are designed, managed, and carried out by the people they are intended to help, although bringing that about requires a special kind of leadership.

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