

What can planners do to help seniors age in place?

By Arlene Etchen

Summary

The challenges of improving the quality of the built environment for Canada's rapidly aging population are greatest in car-dependent suburbs where few housing options are available to seniors, and older adults with reduced mobility become vulnerable when they can no longer drive or move safely within their homes. Finding solutions to challenges like these prompted the World Health Organization to develop the Age Friendly Communities concept (AFC). Since its introduction in Canada in 2007, many municipalities have embraced AFC, but little progress has been made to explicitly integrate AFC into municipal plans. While municipal policies tend to focus almost exclusively on new development, this article identifies strategies and options for retrofitting and adapting Canada's massive housing stock in aid of 'aging in place.'

Sommaire

Les défis liés à l'amélioration de la qualité de l'environnement bâti pour la population canadienne en cours de vieillissement rapide sont les plus importants dans les banlieues dépendantes de la voiture où peu d'options de logement sont disponibles pour les personnes âgées, et où les adultes âgés à mobilité réduite deviennent vulnérables lorsqu'ils ne peuvent plus conduire ou se déplacer en toute sécurité dans leur maison. La recherche de solutions à de tels défis a incité l'Organisation mondiale de la santé à élaborer le concept de collectivités-amies des aînés (CAA). Depuis son introduction au Canada en 2007, de nombreuses municipalités ont adopté les CAA, mais peu de progrès ont été réalisés pour intégrer explicitement les CAA dans les plans municipaux. Alors que les politiques municipales ont tendance à se concentrer presque exclusivement sur les nouveaux développements, cet article identifie des stratégies et des options pour rénover et adapter l'énorme parc de logements du Canada afin de favoriser le vieillissement sur place.

Since 2007, more than 500 Canadian municipalities have committed to becoming 'age-friendly' (AFC) by creating action plans using guidelines set out by the World Health Organization. Although the AFC concept is intended to address the needs of everyone, there is no denying that one of the goals of AFC initiatives is to improve the quality of life for older adults and improve their prospects to age in place, or as a recent Government of Canada report states: "age in community."

At present, only British Columbia directs municipalities to integrate AFC into their official community plans. Ontario's Growth Plan encourages municipal planners to prioritize age-friendly planning and development but the only large municipality in Ontario to make such a commitment so far is Toronto. In the Greater Toronto Area, the Region of Peel is working with area municipalities to integrate AFC into local plans, and the official plans of smaller communities like Thunder Bay acknowledge seniors as "vital assets," the need to facilitate aging in place, while Sarnia's plan refers to the need to "ensure equitable access...regardless of...age."

To the extent that planners give any explicit consideration to the quality of the built environment as it affects older adults, the focus is on policies affecting new development.

This is important, but the current generation of older adults needs and deserves more immediate responses, relevant to where they are already living. The vast majority of seniors live in single detached or other forms of low-rise housing (although the percentage of seniors living in apartments and condos is increasing). Most say they want to stay where they are, which more often than not means the same dwelling, as relatively few neighbourhoods offer alternative housing options.

As people age, their mobility tends to decline, which is why access to resources to help seniors modify their homes to overcome physical barriers to mobility – and extend their ability to age in place – is so important.

The Canadian Home Builders Association (CHBA) and Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) offer two different but complementary approaches to the challenge of retrofits.

The CHBA Home Modification Council

The Canadian Home Builders Association is based in Ottawa. There are provincial affiliates in every province except Quebec as well as more than 50 local associations across the country. CHBA's Home Modification Council supports the growing need for home modifications to accommodate homeowners who wish to age in place, people with disabilities, and their caregivers. The Home Modification Council is a coordination point of expertise, resources, and services for CHBA renovator members supporting homeowners across the country."

- Although CHBA members work with owners to modify all forms of low-rise housing and high-rise condos, the majority of retrofits are for single detached houses, a category of housing that in 2016 accounted for 54% of all dwellings. About 60% of seniors live in single detached houses, so there is no shortage of potential customers.
- Retrofits are not inexpensive, however, so this limits the number of older adults who can afford to modify their homes. Government support for retrofits tends to be focused on energy upgrades through programs like NRCan's Greener Homes fund.
- To help Canadians identify reputable renovators, CHBA created the RenoMark™ Program where members

agree to a Code of Conduct of how they will do business with customers. "This starts with always having a contract. Too many homeowners have had bad experiences with cash contractors."

- In response to growing demand, CHBA is currently developing an 'aging in place training program' for members to "gain a strong understanding on how to improve and maximize home environments based on the client's condition and needs (related to health and mobility)."
- Referrals come from many sources, including occupational therapists, who often join a team of designers and CHBA-trained renovators who have expertise on building codes and cost estimation.
- The CHBA suggests that the trend to higher density, smaller, narrower housing increases the need for collaboration between municipal planners and other officials with building retrofit professionals in order to balance competing interests. For example, designers seeking to minimize grade changes to achieve a 'no-step' entrance must work with municipal building officials to ensure proper drainage to prevent water entry.
- CHBA encourages planners wishing to raise the profile of retrofits as a strategy to promote aging in place to reach out to their local Home Builders' Association or visit chba.ca. Another useful resource is <https://buildingexcellence.ca/2020/03/09/aging-in-place-with-the-comforts-of-home-spring2020/>.

CMHC focuses on retrofits for multi-unit buildings

Like its population, Canada's housing stock is aging. This can present challenges for seniors hoping to age in place, as a large percentage of today's housing stock was built long before accommodating the physical access needs of residents was recognized as issue. About 40% of three million apartment units built in Canada since 1972 were constructed before 1990. Because of their age, the priority for their owners – private sector as well as non-profit and municipally-owned housing companies – is the cost of updating and refurbishing rather than retrofits required to help occupants age in place.

- CMHC-funded studies undertaken by the Centre for Urban Growth and Renewal (CUG+R) pointed out that 76%

of older apartment buildings are rental. This represents an important source of affordable housing that, without significant reinvestment, is at risk. Many privately-owned units were built as dedicated rental buildings before changes in capital cost allowance provisions in the 1970s stalled investment in this sector. Rent levels typically do not deliver an acceptable return on investment for private owners. This helped create the conditions that led to the establishment of multi-partner initiatives such as the Canadian Housing Policy Roundtable (CHPR).

- The 18-storey Ken Soble Tower, constructed by the City of Hamilton in 1967, was recently rebuilt to Passive House energy standards and retrofitted to provide 146 affordable units for seniors incorporate universal design, 20% of which are accessible. The project was jointly funded by the City of Hamilton, CityHousing, FCM, CMHC and the Province of Ontario. CMHC hopes that lessons learned from this project can be widely applied.
- The 2017 National Housing Strategy has ambitious goals; currently there are two programs touching on the needs of non-profit and other community-owned apartment buildings when it comes to retrofits to help aging in place.
- The primary focus of the 'National Co-Investment Fund,' (Housing Repair and Renewal Stream) is to renew the existing affordable housing stock. To access the fund, it requires financial or in-kind participation from others, reductions in GHG emissions and at least 20% of units must be 'accessible.' The program offers low-cost repayable loans and capital contributions for repairs and other needs.
- The 'Preservation Funding' program is focused on 'preservation studies' to help non-profit and community housing providers (that are already under a federally administered operating agreement) carry out work that will ensure their assets are able to qualify for financial assistance down the road. These studies include energy audits and building conditions reports as well as assessments that identify the cost of age-friendly retrofits.

To get additional information on the NHS or other programs, contact CMHC Outreach Consultant, Arlene Etchen, at aetchen@cmhc.ca. ■