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**Abstract**

The brief for the presentation was to be predictive and provocative, and to present visions for future housing options for our aging population. The intention is to propose that housing in the future will acknowledge the reality that 30% of the population will be over the age of 65 in 2035, and that the incidence of disability will consequently increase. Retirement Villages are only one option, and approx. 93% of the population select other forms of housing within the community. Accessibility and visitability are an important and essential inclusion in all housing in the future.

**LIVING WITH DISABILITY AND AGEING**  
**SHOW ME THE WAY TO STAY HOME**

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**Introduction:**

It is the year 2036. I have just received my "Congratulations" fax from His Majesty King William V., a kindly, middle aged, pious monarch. I have survived the poverty of the aftermath of the 1930's depression, childhood without a father during World War 2, childhood poliomyelitis, childhood, the trauma of being the smallest and skinniest kid at school, puberty and pimples, finding out that girls exist (and I was too small to capitalise on that knowledge), acute shyness, the pressure of study, exploration of the wider world, courtship, marriage (somehow), parenthood (just), building a career, overwork, ambition, coming to terms with my own mediocrity, University politics, professional rivalries, mid life crises (many times), later life illnesses, loss of identity, retirement, boredom - and now I am 100 years old.

My wife has died. My children are all getting on a bit (all now in their 70's). My mind is sharp, my eyes are dim, my legs are weak, my hair has gone. I am a child of my time, the macho, domestically incapable male, who relied on my wife for food, cleaning and organisation.

I still love to be surrounded by my mountains of books, still fall asleep over my drawing board (I never did like computers!), still dream my dreams, still love and seek out beauty in all its forms, still need variety and atmosphere to feed my spirit, a sacred place to feed my soul, and demand the right to be an independent person.

So, what type of building will I eventually live in? What type of community will I inherit and participate in?

### **My Private World**

I am actually one of the lucky generation. Born a decade before the much-vaunted "baby boomers", my friends and I have benefited from all the medical research conducted for them. When I survived my bypass operation rite-of-passage in 2005, my surgeon said he had given me another 20 years. That was fine, as long as I was careful and didn't get run over by a bus! And then about 15 or 20 years ago, medical researchers discovered cures for cancer, diabetes and arthritic conditions, so the extra years have been more enjoyable than they might have been otherwise. And just as I was worried about losing my train of thought, they invented a pill to prevent Alzheimer's disease! - (at least I think that's what it was called).

I like living in my two-bedroom unit, my 'smart house' supported by modern technology. It's in an excellent location, one minute walk to the shops and cafes, a bus stop almost outside my front door and a primary school nearby to keep me aware of the joy of youthfulness. It's a bit like life in a lot of the European cities I used to admire in my youthful travels, with the streets full of vitality, visual interest and camaraderie.

I enjoy living here. It is a small private development of 24 units. 8 are owned by greyheads like myself (some married and some single), 4 are owned by younger singles, and the rest are empty nesters or families with 2 or 3 children. Some of us own our units, but some are renting theirs. It's been so hard for young people to get into the housing market since the boom times earlier this century. We get on so well together and look out for each other. Several of my friends have chosen to live in leisure lifestyle villages and are very happy, but this place suits my independent nature better and it's closer to everything. Most of the "Villages" where my friends live are rather too remote from the things I like.

### **An Alternative World - Retirement Communities**

I have several friends who have chosen to live in a retirement community, and they love the lifestyle – plenty of neighbours and activities, with no excuses for being lonely. The community down the road from me is a lively one, with a lot of programs that reach out into the community.

Retirement villages are not new of course and have been around in some form or other since the middle ages. I have visited some wonderful examples overseas in my travelling days. I love the Beguinage in Amsterdam – centuries old, right in the centre of the city and just down the road from the Royal Palace; it is completely integrated into the community and not at all segregated. Another wonderful complex is the 16<sup>th</sup> century housing for retired retainers in Augsburg, called Die Fuggerei, which is just down the road from the town hall and again, right in the middle of activity. That's what I like – the opportunity on my own terms to engage or disengage when I so choose! Then there are the English Almshouses in many towns, which are wonderful heritage houses, usually right in the centre of activity.

The new "retirement" village down the road has a lot of residents of the baby boomer generation and has a very active character. It has high rise apartments, which is necessary due to high land costs and because that generation prefers this style of unit for views, security, lifestyle, etc. The village has tennis courts, swimming pool, gymnasium, adult education

programs and facilities offered to the general public, social function rooms, IT rooms, child care centre, interactive programs with local schools and a complete integration with the adjacent community, unlike earlier incarnations of retirement villages which tended to be walled and segregated from other generations. It has many of the characteristics of the Humanitas project in Rotterdam, which caters for aging over time and in place and is fully engaged in the local community.

Although these communities are a preferred and enjoyable lifestyle for approximately 7% of older people, it's not for me. I prefer to be among younger people and please myself.

### **Accessible and Visitable Housing**

I am so glad that the Residential Design Code and the Building Code of Australia now makes it mandatory for all units specifically for elderly people to be fully accessible. Developers once took the site density bonus available for elderly persons developments but used to balk at providing access appropriate to their ageing client group. Of course, I am cynical enough to think this was a real estate trick so that people had to sell up and repurchase elsewhere, and so increase the sales figures. But it no longer occurs, as developers have to be responsible now and incorporate access.

Although I don't live in an aged persons specific complex, all the units in my group are accessible which means of course that every home is visitable by people with mobility limitations, and this has been a great boon in avoiding social isolation. The wonderful thing about this year 2036 is that all housing in the community must now be constructed to be accessible (and therefore visitable). This is now mandatory under the Building Code of Australia, as it was proven in research studies in the USA that during the lifetime of any residential unit (single storey or high rise), at least one person with a disability lives in any house or home unit. It was also proven that it is more cost effective to build-in access in the initial construction stage than to modify later or to move people into institutional care because of hostile buildings. Builders objected initially,

but changed their attitude when they realised the installation costs were minimal and that the public demand and approval was a great marketing tool. The fact that older people are such a numerical power lobby group now of course was a major factor !

Of course we were not the first to introduce mandatory provisions for access and visitability to new housing. The movement was active in many countries in 2008, including the USA, UK, Denmark, Sweden, The Netherlands, France, Greece, Italy, Spain as well as Australia. Many major cities in the USA, eg. Atlanta, San Antonio, Chicago, Lafayette, Bolingbroke, Tucson, etc. plus the States of Georgia, Texas and Kansas, have had these regulations in place since around 2005. The United Kingdom has the most extensive mandate of any country since way back in 2003, requiring all new housing units to have a level front entrance, wide halls and doorways, a bathroom on the entry level, and accessible electric outlets and controls.

The Australian Institute of Architects developed a Practice Note in 2008, advocating to architects the merits and community benefits of Adaptable Housing and Universal Design. This was the forerunner of the campaign in Australia which contributed to the changes in the Building Code of Australia requiring all new housing to have a basic level of accessibility and visitability..

### **The New Paradigm**

These modern houses are very well designed - with correct orientation and passive solar design principles, as well as adaptability, accessibility and visitability. I think it was either a response to the Global Warming crisis or a return to common sense design values, but whatever the reason, my heating and cooling bills have reduced.

My mid-day meal is delivered from the local Council kitchen. My evening meal is programmed by my computer. I have a home care package through one of the major Aged Care groups, and only pay for services as and if I use them. One of my granddaughters lives nearby and keeps a

close eye on me, but she is having to give more and more attention to her own parents these days.

My children are worried about me and insist that a computerised program monitor my movements around the house. I conceded, but I insisted that crisis intervention is only to be given at my request. I also have a special bracelet with a push button to press if I ever need assistance. I must confess, it is reassuring (at least for my family), but I don't like being tagged or ordered about!.

Sensors control all the lights. A light in my en-suite turns on automatically when I get out of bed at night. That is particularly useful, as this seems to happen at least once or (twice) a night lately. I guess I could get the whole lighting and security system all electronically controlled, but I don't want to get too lazy.

I do appreciate the written captions on the TV screens and those giant screens are fantastic ! These young actors don't speak as clearly as they did when I was younger, and it certainly helps me to decipher those Scottish accents in Taggart!

I should probably make use of a lot more technology, but I have always had enough trouble sorting out those video and DVD machines and don't want to become too dependent on robotic sources.

One good thing is that my unit is so easy for me to get around. All the doors are 850mm clear opening width, and there is a level threshold at the front door which is great when my friends visit with frames and wheelchairs, or I meet with other members of the Paralympics Committee at my house, or my great grandchildren visit me with their new babies in prams. The layout is open plan and so convenient – no steps at the front or rear doors, an open plan with hardly any passageways and where that happens, they are wide enough to turn a wheelchair around. It's great when I carry my grocery bags in from the car. There is a double garage which opens directly into the house, so security is excellent !

The bathroom is a delight to use – plenty of space and I have been able to adapt it to suit my changing needs over time. I have added some grab rails alongside the toilet and shower, and removed the shower screens last year and replaced them with a curtain. Fortunately the floor is level, with just a gentle fall for drainage, and the walls were built to be strong enough to add the grab rails. Of course when I was younger and fitter, I did not want to be reminded of my (possible) future frailty, so I didn't install the grab rails until about 15 years ago.

The kitchen is a pleasure too. Room to move and I have an adjustable bench and sink top now – works at the press of a button. I remember seeing them at a conference I attended in Germany in 1987, but our Australian authorities weren't interested then. There is no danger from naked gas flames because of safety devices and the hot plates are wonderful and don't burn me if I accidentally brush against them. Drawers, cupboards and shelves are all in the right place since I remodelled and adapted the layout a few years ago.

The lighting is easy. The switches are large and easy to operate with my arthritic fingers. The colour contrast is so helpful too! Lighting levels are nice and bright now which I really appreciate - newsprint is not so clear these days, although I have to admit my eyesight may not be quite what it used to be!

It's wonderful now. The houses of most of my family and friends are all easy to access and visit. That is so important - to be able to visit my friends and not be excluded simply because of thoughtless design. It is so easy and so cost effective for the whole community. It means that as older people, we are more able to stay at home because the building design assists rather than impedes our independence. I sadly saw too many of my friends relocate into care facilities due to inaccessible and hostile housing design, or from bad falls down steps or due to bad lighting.

It's all so easy really. If only the builders, developers and architects of the early naughties boom times had been able to foresee the problems they were creating for their own old age, they may have been more empathetic. Well, at least the new Adaptable Housing Code shows us how easy it is to achieve.

That reminds me. I remember writing a letter to a young fellow named Jeff Kennett back in 1980 when he was Victorian Minister for Housing, asking him to introduce an accessible and adaptable housing approach to public housing. It was nothing new, the Swedes had implemented this policy years before, back in the 1970's I believe. I think my letter was filed by a minder under "L" for "lost" or "WC" for "waffling claptrap". Oh well, everything eventually comes to those who wait....and wait....and wait!

### **My Public World:**

I still drive (with a restricted license). Cars have improved so much and all this built-in navigation and safety control has been wonderful for old-timers like me in helping me to maintain my independence. The electric engine is quiet and pollution free too!

Of course, the public transport system is wonderful these days, so safe and easy to access the bus and rail stations, ticket machines and buses or carriages. There are anchor points for wheelchairs and reserved seats for elderly people and people with disabilities in buses and trains. The kneeling and low chassis buses are great and eliminate that first giant step! The train platforms level with the carriage floors makes life easier and safer. Taxis are so easy to use now that we Aussies finally realised that the London taxis are such a versatile model.

I have always felt strongly that we shouldn't make special facilities for people with disabilities –we should concentrate on making the ordinary facility accessible so that everyone benefits. This is the true spirit of the Universal Design movement we now accept.

The other great thing is that the city and local communities are now so easy to get around. It was back in 1962 that ACROD (The Australian Council on Disability) began the campaign to achieve access to buildings for people with limited mobility. It has taken more than 70 years of awareness campaigns, Australian Standards, Building Code of Australia, an International Year for the Disabled in 1982, The Disability Discrimination Act of 1992, Transport Standards, Premises Standards etc. and now the developers, designers and builders have finally understood the simplicity of the idea. There is now a mandatory course unit on Accessibility and Universal Design in all architectural design courses at the universities, and this has helped formulate a positive design approach with the new generation of architects. It's all about changing attitudes!

The general public loves the idea of the universal design approach in which everybody benefits and special segregative facilities are redundant.

My friends and I appreciate the safe tracks constructed for us to ride our "gophers" and wheelchairs. There are so many of us that they even have special covered gopher parking bays at the shops and battery recharging facilities. Most of us can walk short distances, but need wheels for the longer journeys.

The shops and public buildings are so much better now than when I was younger. The buildings somehow feel better – not just in terms of accessibility, but the architects seem to have learnt to design for people and for sensory delight, instead of just impressing each other with techtonic wizardry. The buildings also make full use of passive solar control techniques and I think this is much better for our Australian climatic conditions than the air-conditioned energy guzzling North American glass box clones you still see around our cities!

Floor surfaces in public buildings and shopping centres are now safer and non-slip. It's amazing what a few successful professional liability claims and Disability Discrimination Act cases can achieve!

There are also textured and coloured patterns that make it easier to find my way around and to be alerted to potential hazards. There is a clearly visible band on plate glass windows and doors. There are recognisable landmarks and textured paving warning slabs to help my blind friends (and me) in orientation and wayfinding.

The ATM's and drinking fountains and the public telephones are easy to use and so nice looking. There are plenty of seats and sheltered resting places, and **every** shopper appreciates this. The signage is fantastic – so easy to read and understand and it's very easy to find my way around now.

Another thing I really appreciate is the hearing augmentation on all public telephones, as well as on my own at home. The hearing loops in the theatres and public auditoria are also a great boon.

It's the same with other buildings too – they are all so easy to get to and into – banks, offices, cinemas, the library and Council offices, the local delicatessen and newsagent and even the local parks and gardens, the local football field and grandstand and all the National Parks. Of course everybody appreciates the new universal accessible toilets – parents with children and shoppers with parcels appreciate the extra space as much as my friends who use wheelchairs and mobility aids.

### **Integration – Not Segregation !**

One of the best things about this era is that socially segregated communities are now well and truly a part of history. We overthrew the concept of "institutions" back in the 1980's – even though unfortunately Governments at the time misunderstood the human dimension of the concept. They saw this as the opportunity to close the institutions and make a fortune from the sale of the prime land. They must have known the consequences but didn't prepare for the social transition, particularly in the field of mental health, so produced a new class of homeless, hungry, imprisoned and unemployed who were incapable of socially integrating into the community.

We closed down segregated institutions such as Mt Henry, Heathcote and Sunset, but at the same time turned other sites such as East Perth and Subi Centro into high socio- economic class ghettos.

Fortunately, as a result of the 2005 Mental Health Report, Governments began to really listen, learned their lessons and implemented training programs for social integration, employment and housing.

On the other hand, I was very worried back in 2005 that residential aged care was regressing to the bad days pre 1980. In 1985, being in aged care was exciting. Idealism was in vogue, the individual was paramount, and institutionalism and the medical model for long-term care were discredited and replaced by a residential approach. The new paradigm was based on the individual and human values, not purely economics. Finance of course was a critical factor, but this did not inhibit lateral and creative solutions in line with the challenge of Wolfensburger to socially value and respect all people.

Then to my horror, in about 2002 to 2005, over-awed by rising costs and expanding numbers, organisations capitulated and began to revert back to an obsession with large numbers instead of thinking laterally and seeking other means of meeting the financial challenges. Fortunately, a few years later, we regained our idealism and concentration on the needs of the individual. We began again to review and to revisit the needs of the individual and their need for privacy and personal space and territory. We began again to regard aging as a positive state in the process of life and not to regard older people and ageing as negatives or a "problem" for which we had to find a "final solution"!

Things are so much better again now. We looked at and learned from Scandinavian and Netherlands examples, for they have always been socially advanced. Now that all houses, especially for elderly people, are accessible and home care support services are so highly developed, the majority of older people now choose to remain at home. As a more

educated and discerning client group emerged, they rejected shared rooms in Residential Care facilities. Those baby boomers were certainly a demanding mob and not experienced in sharing long term (just look at their divorce rates)!

Independent living units that did not consider accessibility became hard to sell as fully accessible choices were presented that enabled people to age in place and remain in the same unit and locality of their choice even as their physical and sensory abilities changed over time. It's called adaptability!

### **Statistics:**

I guess we should look at some statistics to show the scale and the reason people are taking this issue seriously these days.

Personally, I don't put much faith in statistics. My feeling is that if one human being is in need, I should try to help their situation. Statistics are only helpful to get action from Governments!

In the 2003 Australian Bureau of Statistics Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers, one in five people in Australia (3,958,300 or 20.0%) had a reported disability. Disability was defined as any limitation, restriction or impairment, which has lasted, or is likely to last, for at least 6 months and restricts everyday activities.

How times have changed. The number of people over 65 years of age in our community has grown incredibly over the past century or so, and we are now a major force to be reckoned with. This is why we are able to influence and achieve such human-valued changes in our community.

In 1901 only 4% (or 1 in 25) of the population were over 65 years of age.

In 2005 this had grown to 12% (or 1 in 8).

By 2025 this had grown to 25% (or 1 in 4)

By 2035 the figure had grown to 30% (or nearly 1 in 3) and still growing.

This is close to 10,000,000 people in our age group !

So we are now a very large and significant minority and a group to be dealt with in a positive manner. We object to being seen as a social problem and the cause of potential financial doom and gloom for the country. After all, it was our hard work and taxes that helped build this country!

We also object to being typecast as “useless, childlike, past it” , and being expected to do as we are told and to toe the line and be grateful – for what?

The important thing I deduce from the statistics is that although more and more of us are living to a ripe old age, many of us are not exactly in the pink of condition. Medical marvels keep us alive, but do not protect us from the wearying passage of ageing. The Government needs to act to clear the Public Hospitals of old people awaiting placement – that reminds me, I must see if the successors of that young fellow Neil Fong have a solution yet!

Disability rates increase exponentially with ageing. The prevalence of profound or severe core-activity limitation increases from 3% for age groups 0-4 years through to 10% for ages 65-69 and then increasing sharply to 74% for those aged 90 years and over. In actual fact, 92% of us aged 90 years and over have a disability. So although a lot more of us grow old, we are likely to accumulate one or other of a number of disabilities related to our mobility, our senses, our body movements or our cognitive abilities.

### **The contribution of older people:**

It’s an interesting thing with disabilities. We can often cope – provided our immediate and local, built environment is designed sensitively and sensibly. A disability only becomes a handicap in a hostile or non-inclusive physical setting. Our disability only becomes a handicap when we encounter a step, or a narrow doorway, or an undefined sheet of plate glass, etc. – or some other barrier or hazard created by designers in their

prime of life or immortal period when human values are subjugated to the cause of "art".

I remember a dear friend, Kevin Borland, at one time one of the leading Architects in the country. Kevin tragically suffered a crippling stroke in his late-sixties and realised the frustration of the unsympathetic built environment (to which he had contributed), which then imprisoned him. He said he would like his time over again so that he could ensure in future that his beautiful designs would also provide accessibility for all people: he also wanted to cajole and convince his contemporaries to practice universal and inclusive design .

Now here's a crazy thought – why not pass a rule that all buildings be designed, or at least approved by a panel of elders experienced in design and life? After all, the great Frank Lloyd Wright was still designing at 90 ! The flamboyant Oscar Niemeyer was still practicing on his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2008. How much different our communities would be, and how much more responsive to the specific needs of 30% of the population – a very significant minority! Communities must now be designed to suit us ! We are after all a very large proportion of the population ! There are now numerically so many of us that we can't and won't be ignored any longer.

Come to think of it, old age or disability has never been a barrier to creativity. Just to name a few ageless geniuses :-

The English Novelists George Bernard Shaw, E.M. Forster, Somerset Maugham, P.G. Wodehouse, Compton Mackenzie, Doris Lessing, Iris Murdoch, etc., plus our own Patrick White – still actively wrote into their eighth or ninth decades.

Philosophers such as Voltaire and Goethe were active until their deaths in their 80's and Bertrand Russell into his 90's.

Scientific geniuses such as Galileo, Newton and Pavlov continued their explorations until their late 70's and early 80's.

Orchestral conductors like Toscanini, Beecham and Stokowski still performed into their 80's.

Picasso, Degas, Monet, Michelangelo and our own Lloyd Rees and others continued to paint and sculpt brilliantly when they were octogenarians and nonogenarians.

Architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright, Alvar Aalto, Antonio Gaudi, Le Corbusier, Jorn Utzon, Harry Seidler, Frank Gehry, Oscar Niemeyer, etc. all continued to create great works in older age.

Steven Hawking was universally acknowledged as a super intellect. His body is confined to a wheelchair but his mind is superlative in comparison to us ordinary scientific mortals.

## **Summary**

I began by inviting you to accompany me on my journey into the world of 2036.

- It is a world that I am glad that I have seen.
- Cities that are designed on the principle of universal design, easy to enjoy, access and move around for everyone.
- Housing that provides a wide range of options in type and form, with an acknowledgement of the richness of social, lifestyle, ethnic issues.
- Housing throughout the community that is adaptable, accessible and above all visitable by myself and all my age group, who now constitute 30% of the population.
- A world where older people are not seen as an economic and numerical problem, but are embraced for their wealth of

contribution to society, for their experience, and as the dignified and valued individuals they still are.

- A world in which there is social integration of all people, no matter what their age or physical condition.
- A society that uses the experience and talents of our elders in official and voluntary roles.

### **What Next ?**

I sincerely hope that I will never have to go into any form of supportive care. I have been my own boss for too long and could never adjust to being told what to do, and when, by other people. If I did, it would have to be a very special place, one that supported, and didn't even try to control me. It must of course satisfy and attend to whatever physical, sensory or cognitive needs induced me to seek help. My fervent desire however is to remain at home, with support available as and when I need it. For this to happen, my residence must be physically accessible.

I want to continue to live in the midst of the community, with the option to join in to the life of the community when I wish, or to retreat to my own home. I want to live in a safe yet still exciting neighbourhood where I can safely explore and observe life, or withdraw, dependant on my mood at the time. I want to at least have the opportunity to mix among people of all ages and types – to observe the exuberance of youth or the sophistication of more mature people as they enjoy and engage in life.

Above all, my "last resort" must be such that it empowers me to participate in life and make all the decisions about my own life. My funds are diminishing, so my residence must be affordable (but not penny-pinching). It must not make me feel like a pauper or a beggar!

It must allow me personal space and privacy, and provide me opportunities for communality or solitude. It must satisfy my bodily needs, but more importantly it must feed and nurture my soul.

In our contemporary preoccupation with functionalism and economic rationalism, we are in danger of forgetting to nurture the spirit and adding life to years. The pleas of Chermayeff and Alexander, written in their book "Community and Privacy" in 1953, still ring true:

*Human sensibility, which may be seriously blunted by monotonous over-stimulation, may also be blunted if it is exercised exclusively in an environment of calculated and automatically controlled physical comfort. Our faculties function best and are best maintained at peak sharpness when effort is required of them. Monotony of any kind - dull or intense - is debilitating.... The uniformity of the air conditioned nightmare fatigues both mind and body.... and the vital side of human life degenerates.*

### **Back to the Drawing Board**

Now here is some really good news to end with! I read in the paper back in October 2005 that the latest U.S. study shows that the older you are when you retire, the longer you live. So goodbye for now – I'm off back to my drawing board! (The West Australian 23/10/2005 Page 3.)

Brian Kidd

22<sup>nd</sup> August 2008