



ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN DESIGN FOR THE AGEING SOCIETY

Author:

Deane Simpson

Young-Old: Urban Utopias of an Ageing Society

Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2015

Reviewer:

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We get older. This is evident all over in the developed countries, both in cities and in the countryside. How can architecture and urban design in Scandinavia meet this future-oriented challenge? The ageing population in the developed countries puts this issue at the very centre of discussion. For this reason I recommend that you read *Young-Old: Urban Utopias of an Ageing Society* by Deane Simpson. It is a new book, published in 2015 by Lars Müller in Switzerland, 575 pages long, dealing with an important issue for the future: architecture and urban design in an ageing society. I am impressed. Very impressed, but some critical comments can be made when it comes to case studies and how the research findings are presented. Who are the target groups for the book?

The author behind the book is Deane Simpson, architect, teacher and researcher at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, School of Architecture, Copenhagen, Denmark. He is also professor of architecture and urbanism at the Bergen School of Architecture, Norway. Simpson received his PhD at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) in Zurich, Switzerland. The research presented in the book began as his doctoral dissertation.

And now back to the book. It centres around design for senior citizens “ageing in place.” Simpson is not discussing housing for the elderly in assisted-care facilities or housing for

frail older people with service twenty-four hours per day. A minority of senior citizens lives like this. The concept of ageing in place represents instead a dominant type of household unit for the silver generation. From this perspective the research is relevant not only for professions such as architects, planners, and developers, but also for society as a whole.

The point of departure for Simpson is an emerging organization of spatial conditions in combination with a discerning understanding of old age. His focus is on urban mutations that have materialized in a growing subgroup of senior citizen, the “Young-Old,” or the “Third Age.” According to Simpson the Young-Old group reflects an historical shift in architecture and urban design for the ageing population, transforming the spatial scale in public spaces, neighbourhoods, towns, infrastructure, and social networks. The Third Age has been developed as a concept to distinguish different types of older persons in the post-war period: the Young-Old (sixty-five to seventy-four), the Middle-Old (seventy-five to eighty-four) and the Old-Old (eighty-five and over). The Young-Old is in this context a new, expanding population of healthy and independent senior citizens, many with financial resources, ready to design their future in a new way. They are free from the responsibilities of employment and childcare.

Simpson refers to authors who describe the ageing society in terms of the crises it faces. The first crisis is one of dependency and has an economic background. This threat consists of expanding health care costs and diminishing number of working-age people contributing to the production of welfare. The second is the crisis of programming for architecture and urban design. The built environment has to be re-designed to fit senior citizens. The third crisis is characterized by a lack of scripts directing how, where, and with whom senior citizens might live their lives in this new, historically unknown phase of society.

These crises facing our ageing society turn the Young-Old group into an experimental field of production for new forms of utopian urbanism. Simpson presents three informative and major case studies from this point of view: The Villages of Florida in United States, Costa del Sol in Spain, and Huis Ten Bosch in Japan. The research methodology takes an exploratory approach. Empirical documentation and analysis of literature are investigated alongside expert interviews and fieldwork in the USA, Spain, and Japan. The fieldwork includes interviews with residents, developers, politicians, on-site actors, photos, and documentation of findings using drawings, diagrams and maps. From a methodological perspective the investigation can be seen as architectural research combined with an ethnographic report on social dimensions in each case study.

The book is divided into three main sections: an introduction of socio-demographic conditions (7–142), a second section called “Young-Old Urbanism,” describing the cases in their context (142–510), and a third section presenting collective tendencies (511–564). Urbanism for the Young-Old group began in 1954 when Youngtown was founded in Arizona and became the first age-segregated retirement community, followed by Sun City in 1960 and Leisure World in 1962. The Villages of Florida was established in 1972, which is Simpson’s first major case study. This is a private city for residents over fifty-five. In 2013 The Villages had 101,600 inhabitants. The average age in the community is sixty-nine. Ninety-eight

percent are of white European ethnicity and eighty percent are married couples. As a result of this concentration of such a homogeneous group, The Villages can be understood as a city only for active senior citizens.

In terms of its architecture and urban design, The Villages has developed into a large-scale low-density master-planned environment with one-storey single houses positioned on a man-made landscape of lawns and lakes. The design of small neighbourhoods has been used as a scaled-down strategy in the development of The Villages. The urban landscape includes small towns with historic design features such as squares surrounded by buildings of two or three stories.

The new design team for developing The Villages was led by Tracy Mathews, director of Design Gary Mark. He began working on a part of The Villages and produced an architecture that refers to memory. The objective is to transport residents back into their experiences from their youth and at the same time limit losses of mental capacity, a designed nostalgia for the childhood. Simpson concludes that The Villages represents an urban experiment, based on protocol from the entertainment industry, transformed into a post-war model of a retirement community.

Costa del Sol in Spain has attracted hundreds of thousands of retirees since the 1980s from Western and Northern Europe. Climate has been one important factor for the decision to move to Costa del Sol. The area is today inhabited by a great number of foreign retirement immigrants. The urban zone emerges from a spatial territory between old villages and tourist resorts. Huge residential areas called *urbanizaciones* have been constructed along more than 150 kilometres of the coast. This is a hybrid environment, combining the American gated community, the Andalusian pueblo, and a colonial outpost. The role of playing golf in the landscape has been a part of the development in Costa del Sol, just as in the USA. The year 1980 marked a shift in Spanish policy towards tourism. Local and central governments began to promote foreign investments in land and property in coastal areas. Urban zones grew up spontaneously and in an unplanned manner, particularly when Britons and Germans began to acquire homes for holiday and retirement.

The *urbanizaciones* are primarily located in the territory between areas with traditional architecture and tourist resorts. They share facilities such as swimming pools and gardens and resident areas of a single nationality. In architectural terms one type of design is dominant, known as Pueblo Mediterráneo style, characterized by two- to four-story dwellings with clay roofs and white walls. The standardization of the zone may be understood as a function of tested urban forms, but limited in variation without schools, churches, police stations, or municipal offices. Sixteen percent of the population are senior citizens from Western and Northern Europe. The average age for Britons is fifty years, and seventy-five percent are married heterosexual couples. In contrast to The Villages in the USA, the *urbanizaciones* became the responsibility of local councils when the buildings were completed. Simpson notes that retirement migrants don't integrate and keep their nationality; they have not learned to speak Spanish and they act as if the urban zone was a colony.

The third and final case study is Huis Ten Bosch in Japan. The city has been described as one of the largest theme parks in history. Huis Ten Bosch opened in 1992 and is designed as a full-scale replica of a Dutch city in architecture, townscape, and landscape. In Japan the Netherlands is seen as an advanced society with a rich history, is a top tourist destination, and for two hundred years was the only window in Japan towards the western world. Takekuni Ideaka, leading architect for the development, formed an ideology embodying a new system of values: ecology and economy in harmony with the natural elements of water, light, and sound. Buildings are situated along narrow plots with a small garden in front of the main entrance and a larger garden with boat facilities at the canal bank. It looks like a traditional Dutch city. The design of individual buildings has been based upon research carried out in eighteen Dutch cities. Also, Dutch craftsmen were brought to Japan to oversee construction. Huis Ten Bosch stands out as an alternative retirement arrangement to the traditional three-generation family. The average age is fifty-five in the city and ninety-nine percent of the inhabitants are from Japan. According to Simpson this development reflects two forms of urban leisure typologies: first, a mutation of environments to a theme park for senior citizens and second, new strategies developed by the entertainment industry for designing retirement communities.

In the last chapter of the book Simpson concludes his research in collective tendencies that these case studies demonstrate. The design of communities for the Young-Old group can be understood as specialization, commercialization, and corporatization, driven by the retirement industry. In architecture and urban design, the result is the production of retirement utopias, age-segregated lifestyles and cities, and a growth in the private governance of retirement communities. Additional tendencies are desires for mobility, the theming of design architecture and public spaces, and the development of narratives from youth, along with concepts, devices, and tools directed towards the Young-Old group.

In summary, this book is an important piece of research on architecture and urban design for the ageing welfare society. However, I have two critical remarks. The first one has to do with the way the research is communicated. The second remark is more of a reflection on the case studies conducted. How has Simpson presented his findings? The book has 575 pages: text, illustrations, and drawings. This is just too much. Research results should be reported in a maximum of 250 pages, so as to communicate knowledge effectively to professionals such as architects, planners, and developers. Dissemination of research-based findings is necessary if you want to influence practice. The second comment concerns the cases in the USA, Spain, and Japan described in the book. I think it would have been great if one of the cases had been \ housing areas for senior citizens in welfare states like Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Denmark. Nordic countries have an organized public health and care service that might have an influence on the development of environments for the Young-Old age group, and could lead future challenges in another direction. I do not know for sure, but it would in any case make the study more relevant to the situation in Northern Europe.

¹ The review was first published in the *Nordic Journal of Architecture*, 2015-4