

Silver Days, Golden Years – or the Big Sleep?

After reading 'The Big Sleep' article in The Age (15/1/16) about the suicide pact of Melbourne scientists Pat and Peter Shaw, and then about David Bowie's hugely creative and energetic last 18 months in The Guardian

(http://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/jan/15/david-bowies-last-days-an-18-month-burst-of-creativity?CMP=tw_t_gu), I was puzzled.

I wondered how many of us in our retiring years might be caught in the middle, still seeing things left undone, places untraveled and ideas not realised, but frustrated by lack of energy, state of health, family support or basic wherewithal to make the most of a twilight that might linger longer.

The recent Belvoir play 'Seventeen' was a poignant juxtaposition of youthful exuberance against the frailties of age, with actors in their 70's taking the roles of 17 year olds celebrating their last day of school and an uncertain future. One of its key messages was an unfolding awareness of our mortality, and what will we have to celebrate or just keep us going towards the end.

Then reading Marcus Westbury's recent book Creating Cities and thinking about how his process of remaking downtrodden areas of Newcastle might be applied to the complexity of our retirement and aged care system, perhaps to create easier ways for elder sharing, just like our student days! Much cohabit potential exists in many big houses on the North Shore (and elsewhere) or recycled inner city warehouses if there were less social taboos, bureaucratic barriers, more community and health support mechanisms, and the potential for cultural/social media hook-ups to foster a new silver age for baby boomers, and generations to follow.

There are some existing affordable and social housing complexes such as Pottery Gardens in Lane Cove with potential for redevelopment to more innovative shared village models. With the imminent changes to the strata act many home unit complexes may provide opportunities for different configurations as reimagined multi-age communities, where cooperation and sharing of skills, time, resources and even management expertise might offer new ways for aging in place to be better integrated within existing urban conditions.

During my architect partner Guy Luscombe's research trip in 2014 to investigate new ways that some European countries are enabling their seniors to enjoy life and even prosper in their silver days, the example of shared seniors' accommodation was one that stood out. In St Gallen, Switzerland, four elderly friends decided to develop their own co-housing solution in an old fabric factory, and created personalised units with a range of common area facilities to support their interests, and this has won several awards.

Various other inter-generational or multi-age housing he visited had mixes of families, singles, young couples and older people which had been shown to work, where residents agreed to participate in the community as part of their contract.

With less than 6% of people over 65 considering Retirement/ Seniors Living Village options, and a fewer still wanting to end up in the traditional nursing home, there appears to be a huge desire for alternatives, either with a few friends or others who might share common interests in music, the arts, gardening, literature or various sports, and capacities to fix things or prepare meals.

Perhaps such community activities might take place on site as in Bayside, Victoria and various New York locations, where residency programs aimed at emerging artists, multimedia practitioners, writers and composers provide residencies or studios in exchange for community engagement activities - artist's talks, workshops, master classes and participation in local festivals or exhibitions to brighten and engage those in their twilight.

Unfortunately there are few precedents in this area, where policy and funding frameworks are limited to existing models, and innovation or disruptive thinking are rarely welcome. A shared equity model based on enablement and affordability might tick the financial boxes, but the regulatory framework appears to be a minimum and ultimate standard.

So perhaps a Marcus Westbury approach is needed, and as he argues in Creating Cities ...

most towns and cities are wasting their most obvious opportunities: the talent, imagination, and passion of the people that live there. In a globalised age, local creativity has access to new possibilities that most places have barely begun to grasp.



Footnote: SMH 19/1/16

<http://www.domain.com.au/news/what-will-the-worlds-best-cities-will-look-like-in-2030-20160119-gm9k4v/>