

# REDESIGNING DOMESTICITY CREATING HOMES FOR THE ELDERLY

**Ks 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.

Sally Stewart





**Ks Architects, Steel Sheet Farmhouse, Osaka, Japan, 2005**  
*left:* The kitchen counter becomes a hub between the entrance, traditional house and new studio.

*below:* Folded planes nestle below the existing eaves line, with vertical combs providing both boundary and gate.



The following projects illustrate a more careful consideration of the relationship between home and the elderly, and its impact on the architecture realised.

**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. Hiroaki 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 to the developing needs of the family and particularly those of a frail grandmother. This has required the synthesis of the historical significance of the original house, a respect for the cultural and traditional aspects of the Japanese way of life, and the rethinking of the necessary amenities to accommodate the needs of the elderly family member.

The solution incorporates a new entrance capsule, accentuating the threshold from the outside world (*soto*) to the domestic, aesthetic and family core (*uchi*), between the Japanese concepts of the alien and the familiar. The entrance also filters out the hubris of the suburb through a series of layers designed to control noise

and light, and to limit views into and out from the house to the street beyond, effectively defining the very intimate world of the family.

To one side, a new accessible living area has been added to provide a self-contained bedroom, wet room and day space that can be reconnected to the main building by opening a series of sliding screens, thus placing the elderly person at the heart of the house.

With the removal of previous alterations and additions, the original timber structure and grid pattern becomes apparent, 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.

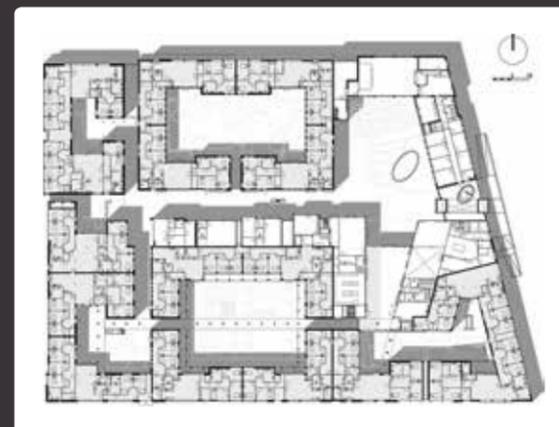
How should architects act when users may be unable to participate in the design process, if the needs of those participants are to be represented? How can the resulting architecture anticipate the desires of those requiring stimulus and continuity, but with significant support needs?



**Molenaar&Bol&VanDillen architecten (MBVDA), De Hogeweyk, Weesp, The Netherlands, 2009**  
*top:* Balconies and raised walkways provide visual connections and interaction above the ground plane.

*below:* The development presents a consistent edge to the neighbourhood while providing highly articulated exterior space at its core.

*above:* Distinctive interior treatments in each housing type provide references to different lifestyles.



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 familialsituation.

**The Custom-Built Community:  
 Molenaar&Bol&VanDillen architecten (MBVDA), De Hogeweyk, Weesp, The Netherlands**

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? MBVDA's De Hogeweyk project attempts to answer these questions, and provide a residential environment that allows those with dementia greater continuity of their pre-onset lifestyles, social situations and patterns of living within the bounds of a dedicated village.

The development provides a range of seven housing types or settings that give the impression of the variety of living arrangements present in most contemporary Dutch communities. Residents are able to live in a setting most familiar to their previous home, requiring less 'learning' of a new and distinctive physical environment, which is a particular issue for those with for dementia.

Grouped around a series of interlinking courtyards, each housing type is distinct in arrangement and interior treatment. Six or seven residents share a house, giving a reasonable level of intimacy and familiarity for residents and carers while reducing stress levels. Through careful manipulation of the courtyard edge, apartments have views or direct access through patio doors, or sizeable balconies that provide small-scale social space.

Elder & Cannon Architects, Housing for the Elderly at Rockfield, Oban, Scotland, 2013  
top: The street edge of the housing provides coherence with the existing urban context.

bottom: View across the shared garden between the apartments and detached houses. The arrangement of components allows mediation between the external Victorian street scale of the small town and the necessary intimacy of the housing group.



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.

#### Age-Specific or Universal? Elder & Cannon Architects, Housing for the Elderly at Rockfield, Oban, Scotland

There remains a misconception that designing for the elderly has a significant financial implication in terms of additional capital or running costs.<sup>6</sup> In addition, it is often thought that design that takes into consideration our changing physical and cognitive performance, and uses these as design criteria, will limit other users rather than making the design outcome universally advantageous. Psychologist Bill Gillham and designer Alastair Macdonald have identified the negative impact of provisions claimed to cater for all the requirements of elderly residents rather than providing for current needs while supporting existing abilities. They note:

The 'total care' philosophy – which the elderly themselves often vehemently reject – is one that *creates* a burden because it is disabling by its very function. The elderly are rarely seen as a resource in their own lives, and almost never as a resource in their own community.<sup>7</sup>

Considering the mainstream rather than the more exacting demands of those with dementia, housing which offers the active elderly a setting that links to recent life, work and community while countenancing customisation and potential progressive support would respond to 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 within the heart of the town, and to provide amenities for residents and the wider neighbourhood that are currently unavailable. It anticipates the needs of the immediate population, and those it will serve in time, as well as the dynamic between residents and the wider community.

Rockfield also attempts to encourage the community to reconsider its aspirations, recognising the potential for small-scale interventions to repair the existing townscape while introducing desirable settings for living in later life. In this case, the active elderly can become a highly visible and influential group, their continued participation in the life of the town becoming a social imperative. The development of high-quality homes for the elderly within the community also acts as a marker of the town's ambitions for a dynamic and inclusive population.

#### Reconsidering the Architect's Role

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. In designing housing for the elderly, a synthesis between the continuous thread of the notion of 'home' and the evolving needs and expectations of the ageing population is required. Here, architects take on a complex series of roles: activator, advocate, empathiser, visualiser, enabler and problem solver. In considering how they can provide the circumstances for the elderly to make the homes they wish for, and an architecture for their future selves, architects should thus heed the advice of Witold Rybczynski: 'Domestic well-being is too important to be left to the experts; it is, as it has always been, the business of the family and the individual.'<sup>8</sup> ▮

#### Notes

1. Our collaboration began with 'Housing for the Third Age: A Study of European Housing Models for an Ageing Population the 1990s and Beyond', in Bill Gillham (ed), *The Challenge of Age*, Foulis Press (Glasgow), 1996.
2. The Just Another Disability: Making Design Dementia Friendly project, begun in 1999, brought together architects, designers, care professionals, dementia sufferers and their carers and families to create a comprehensive guide to making design dementia-friendly. It drew on good practice worldwide as well as the experience of live projects within the city that aimed in practical ways to improve the quality of life of people with dementia and those who care for them.
3. Hauge and Heggen identified the private spaces that residents feel they control as contributing to a sense of homeliness.

4. Solveig Hauge and Kristin Heggen, 'The Nursing Home as a Home: A Field Study of Residents' Daily Life in the Common Living Rooms', *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 17, 4, 2007, pp 460–7.
5. Roger Coleman, 'Preface', in *The Challenge of Age*, op cit, p 9.
6. At De Hogeweyk, relatives and carers comment on the level of activity that many of the residents are regularly involved in, while the level of medication required and connected cost is significantly lower than in other more conventional residences.
7. Bill Gillham and Alastair Macdonald, 'The Role of Research in Schools of Art and Design: The Implications from Practice', in *The Challenge of Age*, op cit, p 91.
8. Rybczynski, op cit, p 232.

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