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Gilroy, Rose. THE ROLE OF HOUSING SPACE IN DETERMINING FREEDOM AND FLOURISHING IN OLDER PEOPLE *Social Indicators Research* 2005, **74**(1), 141–158.

Final published version available online at:

<http://www.springerlink.com/content/3255467m3m4k6214/fulltext.pdf>

DOI: 10.1007/s11205-005-6520-5

The role of housing space in determining freedom and flourishing in older people

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Abstract

This paper takes as its central thesis Martha Nussbaum's normative proposition that social arrangements should be evaluated primarily according to the extent of freedom people have to promote or achieve functionings they value. Using this as a lens the paper explores the housing circumstances of older people in the UK. The paper makes three points. Firstly, given that people use their homes to structure and manage their lives, the design, quality and standard of their home is therefore a critical factor in determining their "doings and beings" (Sen, 1992, p. 40). Since older people are more likely to spend greater time within the home through lower income, lessening mobility or loss of companions, this may be of greater significance to them than other age groups. Secondly the paper argues that the design of "specialist" dwellings for older people where there is a shifting balance between housing and care has played a part in shaping the thinking about the position and status of older people as well as providing a material context in which older people live (Laws, 1994). This paper suggests that this context may alter or deny many aspects of life that may be meaningful to individuals and therefore may inhibit rather than promote human flourishing. The paper draws mainly on a small qualitative study in which older people spoke of their home and its meaning. Quotations from this work are given in italics.

KEY WORDS - older people, housing, space standards, identity, functioning.

The housing circumstances of older people in the UK

It is a popular conception in the UK that older people have too much space and that their preference is to move to something “suitable which is smaller and easy to manage”. Evidence from the English House Condition Survey 1996 (DETR, 1998) reveals that older households do enjoy more space compared to other household groups. Nationally the average floor space per person is 43 square metres and for single person households this rises to 66 square metres (Kellaher, 2002). In the case of older owner-occupiers, each person has 78 square metres. In addition to actual floor space, statistics tell us how that space is organised particularly how many bedrooms this affords. The great majority of older households (80%) had at least one bedroom more than the minimum standard and it is to these households that the term “under-occupation” may be applied. In the population as a whole 72% of households were “above bedroom standard” (ONS, 2003). It might be concluded that in the UK, households desire space. It may also be time for a fresh look at housing need that can no longer be understood by the traditional bedroom standard. The paper returns to this issue later.

The assumption that has informed design decisions for many years has been that, as age increases, the need for space decreases. Appleton (2002) reflects that one of the main arguments advanced against the early UK home improvement agencies was that they encouraged older people to remain in family sized dwellings. It was a *better* solution, it was asserted, for older people to move to something much smaller. Increased pressure in

the 1980s on the British social rented sector from the rise of homelessness was such that many housing managers tried to use the stock efficiently to solve some of the problems (Tinker, 1997). These efficiencies included persuading older people to move from family housing either to specialist older person's accommodation or to one-bedroom flats. Such moves were seen as mutually beneficial.

In contrast, regular tranches of qualitative research suggest that very few older people think they have too much space and most like to have a room for visitors, even if visitors are infrequent (Heywood, 1993). A study of factors influencing housing satisfaction among older people found that few people felt they were living in a house that was too large for their needs (Wilson et al., 1995).

Older people do frequently move to smaller dwellings but the dominant factors are concerns about maintaining the space on a lower income in the face of rising costs and secondly the maintenance of independent living in the face of an unsuitable design (Appleton, 2002). A study in the north of England found older people being pressed by their families to move to "suitable accommodation" because of fears for their personal safety in their current dwelling (Churchill et al., 1996).

Sheltered housing

One of those "suitable" forms of housing for older people in the UK is sheltered accommodation. Sheltered housing is an invention of the later 1960s through circular 82/69 (MHLG, 1969) that sets out in minute detail the services, space standards and

quality of such dwellings. The majority of this accommodation is provided by the social rented sector and in particular Registered Social Landlords (DETR, 1998).

The boxed insert sets out the space standards of sheltered housing. Single bedroom flats with private kitchen and bathroom were designed for couples while the earliest designs for single people were bed-sitting rooms with private kitchen and shared bathrooms.

Table 1: Space standards in Sheltered housing

	Bedsit with shared bathroom	1 bed/own bath
Net space	27.0	39.0
Storage space	1.9	2.5
Overall area	28.9	41.5
All measurements in square metres for whole dwelling		
Source: Ministry of Housing and Local Government and the Welsh Office (1969)		

For many social housing providers the standard for single older people quickly became bed-sit with own kitchen and bathroom making about 30 square metres of overall space. Compare this to the range of 43 to 78 square metres enjoyed in mainstream housing by single older people.

There are significant issues here for those with least economic power. Means (1997) has predicted a crisis in public sector provision over the next two decades. While there is, a

growing recognition of the reasonableness of providing 1-bedroom flats for all including the single person and an increased demand by older people for the restoration of the spare room, the existing social housing stock of sheltered accommodation is still dominated by low space standards. This means that the problem of “hard to let” sheltered housing schemes may grow and that those who are most likely to be pressed to accept the lowest standards will be those living in social housing who are poor and frail (Tinker et al., 1995). However, it may also be the fate of many current older owner-occupiers and private tenants. The introduction of new legislation¹ in the UK to deal with poor quality private sector housing may result in local authorities taking radical action to demolish areas of inner city housing that are frequently dominated by older households. The value of properties bought under clearance powers is generally too low to allow re-entry into owner occupation and this is particularly true in the over heated UK housing market. For some of these people therefore the only suitable alternative may well be rented sheltered housing.

Significantly, those who can afford to turn to the private sector’s sheltered housing enjoy better space standards (more than 60 metres per flat, Kellaher, 2002, p. 48). Private sheltered housing is a newcomer to the market and as such has learned from the mistakes of the social rented sector though at a cost beyond the reach of many owners (Dalley, 2001).

The meaning of home: the personal and the cultural

A number of commentators have set out the importance of home as permeated with wider meanings to do with family, self identity and independence (Gurney, 1990; Darke, 1994; Kearns et al., 2000; Mowl et al., 2000). A decrease in interaction with a wider world (brought about variously through choice, poverty, loss of loved ones, loss of mobility, expectations of society) may increase the salience of home for older people (Rowles, 1978; Gurney and Means, 1993; Munro, 1996).

“If you have any mobility problems, or you’re a carer, or you’re old, or on a low income or depressed, your home becomes more important, not less, because you’re spending more of your time at home. When you’re working, you’re out all day – maybe staying out for the evening – home is much more the place where you sleep, not where you spend most of your life” (Easterbrook, 2002, p.9).

The meaning of home may have resonance on more than the level of the personal/individual. Heywood et al (2002) consider the cultural importance of home and in particular the social norm that bigger is always better (clearly evidenced by the high level of under occupation in the UK). It is surely significant that a high percentage of the recently built housing stock has four or more bedrooms. This does not signal any great increase in child rearing in the UK nor a move to living as extended families. It may spring from other socio-economic changes such as flexible working practices including working from home, the increase in ownership of home computers and the growing

percentage of students now living in the parental home who have their own space demands. It may spring from a desire to signal social status. If so then moving from a large house to a small flat may be viewed as a step down. It is also true that since the 1980s the British have become irrevocably wedded to the idea that owning is better than renting (Murie, 1998). For many older people then the impact of moving from a family house to a small flat and in some cases, combining this with a move from owning to renting may signal part of the downward spiral which old age is considered to be (Breeze *et al*, 2002). Older people are assumed to be moving along a “progressive path from living independently to being cared for” (Hanson, 2002, p. 177). The route is marked by actual moves from a family home to special needs housing and then to some form of care home. Each move is characterized by a loss of space. It is possible then that space itself becomes a signifier of increased frailty since as older people move through the care spectrum to residential and nursing care the private space shrinks with many residential care homes operating on less than 15 square metres per person. In short, space itself signals power and position. This Heywood *et al* (2002) argue may contribute to a loss of status in society. However, it may also trigger changes in status within the family by altering the way an older person is perceived:

“I used to do babysitting but they say, you’re too old Mother now. They take their kids up to the other granny’s at the weekend. My daughter-in-law’s mother. They’ve got a big house up there. And they sleep there you see, if they want to go out. But we used to babysit when they were little. We’ve babysitted all the kids”.
(older person quoted in Churchill *et al.*, 1996, p. 35).

Townsend (1981) suggests that within close relationships there may be an absence of the age boundary such that older people “are simply regarded as people, relatives or friends and valued as such” (quoted in Wilson, 2001, p. 477). Here the speaker’s son has shifted his assessment of his mother from capable carer to frail old lady. This may have occurred because of the changed housing context. For the speaker it is clear that the primary difference between herself and “the other granny” is the size of her house.

Hearing older people

Given the dominance of the provider perspective on space standards it is important to give space for older people’s voices to be heard. A small qualitative study was undertaken locally to explore with older people the experience of home. These interviews were conducted in older people’s own homes partly so that participants would feel in control and literally ‘at home’ but also because it was vital to see how people had arranged their homes and the things they cared about. To obtain a small initial sample older people were approached who were linked to organisations and networks where the author also had active engagement. The aim was to document a cross section of people and housing circumstances: of the 10, seven were in private dwellings, two in sheltered accommodation and one in a semi sheltered bungalow. The sample includes 7 women and 2 men who are now living singly, and one couple. While the voice of older people is heard through direct quotations, the names have been altered to respect privacy. The names given reflect the form of addressed between the interviewer and the older person

hence some participants may be referred to as Veronica or Maggie while others are Mrs Duncan or Mrs Thomas.

The paper now draws on the field work in particular to consider three inter related issues: Firstly space as a freedom to carry out everyday tasks in familiar ways. Secondly home as a place for love and emotional reciprocity and finally home as a container for possessions that reveal identity. Running as a thread through these sections is the fundamental concept that through these aspects of “beings and doings” older people experience greater freedom and that an essential element in this is having the freedom to make choices about housing and care.

The importance of space: freedom to be

Those older people living in their family home who took part in the study were very aware of the housing choices on offer. All had friends in sheltered housing and were conscious of the space that was available there. Maggie was concerned particularly about the lack of an eating space separate from the living area:

You come into a little turn round thing because you know the kitchens, you can hardly turn around in. I mean you're no sooner at the stove then you're at the sink. I think there should be a space where you can put a table in the kitchen. It needn't be so much bigger to have a small table (Maggie)

Betty who enjoyed having visitors to stay felt the omission of the “spare room” was an impediment to her giving serious consideration to sheltered housing:

I remember that chap who came years ago to one of the meetings when he said he was divided from his relations because he had no space. This lady at McCarthy and Stone² had this little dining extension so she could put a bed up there, which a lot of the flats haven't. They had a lovely visitor's room for £10 a night but even so it was away from your flat. You should have a little annexe even a cupboard that had a pull down bed in it.

Veronica living in a very large house with her husband Joe felt that any future move might be to a smaller family house but

We couldn't reduce our space too much because once you get used to space you can't contract too far and we would want our individual space as well as our common space.... There's no space [in sheltered housing flats] for hobbies .. Look at that heap [of papers] in the corner that's all stuff I am working on and I have another corner in the sitting room and Joe has stuff in the dining room and his workshop

Veronica raises an important issue that housing providers seem to ignore and that is that even a couple might want their own individual space: being a couple does not mean doing everything together. It would be interesting to research whether moving to a much smaller unit of accommodation created relationship tensions.

Mary felt the whole concept of what she called “herding older people together” was deeply ageist and betrayed a lack of support for older home owners

That would not appeal to me at all. Quite a lot of people there, women generally because women live longer than men have done that [moved to sheltered accommodation] and when I've talked about it with them, they say we haven't any choice, we couldn't get anyone to help, or maintain. If you could put those things right you wouldn't get anyone to live in sheltered housing. Frankly the people I have spoken to are not happy.

James talks of an acquaintance whose choices were made for him and whose quality of life is now impaired through the reduction in space. James contrasts his own freedom to roam from room to room in his family home.

James: I know an old gentleman. He's just about ninety years of age but he's got all his faculties; he's very bright and alert. He regrets the move. A friend of his had to move him because he'd been in hospital for an operation and he was told he wouldn't be able to look after himself so his house was simply put up for sale. Everything was done over his head really he had no choice as to where he could go to live. It was all that was available at the time and he just had to settle for it.

Interviewer: Have you heard why this man doesn't like it?

James: Well, the heat of the place is one thing and also, I believe it's the solitary confinement feeling about it. He has a bed-sitter room with the kitchen off and he said that if it wasn't for his television, he just wouldn't feel like life was worth living at all.

The old gentleman's friend felt he was making the right choice in putting physical safety first, but should it come first when other bodily and emotional integrity are compromised?

Older people spend much more of their time in the home environment compared with younger and economically active people. Ironically many have much less space, especially those in sheltered accommodation. Not only is space reduced but 'most flats and bedsitting rooms are designed for 'open plan' living and most layouts offer little scope to conceal the more intimate sleeping area from social and reception space' (Hanson, 2002, p.172). There is rarely space for overnight visitors within the unit, nor space to accommodate hobbies or pastimes. In short 'with the best of intentions, for purely pragmatic reasons the originators of sheltered housing also invented a 'special' housing stereotype that is unique to older people's housing and that embodies a specific and unflattering view of what it is like to be old' (Hanson, 2002, p.173).

The importance of space: freedom to care

In spite of the falling birth rate and the rising incidence of divorce being a grandparent is still a very common experience for the current retirement group. In the UK this is increasingly recognised as vital to the functioning of families with grandparents playing a significant role in looking after pre school children as well as collecting children from the short school day and providing illness and holiday cover. The advent of what has been termed "the beanpole family" means that it is not auntie who working parents turn to but

their parents or even their grandparents (Young et al., 2001). Beyond simple necessity, there is also the vital issue of trust where care from grandparents is judged to be the “next best thing“ to parental care (Wheelock et al., 2002, p. 454). From the grandparent’s side there is clearly also great joy in this close contact with their grandchildren as this graphic testimony demonstrates: “It’s quite like being in love - I can’t sleep before they come and when they go, I think about what they’ve done” (quoted in Wheelock et al., 2002, p. 455). Quantitative research in the United States (Kaufman et al., 2003) suggests that those older people who enjoy being grand parents feel younger, believe that people become old at later ages and hope to live longer than those who do not enjoy grand parenting. It might be concluded from these various strands of evidence that grand parenting has positive benefits for the whole family and contributes to subjective well being for older people. However, for some grand parents the picture is one of loss:

“And my grandchildren, they say `Ah Nana, go back to your house where we could play in your garden`, little Rosie and little Tom, they say `we don’t like here Nana`. I used to see them regularly, but now I don’t see them as much `cause they say `there’s nowhere to run Nana or play`. I had a little spare room and they all used to go in there and play”. (older person quoted in Churchill et al., 1996, p. 34-35).

On moving into sheltered housing, the spaces that children valued for play are no longer on offer. The smallness of the flat, the lack of space in the bedroom if there is a separate one provided, and the lack of the spare room offers no child friendly space within the flat.

Outside the flat, there are corridors in place of the street. Streets offer opportunities for playing with other children from the neighbourhood: corridors in sheltered housing generally do not. Where the sheltered flats have communal gardens the very fact of their being communal can act as a deterrent to anyone using them fully. Where a space belongs to everyone, it often seems to belong to no one.

The loss of space then may have a direct impact on loss of role. This may be acutely experienced by an older person who has also lost other adult key roles: worker and wife or husband (Hooyman et al., 1996). Developed world societies that are all ageing rapidly have yet to find roles for retired people that have any real resonance. Price (2000) concludes that apart from grandparent, only the roles of volunteer, tourist and retiree seem open. The older women in her research clearly reveal the disparaging way that volunteers may be treated by professionals. The image of the bronzed and active older couple walking hand in hand through the crashing surf on a far away beach may be alluring but it is only affordable by the better off. What is the role of a retiree? Is it to be an ex person defined always in relation to the world of production (Gilleard and Higgs, 2000)? I used to be a nurse... I'm a retired bank manager.... The damage to one role and perhaps the one that might give most reward needs further research.

In the older people at home study, none of those living in sheltered housing had young grandchildren. Those living in their family home however took pride in the fact that they were still able to hold family gatherings and that their children and grandchildren felt it was still their home and a place to be, in Betty's words "easy". Veronica talks of her

grand daughter's pleasure in looking through her attic cupboards and picking through the accumulated objects: "Grandma these are my cupboards of delight". The capacities to store old letters, photographs, keep a dressing up box of discarded clothes, games those children (now parents themselves) enjoyed can be one of the pleasures in staying with grandma. The next section explores the concept of home as a place for "treasures" and for those things that point to the uniqueness of an individual.

The importance of space: a container for memory

In a society increasingly dominated by consumerism, social position and success may be signalled to others by possessions of the "right kind": the right address, the fastest car, the latest designer's clothes. However possessions may hold many more layers of meaning.

In the qualitative study, Alice is surrounded by furniture and effects handmade by her father, uncles and brother and these are triggers to the memories of when she was part of a bustling family. She has a framed photograph of the two houses that she lived in as well as many pictures of family. Alice's sight is failing fast: she can no longer read and can barely recognise faces. The objects and pictures that surround her are not visible in any detail, but they are a means of making "memories both past and current matters" (Fairhurst, 1997, p. 71). The area surrounding the place where the older person spends much of their time (frequently a special chair facing a window and usually close to a fireplace) is especially significant. The mantelpiece and windowsill may be filled with pictures and objects

The [grand] children come and like to see these things in their proper place, the place they were put when they were given. I have to find places for things (Betty)

For Mrs Duncan there was regret that she had parted with so many of her treasured possessions and more particularly many books that were important to a great reader:

I still think now, I wish I had kept my books. I look for a book now and think, no it's gone. You see when I came I was only in for 10 minutes, you know that's the kitchen, that's the bathroom, that's the bedroom and then she took me round the building. When I got back I was saying what did she have in the flat and Liz was trying to think and so I was to get some idea of the size. The lady who was in here said, "I thought you'd keep coming back and that's why I thought you weren't going to take it", course at the time I didn't want it but...It was hard to decide but Carol was good mind you, Liz was going round saying "well this will have to go and this" but Carol would hold up each thing and ask "do you want this Mam, what about this?" Going through it slowly and giving me time to think. But it was very hard. It wasn't the furniture it was the rest, the personal things.

Place attachment is characteristic of most social groups (Altman, 1992) and in a society characterised by greater mobility it may be that portability of possession is important because it suggests "home" can be restaged by setting these things out in a new place (Shenk et al., 2004). However for Mrs Duncan there is hesitancy about calling this home.

All my pictures are still in boxes, in the cupboard. It's as if I'm not really settled and I am settled so I don't know

Veronica recounts her mother in law's move from home to the "granny flat" made for her within Veronica's house and her subsequent moves to residential and then nursing care. Each of these moves signifying a loss of space and a reduction in possessions.

Well when they came here they were able to bring most of their furniture and things because they furnished their own room. When she first went into residential home she wasn't able to take very much with her so she took a small bookcase and photographs then when she moved into nursing care she wasn't even able to take the bookcase so she only had the photos. So in the end in the nursing home that was all she had. She did have other possessions with her but they kept asking us to take them away because she kept losing them and she was always very concerned about the time. She always knew the time and had her watch. But she kept losing it and they kept asking us to take it away but We said the one she has now is just a cheap one which I got for her because it had large numbers so it doesn't really matter and it is important to her to have it and she did lose it.

How do individuals make selections from a lifetime of collected and presented objects each with its own store of memories? How might friends and family make those choices for an older person when they view a life from outside? Can there be flourishing in such environments when we have so little to call our own?

A critical issue in place attachment may be choice: The ability of an individual to make his or her own choices without feeling pressured may be critical in forming new attachments. This concurs with the findings of Young (1998) in her investigation of older Americans moving to “congregate housing” or grouped living for frailer people. Those who made independent choices or chose in conjunction with their family settled into their new living space more readily than those who had choices made for them. When the issue is about moving to accommodation that is labelled as “care” the capacity of the individual to exercise even small choices may be frustrated.

Conclusion

Given the poor fit between much British housing and the needs of a less mobile person an older person may have to consider moving to “special needs” accommodation. While it is commonly believed that a move to sheltered housing is a positive in terms of regaining independence, decreased personal space may play a part in signalling to others the onset of old age and therefore the beginning of frailty and lack of competence. This may have consequences for roles such as grand parenting where those seen as previously capable may be now judged too old to be carers. Loss of space may instil a loss of self-esteem in older people who may see their routines, their hobbies, their part in child-care and their sense of self compromised. Far from regaining independence many older people housing may find that they have lost significant elements of human functioning that gave meaning and value to their lives.

The centrality of choice: the ability to exercise decisions is a freedom that most adults take for granted and yet a thematic in the field work was the ways in which this is progressively denied older people. Talking with older people and building an appreciation of what they value needs to be at the core of policy making about older people's housing (see table 2). The central concern for physical safety needs to be mediated by an acknowledgement of the role that space can play in allowing the continuation of a unique individual.

Notes

1. The Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) Order 2002
2. McCarthy and Stone is the UK's major provider of sheltered housing for owner occupation. Their individual flats are built to higher space standards (about 60 square metres) but the concept is the same as in the social rented sector with communal lounges and a call alarm system linked to a warden.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank fellow researchers, Peter Kellett and Sue Jackson whose contributions to the field work and the discussion that followed were invaluable. Thanks also to the editor and referees.

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Table 2: Nussbaum's central human functional capabilities

Concept	Nussbaum's definition	As realised in housing
Life	Being able to live to the end of human life; not dying prematurely or before life is not worth living	Under recognise contribution that home (as opposed to housing) can play in maintaining quality of life
Bodily health	To have good health, to be adequately nourished and have shelter	Housing as shelter providing easy access and warmth is a dominant provider perspective
Bodily integrity	To be able to move freely from place to place, freedom from assault	Space needs to allow freedom of roaming. This seen as subordinate to need for security from robbery or assault.
Senses, imagination	To be able to use the senses, to imagine, think and reason, to search for meaning of life in one's own way	Home and garden as a source of reverie, places for possessions and memory
emotions	To have attachments to things and people outside ourselves	Home as a place for possessions

Practical reason	To be able to form a conception of good and to be able to reflect on the planning of one's own life	Home and its storehouse of memories aids reflection on the life course. Gives validity to the self
Affiliation	To be able to live for and toward others	Home as an arena for emotional interaction with friends and family
Other species	To be able to live with concerns for and in relation to the world of nature	The role of the garden in helping appreciation of the natural world
Play	To be able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities	Space for hobbies, interests and interacting with loved ones
Control over one's environment	To be able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life	To be able to make choices that are respected and to then have space to exercise autonomy.

Adapted from Nussbaum (2000) Women and Development: The Capabilities Approach