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Final Report

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Planning for the Future: The Role of Mobility in Residential and Lifestyle Choices of Baby Boomers and Older Adults

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Project Description

This study explores the extent to which Baby Boomers and older adults take mobility and transportation issues into consideration as they make individual residential and lifestyle plans for their future older years. While transportation and urban planners may be aware of what has been called a gray tsunami, little attention has been paid to how individuals weigh mobility in their decisions about living, working and playing in their older years. Yet because mobility is so crucial for continued quality of life, it seems as if it should be a prime factor in decision making for one's older years – transportation should be central to questions about whether to age in place, part of a choice to relocate to another community, and a consideration in decisions about future work and medical issues. This project focuses on the extent to which mobility and transportation issues play into Baby Boomers' and older adults' decisions about future residence and lifestyle, and why such issues may be often overlooked rather than explicitly considered.

Methodology

There were three components to this primary project: first, a literature review of work on housing patterns and trends among an aging population; second, interviews with experts, including academics, designers and builders, about trends in housing and housing choices for older adults; and third, focus groups with Baby Boomers and older adults about the role of transportation and mobility in their planning for their older years.

Following completion of the literature review, a series of seven interviews were done with academics, designers, builders and practitioners (those who help older adults with adaptive needs to adapt their home spaces). Drawing on these results, eight focus groups, each lasting about two hours, were done. All of the groups were conducted at professional focus group facilities in Farmington, CT, or Dallas, TX, and were audio and video recorded. A total of 80 participants took part in the focus groups, 10 in each group. Following the focus groups, the audio recordings were sent for transcription for use in analysis. The groups were stratified by age – half with older adults (born before 1946) and half with Boomers. Because the Boomer generation encompasses 18 years, and older Boomers and younger Boomers may be at different life stages, the Boomers were further stratified by age, with two groups conducted with younger Boomers and two groups with older Boomers. Among the older adults, the groups were also split by how recently the participant had last moved – either within the past three to 10 years or not – in order to develop a sense for what factors led some people to move and some people not to move. Thus, in addition to some regional variation in the study participants, there was also variation in how recently they had changed, or planned to change, their home environment as they aged, as well as how transportation accessibility fit into their decisions about where to live. Embedded within the groups was an experiment in which people were given photos of home with universal design features to look at, discuss, and complete a questionnaire about. In half of the groups the discussion preceded the questionnaire; in the remaining groups people completed the questionnaire before beginning a discussion.

In addition to this, a second project focusing more specifically on the growth of active adult communities in the metro-Boston, MA (within the I-495 pocket), area was completed. This project examined the offerings and locations of active adult communities, designed for those ages 55 and older. Active adult communities, continuing care retirement communities (CCRCs), and "village" organizations were also surveyed about the transportation offerings available to residents or members. Data from 18 of the 38 identified active adult communities completed written questionnaires, along with 14 of the 55 CCRCs in the area and 20 of the 38 villages in the on-line Village-to-Village Network, who completed on-line surveys. Finally, as part of the project, two focus groups with active adult community residents were also done.

Findings

For the primary project, among experts, there was general consensus that much of the existing housing stock was not built to ease older adults' abilities to age in place. They noted that often homes did not incorporate universal design features, which could accommodate people of all abilities. From the focus groups, relatively few people made formal plans far in advance concerning where they wanted to live as they grew older; what plans people had were rarely complete. Some people who were married had not had conversations about where they planned to live until one member of the couple decided it was time to move or some unplanned life event, such as illness or stroke, occurred. In addition, few people were aware of how changes to their home environments might help the space to be more functional for their aging needs.

From the experiment, participants who completed the questionnaire following the group discussion were more likely to express more negative opinions about universal design features that accommodate people of all abilities. Compared with those who completed the questionnaire prior to discussion, they were more likely to: disagree that kitchens like the ones they saw felt welcoming to others; agree that kitchens like these were not meant for people like them; and agree that these types of kitchens did not look familiar to them. They were more likely to: agree that the bathrooms depicted in the photos they saw were not really meant for people like them; agree that bathrooms like these did not look familiar to them; agree that bathrooms such as these would be uncomfortable for them to use. In short, people who completed the questionnaire following discussion of the features were more likely to reject them.

From the secondary project, the survey of different communities revealed that some of these communities may be more livable than others. In particular, while active adult communities may include many service amenities, in the metro-Boston area they typically lack easy accessibility to a range of different transportation options, aside from driving, to meet people's needs. In contrast, CCRCs and Village models typically offered their affiliates a wider array of transportation options, and CCRCs tended to be located closer to many destinations important for ensuring mobility, such as train and bus stops, and for meeting basic needs, such as grocery stores and hospitals.

Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that many people do not plan in advance for where they will live as they age, either in terms of the space itself or its location to ensure their continued mobility. Many people implicitly assume that they will continue to drive throughout their lives, and relatively few housing options marketed to older adults offer transportation amenities. As a result, as they think about their housing options transportation is not consistently an important consideration, and in some housing options transportation modes beyond the personal vehicle are quite limited.

Outputs

Results from the primary project research are being used to draft a paper intended for submission to the *Journal of Environmental Psychology*. In addition, the results were used as the basis for public education materials for adults about planning where they will live as they grow older. These materials, titled *Modern Ideas, Modern Living: Taking the Next Step in Home Design and Planning for the Lifestyle You Want*, are produced by The Hartford and are available free to the public via mail or download (<http://www.thehartford.com/mature-market-excellence/publications-on-aging>). Results from the secondary project have been presented in talks in the local community as well as in a poster presentation for the Transportation Research Board's conference on Livable Communities in Washington, D.C., July 2010.