Happiness is having room to do what you want to do during uncommitted time. An area eight feet by eight feet of floor space accommodates many indoor activities. Above is Mrs. Helen Cochran of Tucson at her loom. She also has space in her apartment for piano, typewriter and sewing machine.

Cover: The author, pictured at the right side of the cover, discusses the requirements of outdoor areas for elderly citizens with Professor of Landscape Architecture, Guy S. Greene. The author is a member of the Board of Trustees of the Tucson Housing Foundation and a member of the Board of Directors of Tucson Council on Aging.

Social & Physical Requirements of Housing For The Elderly

*by Faye C. Jones**

Our concern about housing for elderly people is the same as it is for other age groups in the population. We start by putting all of the camels under the same tent. We put people before things and we believe the prime function of housing is to provide for the basic requirements of life. After finding ways a segment of the population differs from the whole, we may put the camels in separate tents.

Housing should be an environment where people can function to the best of their capabilities and find satisfactions that are essential for their well being. Ability and activities are more significant than age of people.

Robert Havighurst said, "We do not know how it feels to grow old." This is probably our largest handicap in doing things for elderly, whether it is helping them into a car, or building a highrise apartment building. Lots of empathy is needed to determine both the requirements and the way to provide for them. Sentimentality serves no useful purpose. It satisfies the person who enjoys being emotional and wants an opportunity to express his feelings, about others, to other people. It just doesn't get the job done. The job needs plain, hard facts and sound principles of planning, plus all of the empathy people can give to the job.

Frank Lloyd Wright is supposed to

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have said, "Form follows function." Let's explore the meaning of these words and the order. Form is what we see of a building and its parts. Function is what a building and its parts do for people. If the order is reversed, and function follows form, people must adjust to buildings, if they are physically and psychologically able to do so. Why are we building a building?

From a large group there are four social needs of people which increase in importance with the years. Then, more than at any prior time in their lives, people need a territory, identity, spatial discrimination, and stimulation. Upon retirement, people give up the life that provided all of these things in the normal course of events.

Robert Somner, a social psychologist, made observations in a center where about 300 elderly people live. Each morning one man walked across the lawn and sat on a retaining wall screened by a bush. The psychologist knew not to disturb him in his lair but he talked with him at other times. One day he asked, "Why do you sit on the retaining wall every morning?" The man waited before he replied, "It's none of your business." Somner added both round and square tables and chairs to a lounge to encourage conversation. The residents used the square tables and avoided the round. He concluded the corners were boundary markers that define a territory.

Prior to living in group housing, their homes and surroundings gave people identity. They had identity at work, in organizations, in family groups, churches and neighborhoods. They leave behind them those things when they move into group housing but they continue to need identity. Opportunities for identification in a large center are limited.

Let's think about a situation. One hundred eighty residential units mean one hundred eighty doors opening into halls. If all of the doors are painted early vanilla or landlord cream to match the walls, with numbers about an inch high, people who live behind those doors do not have much identity. A person becomes the woman who lives in number 217 or 302. Housing specialists are concerned about both the problem and a solution.

If the doors were painted an array of colors, people would have some identity. "Friends know of my violent dislike for purple, but I would rather live behind a purple door than to be known as number 217." If my vision declined, I may need help to find my look-a-like door. How humiliating! I am sure I can find a purple door, unless all other doors were purple.

These doors will probably remain cream unless someone finds a way to overcome such obstacles as; an order to paint the doors that avoids an increase in labor cost, offsetting a small cost for colored paint, selecting ten colors from about 2,875 which the human eye can distinguish as being different, and, deciding which color goes next to which. Then, there is the painter, the maintenance man, and the public — people who will not be living there, and the man who is mildly negative about the project and evaluates everything by saying, "These old people never had it so good." The artistic and technical problems can be solved easily. People who do not live there are expendable.

We have tried to find a word that describes the kind of decisions that are made with deference to the trades, to the public, to maintenance, to present practices, to what another center did. Maybe they are ego-decisions. The results of ego-decisions often contrast sharply with decisions resulting from a thorough consideration of the physical and social needs of people. Why are we building the building?

Han Proppe, a young architect with an intense interest in the environment for elderly people, believes more thought should be given to the spatial discrimination in their housing. People spend the first 65 or 70 years in a visual environment that is made up of contrasts in light intensities, in textures, in shapes, in sizes, and in color. Contrast serves a useful purpose. It is the way we judge distances and locate things and places. This is spatial discrimination.

When time reaction and motions slow down and visual acuity is not what it used to be, a well designed physical environment helps people to be independent. There are strong social implications in independence.

Elderly people need more than food, medicine and love. Our intent to do good by them is expressed in many ways. Floors, even bathrooms, are carpeted. Temperature is controlled to a uniform degree during all seasons, and, morning, noon and night. The acoustical environment is controlled. They hear what we think they want to hear, and, they do not hear what we think they do not want to hear. We build walls of glass for a view, of something. The mechanical equipment modifies the temperature variations due to excessive heat loss and heat gain through expanses of glass. Operation of this equipment increases their rent, but the elderly can look out and see where their money goes. So much of the world is admitted through glass, there is no point in going outside for a change of view or fresh air. We paint walls cream to harmonize with the beige carpets. Why do we use beige?

Too often, our efforts to do good by people produces an environment without stimulation. Since sameness prevails, there isn't anything to react to. Then, we wonder why the residents do not want to make pots, play games, even talk with other residents. A few months ago, I had an interesting talk with the administrator of a retirement housing center in the San Fernando Valley of California. We talked about the role of the physical and social environments for elderly people. He said, "There are days when I wish for a dog fight against the front door." It is easier to provide people with a stimulating environment through design of buildings, furnishings and color than it is to stage a dog fight — and much more permanent.

Paint some walls chartreuse and raspberry in less important public parts — the mail boxes, the laundry, public restrooms . . . Display some psychodelic art, move the potted plants, rearrange the furniture in the lounge. The residents will move it back, but they will have to talk it over and help each other push it around. It's good for one social experience.

Research is underway to study color preferences of people over 60. The objective is to determine which colors people like, which they do not like, and to which they are indifferent.

The kinds of things that produce controversy and stimulation in their

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past must be replaced. Without stimulation people decline. What is being good to elderly?

A good living unit is a group of good parts put together in a good way. These parts are floor space and equipment and furniture that are needed to provide for basic human needs. These needs are the obvious; sleep, preparation and eating food — snacks to meals, personal care and hygiene, storage of their possessions, and use of uncommitted time. These are the functional requirements of the statement: form follows function.

The form is the way these requirements are provided for. The form is good if the elderly are safe, if they have confidence in their living environment, if they have privacy, and if they can live with dignity. Also, if there is economy of space and money. Economy in these respects may be the way to get other things. When the form of a building disregards function, people must make adjustments.

The 1960 census reported the highest frequency of accidents in homes occur to two age groups — under two years and over 65. Elderly people do not appear to be concerned about their safety.

Safety devices to prevent falls in bathrooms, panic buttons, non-skid floors, good lighting, hand-rails, electricity for cooking, and fire-proof buildings are all necessary. Housing specialists agree entirely with these measures, but we go farther with safety precautions than these devices. This is the age when the frequency of heart ailments and high blood pressure is high. For this group doctors order: no pulling, no pushing, no stooping, no bending, no reaching. Most of these postural efforts can be eliminated in the design of apartments and they should be.

Elderly people need confidence in their physical environment. Confidence gives them a feeling of assurance that they can do the things they want to do without stress, such as, regulate heat on a range, read temperature settings on an oven, find what they want in storage — a function of height and light. Familiarity with the type of equipment and its operation, and accessibility of things, gives them confidence.

During a recent visit to an appliance store to have a look at new equipment, the salesman said, "Using this range is as simple as pushing a button." There were about 20 buttons across the front of the range — some red, some white and some blue. Putting your finger on a button and pushing it is a simple operation. Remembering which color does what,

"This is the age when frequency of heart ailments and high blood pressure is high. For this group doctors order: 'no reaching, no stooping, no bending, no pushing, no pulling.' Most of these postural efforts can be eliminated in design of apartment, and they should be! In this case an unsafe arrangement could have been made safe by installing the wall cabinet 14 inches above the counter top.

and which button belongs to which heating unit, is not so simple. If technology moves any further into left field, we may need to ask industry to make a model for elderly people. People who live with elderly people report they refuse to learn how to operate new types of equipment.

The author was asked to prepare a critique of proposed plans for a large retirement center in another state. The living unit plans had been collected from various sources. All of them have been built and people are living in them. Space and equipment were studied in these layouts from the standpoint of safety, privacy, dignity, confidence and economy of space and money. There were good features on these plans.

Bedrooms were so small people could not make a bed or clean under it without moving the bed. It is true that space costs money but when people live with wall-to-wall mattresses, it is time to remove a wall and have an alcove off of a sitting room, with appropriate screening. In other cases plans were found without either a bedroom or sleeping alcove. Residents must sleep on furniture that converts into a bed. The doctor orders, no pulling and no pushing. People like to live with dignity. People who work with the elderly say they make their bed but may be in and out of it several times during a day.

In small apartments, a substantial amount of wasted space is evident due to poorly planned traffic lanes. In a 12 foot by 16 foot sitting room, 58 percent of the floor space was devoted to traffic lanes. After moving two doors, only 17 percent was used for this purpose. Also, the change provided visual privacy in the bedroom.

Housing specialists cannot give designers research results to cite the amount of floor space that should be devoted to traffic through a room. There are too many variables to study this problem. We do know a straight line is the shortest distance between two points.

On one or more of the layouts for these apartments, there were dressing rooms three feet wide by four feet long with a mirror over a narrow shelf, and there were the two doors. It is doubtful if many 80 year olds can stand on one foot long enough to put a sock and shoe on the other. Want to bet that the person who lives in such an apartment dresses in the sitting room? . . .

My empathy for these people is rather strong when it relates to kitchens and equipment. Do we know

what it is like to add limited vision to inadequate facilities. One of my 80 year old friends is a retired physician. He is blind. He talks about his problems during visits. One of his problems is shopping for food he can use. Cans and packages must be marked by a sighted person so he can identify the contents later.

Prefabrication is used to reduce the cost of buildings — Look for exceptions. An exception is a ready-built unit that is used in lieu of a kitchen. No one can dignify this 24 by 28 by 36 inch object with the name kitchen.

It has two units for cooking but no oven. There is a very small sink beside the burners. There is no work space. Under the sink, there is about two cubic feet of refrigerated storage. Under the cooking units, there is about the same amount of space to store dishes and utensils and food supplies. All of the storage is between the floor and finger tip heights. Workers must bend or stoop to remove and return to storage everything they use. Dignity or not, the top of the chest in the sitting room will be used to store packages and dishes. The contract price on the "thing" is about $375.

Someone defended this prefabricated unit on the basis that elderly people eat T.V. dinners and the unit is good enough. Let's see about that. The refrigerator shelf is not as wide as the T.V. dinner and there is no oven.

It is always easier to find fault than it is to prepare an alternate proposal. This critique attempts to do both. One alternate is to include a 3-unit electric range with an oven and an 11 cubic foot refrigerator. The storage is high in this refrigerator. It costs about $60 less than the lowest price under-the-counter models that have less than half the capacity. The work counter and storage proposed is a custom designed six-foot long base cabinet with a 24 inch sink installed in one end and a four-foot long wall cabinet installed 14 inches above the counter top. I am aware that the installation height of the wall cabinet is about eight inches lower than the present practice installation. Housing specialists know that elderly women are not six feet tall. The contract price on this complete kitchen is about $550 — $125 less than the "prefab" substitute being used.

Someone thought elderly people like the prefab unit. Sorry, the project can't afford them. On a three hundred unit project, the prefab units will cost $37,500 more than the custom designed kitchen described.

Opinions of people should be treated cautiously. For years, the public has been observed while viewing new houses that are open for inspection. Eavesdrop on people while they tell the builder how much they like the house. But, outside the door, they review all of its faults and agree they wouldn't have the house at half the price. This seems to be an old American custom.

The program of building a center to house elderly people goes through many phases from concept to completion. Different professional groups have valuable contributions to make. If the training and experience of an individual has prepared him to do the work, he is a professional. On all other phases of the job, he is an amateur. Someone defined an amateur planner as a person who can make two bad mistakes to correct one people can live with. They are the people who move a bathroom door to open into a sitting room to make wall space to install a towel bar that is not needed.

The sociologist, the physician and the housing specialist may get together and design a facade for the building but their design would not become the ninth wonder of the world.

The author recommends that models of living units be prepared for nationwide use. Each of the models could be designed to solve a problem and presented in print. Since ability to pay is our Lord and Master, base the size of the models upon price. But, size is not design. The design of each model should be based upon space requirements for activities appropriate to the problem. There are advantages of using minimum space for each model. However, in each model, there should be places indicated on the layout to increase either the length or width or both without disturbing the design of kitchens, bathrooms, storage or traffic routing. This can be accomplished with modular planning.

Housing specialists have information that they can use to improve design. We have data from research results on energy output for various types of postural efforts. We have design data for both horizontal and vertical dimensions of space; space requirements for activities in three standards — minimum, desirable and optimum. There is information about reaching and working heights of people. We have design data for storage. People having impaired mobility have concerned us and we know what adjustments must be made for those people.

The $37,500 that it is possible to save on a single project will go a long ways toward the cost of preparing the models. These models should save time and money as well as produce a good standard.

In respect to physical requirements, people are more like other people than they think they are. Differences that do exist can be provided for within the framework of good functional design for the group we set out to serve.

Research results take much guesswork out of solutions for technical problems. Decisions based on personal likes, present practices, and assumptions, when other people are the consumers, do not give good results. Assumptions can be wrong.

The value of being analytical when making choices is helpful. For example, the wall finishes in residential units may be exposed masonary, wood paneling either prefinished or job finished, drywall with paint or wallpaper, plaster with paint or paper, or the inside of a prefab wall section. Strip all of the choices down to the atoms in their bones. Find out which attributes each treatment has for the purpose before making a decision.

From the first concept of the job to completion, there will be difficult decisions, or there had better be. These will be times when one question should be asked and answered: Why are we building this building? When completed, the building often shows if the question was asked at the right times and how it was answered.

Housing can satisfy an amalgamation of basic human needs. The people who live in the center are silent consumers. Know them well enough to give them a place to live that is in accord with their abilities and values.