

Singapore

ILC Singapore

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Types of housing and their suitability

The majority of people in Singapore reside in public apartments provided by the Housing Development Board (HDB). The HDB controls over 90 per cent of the total housing stock in the country and the remaining 10 per cent consists of private market stock. Eighty seven per cent of people aged 60+ reside in an HDB flat. (The estimated number of older people aged 60+ is 530,382 which represents 14 per cent of Singapore's total population (Census of Population, 2010).) The flats vary in size, from one room to five rooms. In general, younger persons apply to purchase an HDB flat on the bases of income earned and lifetime ownership. Lower income individuals tend to own smaller flats and higher income individuals tend to own larger flats.

In 2008, about 40 per cent of older households resided in a three-roomed flat and 30.2 per cent resided in a four-roomed flat (HDB, 2008). In 2003 a greater proportion of older households occupied a five-roomed, and thus larger, flat – which increased from 10.1 per cent in 2003 to 14.9 per cent in 2008 (HDB, 2008)

The different types of housing, as defined by the size of an HDB flat, have traditionally been intended to meet family size needs. However, with demographic change the majority of older households now comprise a nuclear family. Single-person households, occupied by an older person alone, have increased from 16.3 per cent in 2003 to 17.5 per cent in 2008 (HDB, 2008).

The types of housing, which include HDB flats and private housing such as landed property, have historically not met older people's health and social needs. This situation is changing, however, with changes to land use, and senior activity centres and senior service centres increasingly built on the ground floor of HDB apartment buildings. Community centres, which offer social activities for residents of all ages, are also in close walking distance.

Policy on housing and the provision of specialist housing

A key development in housing policy for older people is the construction of HDB studio apartments – which constitutes a departure from the traditional one-roomed HDB flat and may be viewed as innovative. Since 1998, approximately 2,000 studio flats, in stand-alone blocks or integrated with larger flats, have been sold by the HDB on a 30-year lease to individuals aged 55+. These studio apartments are designed to be elder friendly. Each flat is 45m² and consists of a living room, a kitchen, a

bathroom and a bedroom; all are fitted with non-slip tiles, grab bars and a bell pull for emergencies.

It is arguable, however, whether the current stock of studio flats will meet both actual and latent demand. It is neither clear whether older people prefer such housing, which may require them to relocate from the neighborhood in which they grew up and to form new social networks late in life. Older Singaporeans also tend to want to leave their dwelling as inheritance for their children, which they are not able to do with a studio flat as the flats are leased from the HDB.

Given a shortage of land and high density living, policy on housing for older people strongly encourages “ageing-in-place.” Hence, early in life, the majority of individuals apply to own an HDB flat and continue to live in the flat in late life. To support “aging-in-place,” health and social care services are increasingly provided by non-profit organisations to HDB neighbourhoods in which a majority of residents are old. Current housing stock with basic age-friendly features and some access to elder-specific care services – such as senior activity centres (SAC) and a limited number of assisted living facilities – caters only to low-income older individuals. However, as a part of Singapore’s long-term care policy, older persons who are frail and/or lack caregiver support are likely to be relocated to specialist housing – also known as long-term care residential institutions. Specialist housing is managed by the statutory agency, the Agency for Integrated Care (AIC). It includes nursing homes, chronic sick hospitals, sheltered homes and in-patient hospices. The availability of private retirement villages and assisted living facilities is minimal to none.

Problems are attached to specialist housing for older people nonetheless. A central concern is that frail older persons and/or family caregivers have low awareness of home and community based care services that would enable elderly persons to remain living in their home. There is a tendency for them to apply to the AIC for nursing home placement when the older person’s conditions deteriorate or when family caregivers are no longer able to cope. This tendency happens despite an elder’s preference to continue living at home. In addition, there is a shortage of space in nursing homes and numerous frail older people are on the waiting list.

Overall, specialised community based senior housing that couples services with age friendly design is still fairly undeveloped in Singapore. However, awareness of a need for universal access in buildings and safety features has increased significantly over the past 20 years. Demand for various types of senior housing will increase in the coming five years as baby boomers start to reach age 65 (the first batch turned 65 in 2012). Significant changes are thus anticipated in the senior housing sector.

References

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