

Impact Case Study

The value of home design in supporting ageing well in place

Introduction



The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare says that “secure and affordable housing is fundamental to the wellbeing of Australians”.

Many older Australians have been able to realise this goal in mid-life – but existing housing design isn't always suited to accommodate the life and lifestyle changes affecting people as they age. While the “new middle agers” of 50-75 years are generally in better health than their predecessors, around one in five experience disabilities which may limit their mobility and core activities, sometimes severely.

Housing design can be important to support the activities of daily life and keep people connected to community, family and friends. Yet often when choosing a home people don't think about long term needs.

Background



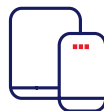
Members from the Centre for Organisations and Social Change (COSC), in partnership with a niche property development company, began a project to learn more about how carers perceived the potential value universal design features which would allow home design to respond to and continue to support homeowners as they age.

Universal design features are home designs that can be adapted to the homeowners' changing health and mobility needs over their lifetime. The “Silver level” seven core universal design features were highlighted in 2010 in the Livable Housing Guidelines (LHG). They are:

- A safe, continuous and step free path of travel from the street entrance and/or parking area to a dwelling entrance that is level.
- At least one, level (step-free) entrance into the dwelling.

- Internal doors and corridors that facilitate comfortable and unimpeded movement between spaces.
- A toilet on the ground (or entry) level that provides easy access.
- A bathroom that contains a hobless shower recess.
- Reinforced walls around the toilet, shower and bath to support the safe installation of grabrails at a later date.
- Stairways are designed to reduce the likelihood of injury and also enable future adaptation.

The Research



COSC member Dr Sarah Sinclair, alongside other RMIT academics Professor Ashton de Silva and Associate Professor `Foula Kopanidis, investigated how carers valued home design which supported ageing residents through surveys of in-home care service providers. The surveys aimed to capture their experiences, knowledge and observations on how home design affected the life and health outcomes of the seniors for whom they care, as well as the carer's capacity to provide care.

“Value” was explored in terms of how housing design helped residents to age well, by reducing the level of care needed to support them and the amount of time spent on required care.

Key Findings

- Up to 97% of caregivers believed that universal design features affected the level of care needed to support ageing well.
- Around 95% of the sample – and 100% of informal caregivers (family, friends and neighbours) – also strongly agreed that location and relative access to amenities also had a significant impact on the level of care.

- 97% of informal caregivers and 88% of caregivers agreed that the design of a home impacted their ability to deliver services in the home. The groups concurred that good design supported the delivery of cognitive (96%), physical, social and medical needs (94%).
- 77% of those delivering physical care agreed that home design affected the time needed to support Activities of Daily Living (ADLS), including the provision of care to those with higher needs.
- The location of the home also affected the time needed to support a client or family member.
- All groups agreed on the importance of access and accessibility. For those with medical and cognitive needs, flooring, laundry space, kitchen space and tapware – which are not included in the LHG Silver level features – became more important.

This research highlights that for older groups, more attention needs to be paid to their specific housing needs.

Funding support and/or institutional support



This project was a collaboration between RMIT's Centre for Urban Research and LGA Australia.

Project outcomes



The report *Exploring the Economic Value Embedded in Housing Built to Universal Design Principles: Bridging the Gap between Public Placemaking and Private Residential Housing* by Dr Sarah Sinclair, Professor Ashton de Silva and Associate Professor Foula Kopanidis was published in 2020.

- Download the report from Analysis and Policy Observatory: <https://apo.org.au/node/308331>.

Media

- *Future of age care must be built on better housing design: report*, rmit.edu.au, 17 September 2020
- *Future-proof housing critical to ageing well at home*, The West Australian, 5 October 2020
- *Rethinking cities with ageing in mind*, rmit.edu.au, 16 April 2021

Publications

- *Housing and Ageing Well*, Measuring, Understanding and Improving Wellbeing Among Older People, pp.211-236, 21 March 2020

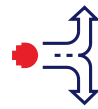
Overview of the impact



The report has been cited in other research into accessible home design, including:

- *Accessible design features and home modifications to improve physical housing accessibility: A mixed-methods survey of occupational therapists*, Disability and Health Journal, Volume 15, Issue 3, July 2022, 101281
 - <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dhjo.2022.101281>
- Australian Human Rights Commission's *Submission in response to the National Disability Strategy Position Paper* (2020), October 2020
 - https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/ahrc_submission_nds_position_paper_2020_0.docx

Next Steps



In 2022, new livable housing design standards were introduced by the Australian Building Codes Board (ABCB).

- <https://www.abcb.gov.au/news/2022/new-livable-housing-design-requirements>.

Along with explanations of the changes and why they are necessary, the new standards include technical details and how to follow them correctly.

The new standards will help increase the stock of housing that is adaptable and better able to meet the needs of older people and people with mobility limitations. This is important to support housing choice, ageing in place, and reducing the cost of future adaptations as people's needs change over time.

In 2023, liveable guidelines were added to the *National Construction Code (NCC) 2022* and the Victorian Building Authority.

Dr Sinclair and her team continue to conduct research into ageing well in our existing spaces.

COSC Research Theme

- Positive ageing and organisations

This theme considers how older people can be supported within and through organisations to be connected and contribute to society and the economy.