The benefits of mutuality: women, ageing and health in the Older Women’s Cohousing Group

Melissa Fernández Arrigoitia
Sociology Department, Lancaster University

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Ageing and Communities
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A window into post-traditional ageing?
‘intentional communities... created and run by their residents. Each household has a self-contained, personal and private home but residents come together to manage their community, share activities, eat together. Cohousing is a way of combating the alienation and isolation many experience today, recreating the neighbourly support of a village or city quarter in the past’ (UK Co-housing network)
• All women’s senior cohousing, inaugurated Dec. 2016
• Barnet, North London
• History of 18 years (involved co-design btw. 2010-14)
• Mixed-tenure community: 25 households with a common room; 8 social rent; two HA’s
• Wide range of ages, incomes and backgrounds
### OWCH residents: a diverse picture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Number of women (of the 26 that moved in)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>50s</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60s</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 70</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Over 80</td>
<td>6</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Number of women (of 15 replies to questionnaire)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Divorced or separated</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never married</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live-in couple</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>2</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household income</th>
<th>Number of women (of the 14 replies to questionnaire)</th>
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<tr>
<td>£40-£50,000</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£10 - £20,000</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than £20,000</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Health and well-being

Self Assessed Health in General

- Excellent: 7%
- Very good: 46%
- Good: 27%
- Fair: 7%
- Poor: 13%

Are day-to-day activities limited because of a health problem or disability which has lasted, or is expected to last, at least 12 months?

- No: 33%
- Yes, limited a little: 47%
- Yes, limited a lot: 20%

Health issues included:
- Hip replacement complications
- Hip and knee pain which can make walking any distance difficult.
- Arthritis
- Mobility difficulties/arthristis and hearing loss
- Debilitating fatigue
- Fibromyalgia
- Spinal surgery 2010: bone graft and metal plates and screws in spine - low back pain except at rest. Leg pain also due to bursitis. Chest pain/angina on exertion.
- Ulcerative colitis
- Osteoarthritis
- Balance problem
Value in being all-female

“Like for X(founder), it’s so important that it was a group of women. And it was so interesting, the other day, a friend of mine, we were talking on the phone and I told her we’re nearly ready to move in. And she said, it’s wonderful you won’t be living in the shadow of men. And I went, wow [whispers], what a good way to put it... I mean, that’s what life is for women, we live in the shadow of men...”
Gendered ‘after’-life

“When you come to the age that I am, you’ve done your childcare, you’ve done your mum and dad, you know, you’ve done your work and one of the motivations for me throughout all of that was that somebody needed me there to do this or to do that. And that has diminished as an aspect of my life but [in OWCH] I am needed because, you know, because I can contribute to this policy document, I can sweep the corridor, I can do that... So there’s an expectation on me and a satisfaction as an outcome. ...and I think also, doing something with other people like sweeping the corridor can be fun.”
Agency during ageing

“I want to be part of something in my life, I’ve always been part of something, so I want to continue doing that, and I think for my own health I don’t want to be stuck in a flat on my own that’s a nice flat but I don’t know anybody, and there’s no one there to call on.”

“But so being part of something new, because for this country this is new, senior people... and taking control of your life. It’s very interesting with the housing associations how much they think they will need to provide for us, and we’re all women who are used to doing. I am sure this isn’t for everybody, but I think it’s being in control of my life as I age, and having the support of people around me to do that as well.”

Living differently as

- ‘Being part’ & connected
- Cooperation & deliberation
- Being needed and doing with others
‘I think one of the things in this community is that we are very individual and you know when you see an ageing population you could take on that idea that that’s what ageing is about. Here, it’s not. It’s individual pathways .... I think we retain that individuality in ageing in this group.’

Living differently as

- Overturning ageist stereotypes
- Deeper friendship bonds
- Retaining sense of self & identity
Acceptance of ageing

‘What’s happening here is that we are thinking individually and taking some courage to actually accept that we’re getting older and trying to work through that, acknowledging that it is a process and we can become victims, or we can use our power, both within ourselves and (..) and the courage we get from each other is inspiring.’

‘But what I find when people say to me ‘you’re living amongst a lot of old people, but, you know, we’re not old people and I have to say that I find the older members of the community so inspiring and I want to be like that.’

Living differently as

- Defying age-specific concepts
- Reverting stereotypes of the old as weak
Boundaries of mutual support

“It’s a suck it and see point. You know, I don’t think we have a clear idea about the boundary [of care]. I think we have a clear idea that we may have to discuss that with the family, it may be that, when I go bonkers that they will have to contact my children and say, how can we deal with this, you know? Because I don’t think she’s safe, or I don’t think we’re safe, whatever... But, I think that’s understood by us all I coined the phrase, actually, that we don’t look after each other, we look out for each other.”
Some conclusions

• A community of learning, mutual support and love that does not deny age as key to embracing everyday and long-term processes of ageing;

• Must negotiate the intricate balance between individualism and interdependence in ways that can take their toll on physical health;

• Breaking from traditional ageing by ‘looking out for each other’ is empowering and beneficial to well-being, but will such support and security be enough to face the challenges associated to deteriorating health as they age in place?
DARE TO BE DIFFERENT

Turning trouble into triumph, embracing independence and embarking on adventures. Four women prove it’s never too late to break the mould.

Interviews by Olivia Marks

JUDE TISDALL
THE CO-HOUSING PIONEER

Three years ago, I was listening to a friend tell me about an all-women co-housing project she had heard of. Both in our mid-twenties, we were at that sweet spot in life where the demands of work and family had shifted, and we were starting to imagine how our lives might look in our 40s and 50s.

Enter OWCH ( Older Women’s Co-Housing). Since 1998, its founding members have been working on building a supportive community – a neighbourhood, if you like – for women over 50. From the kernel of the idea, to finding the land, funding and architect, they had succeeded in the mammoth task of creating 23 flats in a leafy part of north London, complete with beautiful gardens and an orchard. And they had a final home they needed to fill.
THANK YOU

M.FernandezA@Lancaster.ac.uk
Some questions and lessons

- **Questions remain:**
  - How will details be passed on? How is ‘sustainability’ legacy ensured?
  - How will finances be plentiful in event of other defects?
  - How will the life and stages of community be attended to over time?

- **Lessons:**
  - - Need to monitor buildings effectively alongside women’s perceptions and ‘life’ of cohousing/shared scheme
  - Specific to OWCH site, but also wider about what gets missed in design for older age schemes, what forms of communication between different parties may be best for self-management, whether subcontracting in some cases better..
Promises of co-design

Design awards

• Evening Standard New Homes Award 2017 — Winner
• Housing Design Custom-build Award 2017 — Winner
• Housing Design Award 2017 — Overall winner
• Sunday Times British Homes Award 2017 — Winner
• Build It Award 2017 — Winner
• Building Award 2017 — Winner
• Inside Housing Development Award 2017 — Winner
• Housing Design HAPPI Project Award 2016 — Winner
...with its limits

If you get older and frailer or you're wheelchair-bound...it's quite difficult so I think, we think the architect should have thought about it right from the beginning to be honest...but we all have an equal say in that and how the money will be spent and how we've raised the money for it and so on...if you're building a place for older people these just are the things you think of, aren't they?...and why didn't we think of it? Because we didn't, we don't have that experience... And there's some things that they haven't thought through properly. Door handles that are all that kind, you know, not a turn thing but a lever...Well we've got a bit of money out of them [architects] which will go towards the door. Yes, all the doors, all the flats are meant to be wheelchair-accessible but if you can't get through the door it's not really wheelchair-accessible... I think all of us too have started, have learnt an awful lot..
...and sustainability

It is a major feature in ours, we have got some solar panelling, and we are very very green about things like, what sort of soap powder we will be having in our laundry... That sort of thing. And we are looking at refuse and how we are going to recycle...And growing our own vegetables and doing our own thing, you know, it’s absolutely integral to everything we are doing. .. really important, yes. I care that there will be something left for the following generations, for you and your children.