

# REFURBISHMENT: STAYING IN ONE'S OWN HOME



## Refurbishment: Staying in one's own home

On the basis of comments from the work group as the project evolved, we considered it important to enhance the final version of the Guidelines by adding a new section dedicated specifically to the theme of refurbishing existing homes. Such an important choice however could risk creating some confusion if not properly explained and justified; in this brief introduction we will try to highlight some of the most important points.

The questions which may arise are numerous, but at least two would seem to appear central:  
a) why is it necessary to dedicate an entire section to the subject of refurbishment?,  
b) in what way does this section relate to the main guidelines? We will try to explain by also introducing a description of the communicative forms employed for the 5<sup>th</sup> section.

A) During the experimental phase of the draft versions for the guidelines, it was noted that there was a strong bias towards new construction, particularly with regard to the images present in the publication. This ran the risk of implying an intention (not intended by the writers) to give more emphasis to new works (linked, therefore, to the idea of people moving home) in contrast with the reworking of existing buildings (strongly tied to the idea of remaining in one's own home).

The guidelines are not meant in any way to favour new construction over refurbishment, as demonstrated by the many images in the text showing refurbishment projects (e.g. the Mälteriets in Stockholm and "Giardino dei Semplici" in Bagnacavallo (Ra), etc.). But if the question has been raised it is possible that some readers may feel that such an intention exists. It must be emphasised that the entire aim of this work was, and still remains, to help to identify the greatest possible number of residential needs for the elderly so that **they can stay in their own homes for as long as possible**.

B) Historically, this form of housing directed at the elderly almost exclusively took the form of new buildings. Many lessons have been learned, however, and we mainly have to thank the elderly themselves for their comments and input. There are now numerous signs of a change of attitude, so much so that the refurbishment of existing housing is emerging as a significant proportion of the total number of homes created each year. It is probable that in the future this trend will strengthen and refurbishment projects directed at the improvement of living conditions in existing buildings will represent an enormously significant, if not the most important, sector. This is particularly true in those countries where there is a more rigid housing market (an elevated number of privately owned homes, high house prices and building land which is much more expensive than the cost of building work itself, etc.

C) In many countries the quota of the residential market for new constructions is by now decreasing and developers are looking towards projects directed at the renovation of existing buildings. One must also higher

consider that, in many areas, there are existing buildings with a historical value, in which there are often a proportion of elderly residents and where rebuild would not be permitted. One must, therefore, consider refurbishment projects as being fundamental to safeguarding the heritage and identity of local communities. In the future there will be therefore an enormous volume of adaptation and innovation which will need to be carried out in order to provide the appropriate accommodation necessary to satisfy the needs of elderly people whilst safeguarding buildings of historic value.

D) Contrary to the obvious assumption, the refurbishment of peoples' own houses often proves to be simpler than other projects. In many cases, indeed, the changes needed to make a home satisfactory can be carried out in a few significant steps, even if they need to be accompanied later by many smaller details. In such cases, great technical expertise is not even necessarily required: assistants, family members or the elderly themselves know the various possibilities (the guideline recommendations will help) can make some changes themselves without much cost. Admittedly, not all refurbishment projects are simple. There are cases indeed which require considerable work in order to make an elderly person's home comfortable, for example, when one has to install a lift in a multifloor complex.

But it is also true that the difficulty to be faced in the refurbishing is often less than that associated with a new building. Thoughts and solutions always remain focused on the single home and not on the wider scope that must be faced when designing a completely new building.

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.

However, when considering refurbishment, if the nature of the building is such that it is not possible to meet the fundamental needs of older people, then consideration should be given to using the building for a different group of residents, and using another building or land to build homes that are more suitable for older people.