

OLDER PERSONS HOUSING DESIGN: A EUROPEAN GOOD PRACTICE GUIDE



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Summary

The principal aim of these guidelines are to ensure suitable housing solutions that can sustain the independence of elderly people in their own homes for as long as possible. This publication therefore is a sort of operative manual which gathers together good practice for the design of new homes, or the refurbishment of already existing homes, that are accessible to the needs of people from all ages, and in particular the elderly.

We have purposely avoided a focus on the technical aspects of design as there are already a range of publications for this purpose. What we have sought to do is to demonstrate technical matters and design solutions in an accessible jargon free format that can be used to bridge the gap between older people, commissioners, and designers to encourage a shared understanding leading to improved housing design.

This guide has been developed in the course of the European Project Interreg III C (Projects for European Interregional cooperation between public entities and equivalent institutions - April 2005 / September 2007). The project Wel_Hops "welfare housing policies for senior citizens", involved institutes from 5 countries: The Blekinge Institute of Technology, Karlskrona University (Sweden); Brighton & Hove City Council (United Kingdom); FAMCP - Aragonese Federation of the city council and province of Saragozza (Spain); the Municipality of Győr, Hungary (a new member of the European Union) and ERVET - Emilia-Romagna Territorial Economic Development (Italy) which was responsible for guiding the other partners in the project.

These Guidelines (also available on the web site), which today are presented in their definitive form after being tested and verified in the various countries by designers, builders and public administrations, evolved out of a project. The interdisciplinary and international work group (made up of sociologists, economists, architects, engineers and those responsible for study and research in welfare) who have edited the Guidelines, wanted above all to create an easily consultable instrument adaptable to the diverse contexts of the countries which belong to the European Union and addressing all who are interested in the question of autonomous residency for the elderly. Indeed the Guidelines have been verified in the field through the contribution of numerous pilot experiences realised by the Public administration of the 5 project countries, planners (such as engineers and architects, quantity surveyors and experts), but also the elderly and their families, caregivers and the managers of residential structures. The Guidelines, in synthesis, through the

use of photos and explanatory images (realised by technical experts involved in the programme) have been organized into four sections to provide a detailed architectonic and constructional overview necessary for assuring that the objective of “sustaining senior citizens in their own homes for as long as possible” is met. The volume therefore is laid out in the following way:

Section A – The home, seen as the place of reference for the life of senior citizens and carers, where they carry out those daily routines which are considered fundamental such as sleeping, taking care of personal hygiene, preparing and eating meals, and feeling safe and secure. The home must also satisfy some complimentary needs, needs which increase the quality of life and the psychological well being of the elderly person (for example the intimacy they feel within their home).

Section B – common areas of the building, intending the communal parts of the building which function as complimentary to the primary needs of residency, such as: corridors, stairs and lifts, but also services such as, laundries, gyms and areas which encourage interaction between neighbours.

Section C – grounds outside the building, meaning gardens, courtyards, parking areas, green and non-green areas, areas of “Mediation” between the building and the wider community where recreational needs can be satisfied.

Section D – the urban context, that is those areas within a radius of 400 metres of the main building adapted for elderly use. In this section one describes how different essential needs can be satisfied to complete the residency: shopping, going to the doctor, using cash machines, participating in the life of the community and getting further afield thanks to public transport.

In the final version, after the testing phase, a new section has been added **Refurbishment: Staying in one's own home**, considering how the guidelines apply to these types of works.

Preface

The ageing population represents one of the most extraordinary social transformations which has characterized and will continue to characterize European society. The possibility of living longer is clearly a major advance for whoever exceeds the mature age with realistic prospects of living autonomously well beyond those sociologic and demographic hypothesis of the past. The heightened hope of living longer and the increase in the number of elderly citizens represents a challenge for whoever is responsible for running a country: we find ourselves in front of a radical social change with the need to redefine welfare policy objectives. Bringing attention to the consequences of the "demographic revolution" often means highlighting the burden and difficulty for the elderly - to face the increasing questions of health and needs, casting a shadow on the positive potential of a long and independent life.

The challenge for the new generation of elderly citizens is not only the prospect of a prolonged life, but also the manner of ageing, of keeping that vitality and quality which makes life worth living. Ageing well, therefore, as medical and social sciences teach us, is principally avoiding dependence, by remaining useful to one's self and others, keeping active, even when physical decline is inevitable, and maintaining a healthy and interested mind. With this orientation the Wel_Hops European project considers the ageing of the population as an opportunity, and works around a new proposal in approach and content. It proposes, for the first time in Europe, to promote new initiatives at a governmental level and to experiment with innovative and integrative initiatives in favour of the elderly: continuing to live as long as possible in one's own home through the improvement and the construction of accessible homes which satisfy the needs of older people (considering that a home that is fully accessible can also be lived in by a younger generation).

The project has taken up the global discussion on how to raise the elderly citizen's quality of life through numerous encounters organized on a European level by its various partners, through an open discussion on the theme of the quality of life and by listening to the elderly of today and tomorrow. This has involved the diverse sectors of public administration and all those parts of society concerned. Ervet, project leader, and agency for the social and economic development of the Emilia-Romagna Region has been able to put itself forward as a guide for all the European institutions involved; including Sweden and the UK, already European leaders in welfare.

From the work and experience contributed by 5 European countries (Italy, Sweden, Spain, United Kingdom and Hungary) and with reference also to the "2nd Conference on the ageing population of the United Nations", comes the publication: "Older Persons Housing Design: A Good Practice Guide" with co-financing from the European Union and national governments. This work, directed at planners, university students, public administrators, commissioners and older people themselves, shows the cultural advances which Europe has made in these very important themes and is a sincere recognition of all those researchers in the medical and social science fields.

INTRODUCTION

Since May 2003 a group of local authorities, regional development agencies and universities from across Europe have worked together to share their skills and knowledge to look at housing issues arising from an ageing population. This partnership working has been made possible through the European Union Interreg III C framework.

The partnership has brought together: Ervet - Emilia-Romagna Economic Territorial Valorisation (Italy); Blekinge Institute of Technology (Sweden); Brighton & Hove City Council (United Kingdom); FAMCP - Federaciòn Aragonesa de Municipalidad, Comarcas y Provincias (Spain); and the Municipality of Györ (Hungary).

Demographic data highlights a significant shift in the social structure of the European Union. Currently, around 22% of the resident population is aged over 65, a percentage which will increase to 40% by the year 2050. In the same period the proportion of people aged over 80 will increase from 4% to 11%. (Source: 2006 European Commission).

Starting from an analysis of this data and the sharing of individual experiences, the partnership gave itself an ambitious objective: the definition of a project of European standing, able to identify good practice guidelines for the correct planning of homes suitable for older people and making them available via an appropriate web site. This project was presented and approved under the European programme Interreg III C which is dedicated to interregional cooperation. Moreover, it received approval from Community bodies, attaining second place among all the proposals financed by the secretariat Interreg III C East of Vienna.

The strategic objectives had to respond to the following demands: how to plan a home and a city suited to an elderly person and, how to insure that the home and the city allowed elderly people to lead independent lives.

The rapid growth in the numbers of elderly people has led policy makers, particularly in health and local government, to give increasing consideration of the needs of the older population. In particular, Ervet has carried out studies and research on the theme and after close on 10 years

of intensive work, in November 2004, the *Action Plan for the Regional Community* was approved by the Emilia Romagna Region, written with the collaboration of Ervet.

Being particularly sensitive to this theme, and having gained wide experience in the course of previous projects, Ervet assumed the leadership of what has become the European project, **wel_hops (welfare housing policies for senior citizens)**.

The Wel_hops project has the aim of realizing common European good practice guidelines for the planning of older persons housing. **This might take the form of entire housing projects, from their initiation to their completion or the renovation of existing homes. The guidelines have the overall aim of making the housing suitable for the elderly, to guarantee them as long a life as possible in their own homes in as independent and safe a manner as possible.**

The Wel_hops project has been co-financed by the European Union, national states and individual bodies to the sum of 1,143,060 Euro and ran from April 2005 to September 2007.

The Wel_hops philosophy and ethos is aimed at:

“improving independence, choice, and quality of life for older people across Europe”

A website has been developed to help promote the guidelines, available at **www. welhops.net**

From Manual to Guidelines

All the technical aspects of the Guidelines **have been addressed exclusively from the point of view of an elderly person's needs**, and have been kept fairly general to maximise understanding, providing practical examples to technical problems. This ensures that the guidelines build upon rather than replicate the wealth of technical guidance available in some countries.

In fact, it is sometimes difficult to choose between the large number of guidance documents currently available and to find less well known, or even completely new, solutions. Tests of draft versions of the guidelines, carried out by all five partners, have confirmed the need for such efforts as well as having brought to light less evident needs, apparently only secondary, but

which give an added depth of interest to the whole work. In that context, it is worth pointing out that among the 50 European experiences visited and tested, none of these (even the best and most interesting from many points of view) was able to satisfy the entire range of nearly 400 needs expressed by residents and indicated in this publication.

The issues around housing design are very different for people approaching the subject from different professions with varying levels of understanding and expectation. We have purposely avoided producing a very detailed and lengthy technical manual given the diversity between the various European countries with regard to regulations, social, cultural and economic differences. Thus, we concentrated on concerns exclusively defined by the residential needs of elderly people in an easy to understand format the crosses all levels of understanding.

The guidelines are there to raise an awareness of the housing needs of older people in an easy to understand manner, highlighting key fundamental needs and overriding principles. With any development project, once commissioners identify and establish these principles designers must refer to their country's own technical and regulatory guidance to put these fundamental needs and principles in practice.

The fundamental needs of older people do not change from country to country or region to region. The project has recognised this principle and has produced a single design guide that is equally applicable in all European countries (and beyond). Different language versions have been produced, but the content is the same in each version, whether in Italian, Swedish, Hungarian, Spanish or in English. This standard ensures that future projects involving different countries can work from a common framework and shared understanding. A single design guide also ensures that the housing needs of older people are equally recognised in all countries.

It is important to note that the guidelines are recommendations rather than obligations. Due to the variances of language in differing countries, the guidelines are a "Good Practice Guide" in the UK, "Recommendations" in Italy, and "Suggestions" in Spanish. Fundamentally, all housing must be designed with the needs of future residents in mind and the guidelines will help those involved in the development of projects to work with older people to identify those requirements that are most applicable.

The Guidelines, the object of the research carried out by the five country partners, are

recommendations for the planning and construction of new residences, the restructuring of existing ones and also for important urban transformations with regard to bettering the life of older people. They represent an array of technical considerations, formal solutions, practical details and applicable methods for an innovative vision directed at housing for both the elderly and the very elderly.

We wish to highlight not so much the innovative character of the proposal made by the guidelines, in so much as others have already struggled with this aspect, but more their open ended characteristic which may be implemented over time. In reality, with these “recommendations” there are, even though in a more or less implicit form, some indispensable “pre-conditions” for defining those conditions which allow us to improve the quality of life of an older person, equal to those of a purely technical nature.

For example the slogan *“improving independence, choice, and quality of life for older people across Europe”*, which singles out and accompanies the whole Wel_hops project, goes well beyond a simple affirmation for introducing a collective mode of behaviour, capable of directing the decision makers, both private and public, and contrasts directly with the idea of institutionalisation without alternative. That concept, although well established in Northern European countries and some Southern regions (Emilia Romagna among them) still only remains an aspiration for public administrators in many countries.

Another point which deserves mentioning is that a side effect of the introduction of the points raised in the Guidelines will be an improvement in everyone’s lifestyle and not only that of elderly people. Many of the principles applied throughout the guidelines would equally apply to other residents, not just the elderly, particularly for those with physical or sensory disabilities. If more general housing is built to the standards suggested in the guidelines, it removes the often challenging need for residents to move home as their health or other needs change.

In the Guideline recommendations, extensive use of automated and innovative technical solutions has not been given pride of place. Hi-tech solutions have been thought of to help the person rather than substitute them for the principal activities of everyday life. Having done this, other objectives were met, all aimed at maintaining personal independence over time.

An important aspect which merits being mentioned is the particular point of view from which the

entire question of senior citizen housing has been approached.

The guidelines only deal with points principally relating to the nature of building, the fittings and fixtures and the technological systems of home / building / city. Only in some particular cases has there been some dwelling on aspects inherent in furnishing, but only, either directly or indirectly when these questions were related to form or to the physical spaces in building and urban divisions. The subjects of sanitary articles or assistance and also references to small elements of furnishing have been intentionally left out of the picture as they were not considered pertinent from the point of view of the Wel_hops project.

Similarly, the guidelines do not contain all those observations which by now are considered indispensable in building and inherent in normal practice, being covered by the national standards of the various countries (seismic stability, material certification, energy efficiency, building site safety, etc).

The researchers and European experts working on the project were very conscious of the views expressed about the limitations of the guidelines but felt that it was vital to adhere to the fundamental aim of the work of defining general measures which enhance the quality of life (home, building and environment) rather than undermining the purpose by expanding the document to include vast amounts of detailed guidance.

One last point that should not be forgotten in this first part of the introduction relates to the name adopted for this document. By using the term guidelines or suggestions the authors have intentionally underlined that the text is directed towards focusing attention on a requirement, linked to the specific needs of residents, and able to meet performance objectives, rather than being an instruction manual that must be obeyed.

Construction manuals have traditionally been produced in a prescriptive format, often based on diagrams, project type, suitable solutions, iconographic symbols originating from some construction tradition and / or the instructions for a particular construction, valid once and for all. The alternative is a cultural or performance based model based on the needs of the user. It takes a totally flexible position which leaves the doors open to diverse solutions which, whilst respecting predetermined aims, allowing for innovative and creative manoeuvring, conditioned only by the knowledge of the overall objective.

This leaves a wide space for future technical solutions. Moreover, these could be further implemented thanks to the growth of understanding and the development of technology. This approach does not offer ready-made solutions which are only valid in a specific moment or in some geographic location (the traditional manual type), but offers every possible solution as long as the user's / consumer's needs are met.

This is an opportunity not to be missed, especially with respect to the theme of extra care housing which still has a long way to go at a European level in order to realise its full potential, particularly now that new countries with different historical and cultural traditions and different housing models and demographics have entered the European Union. Radical change seems inevitable, particularly starting with more vulnerable sections of the population.

The form of communication adopted by the Guidelines

The method of representation used by the Guidelines has been chosen to be immediately explicit and easily understood. The available options were numerous, but the guide uses a form of communication based on easily understandable references which are simple to understand and effective in interpretation. The guidelines bring a common understanding to the development projects when being planned by people of different professions, particularly when technical experts are working with non-technical project commissioners and older people.

For these reasons certain methods have been ignored: methods of representation based on long didactic and repetitive texts which discourage reading; methods which are excessively technically based on designs with representations in plans, sections, graphic representations, etc, likely to discourage those who do not have the necessary expertise; representations of a cartoon nature which, although easily interpreted, risk giving the entire work an unscientific aspect.

In order to facilitate immediate understanding, but at the same time guaranteeing a clear image of the enormous effort behind the scenes, the authors have opted for a hybrid solution which contains both a limited textual element relating and highlighting each person's need, as well as in a figurative way (image or photograph) which represents the person's essential needs in a visual way. In particular the images have been constructed highlighting the relevant actions

in the foreground, leaving in the background (in grey) the remaining spaces unused at that moment.

The aspect of setting has been expressly configured in such a way as to appear pleasant for residents (many parts have been taken from photographs of the real residential environments); the reduction of the furnishings is due to this type of choice. In the discussion between the partners of the Wel_hops project and on the basis of the diverse experiences registered in the first phase of the work, there have been other more "contemporary" and "modernistic" solutions, often also particularly appreciated by users. But we know that today it is not the same for everyone and, therefore, we have left such modern alternatives for future occasions, staying for now on a more conservative and achievable note and one that is more tied to the traditions of all partner countries.

True independent living is more than just an accessible home. Older people must be given every opportunity to interact and be a part of the wider community. We must ensure that any home based on the guidelines does not become a 'prison' for the residents. It is equally important that the grounds and urban environment is accessible to older people.

We have divided the guidelines into sections to represent the wider living environment of older people from the home to the community:

- **Section A: the home** - single units of accommodation. This section has been subdivided into two subsections marked by the indispensable needs and those distinguished as complementary. This separates the needs normally considered as essential for the life of each resident (washing one's self, sleeping, eating, etc.) from those considered as optional, even though they may belong to daily individual behaviour (washing clothes, looking after pets and plants, making the most of comforts and availing one's self of safety and security, etc.).
- **Section B: the building outside the home** - the communal spaces outside the home: stairs, halls, general and individual services. This section has 4 subsections: passages and walkways; individual and family services; collective services; and general services. The relative needs of the area of walkways and passages relate to horizontal and vertical connections with the relative areas of access and rest.

We have listed among the needs relative to individual and family services all those which

are linked directly or indirectly to the wholeness of function, which relate to the needs of the individual but which can be also carried out in a communal area (laundry, drying and ironing, individual deposits, etc.).

The needs relative to collective services relate to all the spaces that each development provides in order to encourage interaction and recreational activities directed at residents and non-residents who may use the building (communal room, café, library, gym, TV and computer rooms, prayer room, etc.).

Finally, general services relate to all the spaces and equipment and facilities inherent in extra functions such as controlling the environmental comfort and the aesthetic quality of communal spaces.

- **Section C: the grounds outside the building** - it considers fairly diverse subjects (entrances, pedestrian pathways and carriage accesses, parking, gardens, etc).
- **Section D: the urban context** - the links with the wider community, the public transport stops, etc.

Inside the sections the Guidelines are structured as a homogenous collection of needs which make up all the daily requirements of residents, both inside and outside the home; they arise from an analysis of the requests expressed verbally or through questionnaires given on various occasions, as well as from investigations on their everyday behaviours and living habits.

The Guidelines have been subdivided, for reasons of descriptive clarity, into **fundamental needs** and **specific** needs. Fundamental needs are the general needs which are essential to the diverse phases of "living", while Specific needs are the ancillary but indivisible needs which complete each fundamental need. The specific needs are dependant on fundamental needs. Such a modality of the representation of needs is applicable to all the four sections of the work.

In order to complete the whole array of the specific needs related to each of the fundamental needs, it was necessary to repeat some already featured in a previous fundamental need. This ensures that each section in itself stands alone, which is of particular use when undertaking smaller projects, for example refurbishing the common public areas, whilst at the same time all of the sections together reaffirm themselves and contribute to the whole housing experience.

In order to reinforce the presence and importance of all the activities relative to the refurbishment and renovation of buildings, we have added a new section to highlight the key issues to consider when undertaking these types of projects.

We are very clear that the guidelines are recommendations for ensuring new and refurbished housing is particularly suitable and accessible for enabling older people to maintain their independence. Where it is not possible to meet all the recommendations of this guide, the most important overriding message is to make sure that potential residents of the building are fully involved in the design process at the earliest possible stage to ensure their specific needs are met as far as possible.