REDESIGNING DOMESTICITY
CREATING HOMES FOR THE ELDERLY

K's Architects, Steel Sheet Farmhouse, Osaka, Japan, 2005

opposite: The skylight running the length of the house defines the boundary between the original house and the steel sheet addition. The new accessible living spaces are distinguished by their white, light-reflecting surfaces.

In keeping with the nature of the minka, sliding screens vary the scenography depending on time of day, year and activity.
Our homes are the settings for much of our lives. They provide opportunities for us to develop a sense of our individuality, shared aspirations as a family or as an extended community. Increasingly, architects recognise that the potential of the home as a positive influence requires reconsideration when designing for the elderly or for those heading towards later life. Our homes are distinct from our housing, while housing can provide large-scale standardised solutions, whether in social housing or the speculative market, the home is always a unique outcome, a reflection of its occupants. Given the importance of our homes, and their relation to our lives, how are architects developing designs that can accommodate the desires and aspirations of the ageing population? How are they recognising the demands of the postwar generation who are increasingly active in old age, and have significantly different life experience and expectations to those of their parents’ generation?

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Connecting Tradition to Contemporary Life: Ks Architects, Sheet Steel Farmhouse, Osaka, Japan

The original minka (traditional Japanese-style farmhouse) that forms the basis of the Sheet Steel house is now completely surrounded by Osaka’s vast suburbia. Emioki Kimura, the founding partner of Ks Architects, has acted as architect to three generations of the same family, originally for the father, his first client. The most recent work for daughter and granddaughter has entailed remodelling the original 1920s house to clarify its form, almost a step back in time, providing a more practical solution entailing remodelling the original 1920s house to clarify its form, allowing the ground floor to operate in a traditional manner with tatami mats and paper shoji framing interconnected rooms and forming long views from the elderly living space.

Kimura has here developed a new domestic language based on sheet steel fabrication techniques from the shipyards of nearby Hyogo to create a keen distinction between the traditional and contemporary. The resulting house allows the family to once more use their home in a way that caters for their differing and sometimes competing needs, but without the compromises that often seem inevitable. In so doing, the reconsidered home provides both shared opportunities and universal gains. It is far less about extending and adapting the accommodation, and far more about revealing the original beauty of the timber-framed house in a new interpretation of the familial situation.

The solution incorporates a new entrance capsule, accentuating the threshold from the outside world (eaves line, with vertical combs providing both taxonomy and gate). The entrance also filters out the hubris aesthetic and family core (between the Japanese concepts of uchi) to the domestic, the threshold from the outside world (elderly family member). This has required the synthesis of the historical in the developing needs of the family and particularly those of a frail grandmother. How should architects act when users may be unable to participate in the design process, if the needs of those participants are to be represented? How can the resulting architecture anticipate the desires of those requiring stimulus and continuity, but with significant support needs? How should architects act when users may be unable to participate in the design process, if the needs of those participants are to be represented? How can the resulting architecture anticipate the desires of those requiring stimulus and continuity, but with significant support needs?

The following projects illustrate a more careful consideration on the architecture realised.

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Residents are free to wander, shop for groceries, take part in the wider community or that of the smaller home unit. Although De Hogeweyk has been criticised for the apparent artificiality of the environment it provides, the situation is no more synthetic than any medium-sized housing development. De Hogeweyk may be seen as a highly articulated, even unique, response to housing for those requiring significant support. Although De Hogeweyk has been criticised for the apparent artificiality of the environment it provides, the situation is no more synthetic than any medium-sized housing development. De Hogeweyk may be seen as a highly articulated, even unique, response to housing for those requiring significant support.

Considering the mainstream rather than the more exacting needs of those with dementia, housing which offers the active elderly a setting that links to recent life, work and community while concentrating on maximising and potential progressive support would respond in the spectrum of housing needed.

Within Elder & Cannon Architects’ Rockfield housing in Oban, the housing types, their physical relationships and the possibilities of public and private space have been configured with the circumstances of its setting in a small Scottish town in mind. The project aims to attract and retain an active elderly population, and those it will serve in time, as well as the active elderly a setting that links to recent life, work and community. While the level of medication required and connected cost is appropriately low in this community, the residents are regularly involved in, comment on the level of activity that many suffers and their carers and families to create a comprehension guide to make designing dementia friendly. It is even good practice to work with the dementia friendly environments that aim at practical ways to improve the quality of life with dementia and those who care for them.

All of us need to consider where we live, how we live, and how we will use our homes in the future, and architects need to be mindful of these same criteria when designing our housing.