

Building for Communal Living in Old Age

Communal living is a good way for old age.

Forms of communal living – whether as neighbourhood communities, shared housing or apartments – are very suitable for older citizens especially. In addition to housing being suitable for people who are no longer so strong and whose health is not the best any more, but still wish to live independently, this form of living is a good way of maintaining social integration: many old people live alone. As they grow weaker, their friends become fewer and far between and their radius of action gets smaller, many suffer from loneliness. They lack contact, impulses and the feeling of being needed.

So why not move into a house with other people or maintain an active neighbourhood community within one house or district to help establish social networks? In addition, communal living means that one must be active oneself and play a role in the community. After all, this is the best recipe for a fulfilled life and pleasure, even in old age.

There are many good examples, which have enjoyed public recognition. Organised networks have formed, providing information, advice and support. Nevertheless, communal living projects are still comparably rare.

This paper is intended to contribute to making communal living in old age easier. The security that these buildings will be in demand in the long-term, and will therefore maintain their value, is one main factor which makes it easier to decide to invest in this form of building.

Investors are faced with many opportunities and but few risks in building houses and neighbourhood communities for young and old alike.

The current trend in communal living is towards houses and neighbourhood communities with individual apartments of different sizes. There should be mixed apartment sizes, as mixed living between young and old is preferable. Many old people need large apartments. This requires a combination of purchased and rented accommodation. These requirements correspond with those which generally prevail in housing construction, and can easily be fulfilled.

Building without barriers is established – security for the future on the rise

Consistent construction without barriers is increasingly asserting itself in communal living projects and supervised housing. However, these plans often remain unfulfilled. In general housing construction, however, we are still a long way from building without barriers. Therefore, housing complexes for communal living are more secure investments for the future than common housing construction.

Balcony or terrace accesses without thresholds remain a problem. Often, the layouts of so-called half-rooms are insufficient. The layout in these smaller rooms, mostly

used as bedrooms, should be such that a bed can be put in to be accessible from three sides.

The development of buildings in low housing complexes, which would otherwise not need an elevator, can be more expensive. In terms of economic efficiency it is important to connect as many apartments as possible to one elevator. It is possible to avoid monotonous corridors or expensive long tree-lined paths by combining tree-lined paths, open development cores and bridged types.

It is difficult to finance the communal rooms in projects for young and old; it is better to be flexible and not to plan too large

The communal rooms are the "extra features" of communal housing complexes. In publicly subsidised housing construction, they are only financed in most regions in connection with supervised housing or other rest homes, but not in general housing construction. It is usually only possible to finance the construction and operating costs if the housing construction firm includes the costs in its general calculations of economic efficiency, and does not assign to, and charge each of the individual households for these costs.

Communal rooms can be small, one or two square metres per apartment can be sufficient. Their acceptance is dependent on their central location and their pleasant design, as well as the possibility to sit outside; of course, it is particularly important that the inhabitants be willing to decorate these rooms. This is more important than their size. It is also possible to reduce the risk of financing the operating costs in the long-term by making the communal rooms suitable for flexible use, so that they could, if necessary, be made into apartments or hired out to service providers.

Use the opportunities offered by an active role by the inhabitants in planning and operation

The often long planning times until an initiative group has been found and developed a concept, and the wish of many participants to have their say often scare off housing construction firms. In general, the initiative groups for these projects are not the investors, as communal and neighbourhood living projects of this nature for young and old often comprise 50 apartments and more. However, there are sometimes smaller initiatives in which the inhabitants are themselves the investors, commissioning a recognised project manager with the fulfilment.

The results benefit from planning with the future inhabitants, or at least a smaller core group: the building quality, the maintenance and servicing of the object, harmonious cohabitation, well-being and satisfaction.

Also for housing in old age: layouts with rooms of equal quality, for couples and for privately organised apartment sharing

We found hardly any small, organised groups of older people sharing accommodation. However, there were a few who believed that their standard of living would remain

high in the future. Quite frequently, we came across older people, who despite their advanced ages – sometimes far older than 65 – had entered into a new relationship and were living together, either married or unmarried. Many were also looking for this kind of partnership. It appears that many old people now wish and intend to continue in their accustomed pattern of sharing their lives with a partner, even after their original partner had died.

In addition to the communal areas, couples and small groups of friends sharing accommodation expect that everyone should have their own room, not only for sleeping, but also for private activities and interests. The traditional layout, with large communal areas, a medium-sized bedroom for the parents and smaller bedrooms for the children, is not suitable. Suitable layouts with equal-sized rooms which can be used flexibly are also good for the lifestyles of many young people, couples, single parents and people who work from home. Therefore, the market segment for this kind of layout is by no means small, and the risk is slight that these apartments cannot be marketed.

Supervised living groups for people requiring help – more planning and construction expenses are required, and less long-term security for use

It is more difficult to construct housing for larger communities. The market is very tight and the requirements very diverse. These requirements can often only be fulfilled in the existing or planned accommodation at extra cost. In addition, it is uncertain how the demand will develop.

These shared housing facilities are usually only constructed for people needing help. The concept includes mutual household management, supported by permanent or external home-helps and consultants. This enables older people, who cannot quite manage on their own, to still live independently.

Supervised housing with 1 ½ room apartments for each inhabitant and communal rooms can be easily realised by joining apartments, provided that the group only consists of four or five people.

In the last few years, these projects have been set up in Germany, especially to help old people suffering from dementia. Due to the joint household management especially, life in a communal group offers confused old people many impulses and considerable confirmation within a family environment.

Up until now, the standard of living in these communal projects for dementia patients has been similar to that in rest homes. Usually, the inhabitants only have their own room and a shower bathroom. Made up of six to nine people, the groups are larger. These shared apartments can be 280 m² or even larger.

These layouts, which are similar to hotels can only be realised as special solutions in residential buildings, due to the extensive sanitary development and the size of apartments on one level. They can be installed in renovated attics, or on the ground floor or even in renovated city villas. It remains to be seen how the demand for these

intensively supervised communal groups will develop.

Communal living projects in old age in the sensitive context of desiring social integration and distance

There are now two types of communal living projects: such in which the inhabitants take responsibility for a very active communal life and such in which communication is offered as part of the "service". It is understood that the latter – which makes less active demands of the individual inhabitants – represent the majority for communal living in old age, and that real communal living projects, in which the inhabitants are the initiators and the main actors, remain the remarkable, admirable exceptions.