

“Granny Flats”: How Viable an Option for Older Persons

by Toby Brookes*

With the rapid aging of populations throughout the world, housing options for the elderly which serve as alternatives to institutionalization continue to be actively explored. Among these alternatives, the “granny flat” offers a form of housing that permits the continued independence of older persons while allowing for the support needed with the limitations aging may bring. The granny flat is a self-contained housing unit, usually movable, which is adjacent to the home of relatives. There are variations in structure, degree of self-containment, etc., but in every case these housing units allow the elderly to remain in the community and facilitate family based services.

While appearing to be an ideal housing alternative for older persons who are no longer totally self-sufficient but do not require extensive care, granny flat projects nevertheless present a challenge to the administrative management capabilities of those who undertake them.

Now, a new book, *Granny Flats as Housing for the Elderly: International Perspectives*** edited by N. Michael Lazarowich of the University of Waterloo in Ontario, alerts prospective planners to the elements essential to the success of granny flat programs. His review is based on the experiences of Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, the United States and Canada with the granny flat over the last fifteen years. Although each country presents unique circumstances, problems and solutions, many of the lessons learned in these countries are probably universally applicable.

Australia:

In 1975, the first movable form of the granny flat was introduced in Victoria, Australia. These movable housing units can be dismantled when no longer required and reerected on another site. They have been available either through rental from the Ministry of Housing and Construction or through private funding of their construction with the Ministry still maintaining regulatory control.

All the units contain a living room, bedroom, kitchen and bathroom. However, not all had been constructed of the same materials, resulting in a variety of erection methods as well as longevity of varying degrees. By 1985, there were eighteen different types of units which were supplied by twelve different contractors!

In response to this inefficient practice, a standard unit has been developed and in use since 1990. Given the relative

climatic uniformity of Australia, a standard unit is both practical and cost-effective. The concern for efficiency has also led to a reduction in “red tape” in the waiting and removal times for units (average removal times have been reduced over the past five years from eight to ten months to three to four months). In addition, the issue of length of tenancy as a cost factor is also being addressed with the possibility of a requirement for a minimum tenancy.

Despite the progress that has been made in expediting the granny flat option, Bill Power, a manager of the Movable Units Program, in his assessment of the Australian experience points to the constantly rising costs of the program and suggests that the Ministry of Housing and Construction needs to consider all the factors involved in a comprehensive manner in order to assess its value. A balance must “be found between the difficult to quantify benefits and the actual dollar cost of the program.” In Powers’ opinion, “the Program has been appreciated by most who have directly benefited from it, and it deserves to be developed.”

New Zealand:

Weaknesses in the administration of the granny flat program due to ill-defined government responsibilities and a lack of uniformity in housing policies due to wide differences in local governmental ordinances have hindered the development of this housing option in New Zealand, according to Lex Chalmers and G. Brent Hall.

In 1986, six years after its initiation, the program was taken over from local government agencies by the Housing Corporation, a central government agency. The local authorities’ difficulties with funding, construction and maintenance of units, and the inability of New Zealand’s small residential construction industry to support a production line technology in the construction of granny flats, resulted in high average unit costs. As a consequence, the supply of units was limited and the program floundered.

With the financial and management responsibility now in the hands of the central government housing agency, Chalmers and Hall are optimistic about the future of granny flats in New Zealand. They do conclude, however, with an expression of concern about the lack of attention given to the elderly Maori population. It is well to note that in planning granny flat projects, “design factors may have to be modified to suit different cultural experiences and expectations.”

Canada:

N. Michael Lazarowich indicates that thirty demonstration

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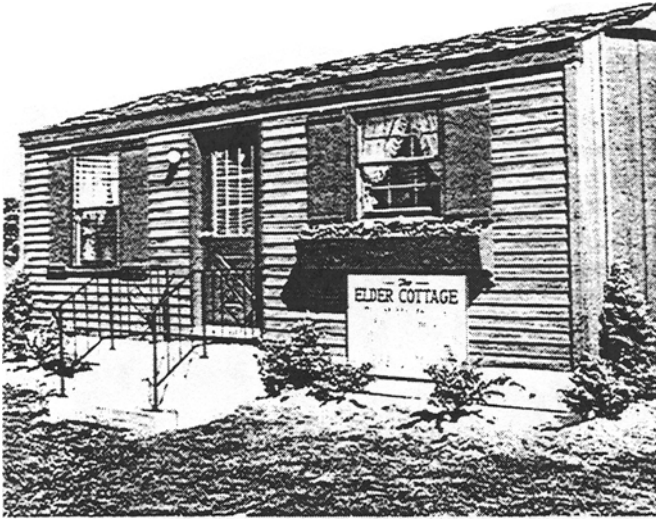


Photo: An "Elder Cottage" in Lititz, Pennsylvania

projects held in 1987-88 and managed by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) and the Ontario Ministry of Housing (OMOH) have shown that there is "strong consumer acceptance of the granny flat concept by occupants, hosts, neighbors and regulators." Although he does identify four issues central to the success of the granny flat program that need further resolution, the "enthusiasm, excitement, commitment and leadership" displayed by CMHC and OMOH have been key factors in the success of the demonstration projects.

The four issues central to the success of a granny flat program are financial, regulatory, information/marketing and political will. Recent developments have indicated that these issues are being effectively addressed. For example, CMHC is being encouraged by the federal government to expand the seniors' social housing program to include granny flats. This action would make granny flats eligible for rent supplements, non-profit housing status, and cost sharing in unit construction. In addition, the Ontario Ministry of Housing will be facilitating granny flats by providing information and making it easier for municipalities to regulate the flats. Lazarowich concludes that the prospects are very good for further granny flat development in Ontario in the 1990s.

Great Britain:

Although in Great Britain the concept of the granny flat dates back as early as 1945, the development of this housing option for the elderly has not been as successful as elsewhere. Anthea Tinker points out that there is actually very little data about granny flats in Great Britain, or for that matter, in the rest of Europe and that the lack of data in itself indicates the limited development of the granny flat option.

In contrast to the units described in other countries, granny flats in Great Britain are not movable. Usually, they are permanent structures attached to a housing unit occupied by relatives or by a younger family. Matching, thus, becomes difficult when the original person for whom a granny flat may have been added moves or dies.

One can only speculate as to why movable units have not been acceptable in Britain. Tinker offers the possible answer of a lack of space in British gardens, but finally, leaves this question open. The complications of allocation of flats, waiting lists, matching elderly tenants with younger families—in addition to the current emphasis on the policy of community care which excludes the role of housing—have all served to discourage public sector pursuit of the granny flat option. Acknowledging these complications, Tinker suggests that perhaps a more realistic approach for the public sector would be a program which would "ensure that elderly people and their relatives can be enabled to live close but not necessarily next door."

Tinker is doubtful about the ability of the public sector to implement granny flat programs in the near future. She concludes that "The British experience shows that there are problems over this kind of provision in the public sector and that there has been little widespread development in the private sector, but that there may be some expansion in the latter."

The United States:

The success of "Echo (elder cottage housing opportunity) housing," as granny flats are known in the U.S., has been very limited. Although endorsed by media and housing professionals and appropriate zoning and quality units have been available, the concept has not taken hold.

In his presentation of the U.S. experience, Patrick Hare cites an echo house success story in the county of Frederick, Maryland. In Frederick, homeowners in agricultural areas were allowed to put mobile homes next to their housing to enable them to take care of elderly relatives. In fact, many rural areas in the U.S. have zoning which permits mobile homes, facilitating this type of echo housing. However, agricultural areas are not the norm in the U.S. and isolated pockets of success such as the Frederick experience have not been enough to convince the American public of the desirability of echo housing.

In a market-driven economy such as the U.S.'s, it is probably not possible for the echo housing option to be successful until its economic viability and cost effectiveness are established. This could be accomplished, in Hare's opinion, through joint efforts by real estate agents, hospitals, group health plans, insurance companies, home health care agencies, and mobile home dealers. These are the groups who have the skills and financial incentives to market the concept to the American public.

In all of these discussions, the social and psychological benefits of granny flat housing are not called into question. There appears to be a consensus that elderly persons who

live in this type of housing benefit greatly. Clearly then, the major obstacles in the implementation of viable granny flat programs are management issues which are mostly in government hands. It would be interesting to learn why the Canadian government has been so supportive of the

program in contrast to the governments of the other countries discussed. For not until there is a real commitment on the part of government agencies to this housing option for older persons can some of the major obstacles be overcome.

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