

BUILDINGS FOR THE HOUSING OF SELF-SUFFICIENT SENIORS IN THE COUNTRYSIDE - PRIVACY AND INTIMACY

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ABSTRACT: In this age of singles and nuclear families, privacy is becoming an increasingly desirable commodity. The desire for privacy is transforming not only our habits and lifestyles, but also the built environment. This is particularly evident in rural environments where development is moving away from the public space boundary of the street and private land to its center, and gardens are enclosed behind a barrier of opaque fences.

Can we offer the same level of privacy to self-sufficient seniors living in senior community homes and similar facilities?

In the following paper, I attempt to answer the question using the findings from visits to a few selected buildings for housing self-sufficient seniors in the Czech countryside. The most significant deficiency in the facilities visited was the lack of a defined private space for residents in the exterior, the lack of space for storing personal belongings, and the boundary between private and public space generally being too hard.

KEY WORDS: Elderly, rural, village, care, community, home

Introduction - personal space in the countryside

Rural life is characterised by the need to define personal space, not only inside the house, but also in the exterior. Although the life of most rural dwellers has not revolved around

agriculture for a long time, daily habits are often linked to being in the garden or yard and taking care of it (Galčanová and Staveník 2020, Kubátová 2010).

These outdoor spaces often form a transition between the public space and the privacy of the interior, a kind of decompression chamber.

Do we succeed in conveying this quality to residents of buildings for the elderly in rural areas? Do these buildings allow the inhabitants to easily transition between interior and exterior? Do they have their own grounds where residents can feel private, at home? I will attempt to answer these questions in this paper using a few selected examples of buildings for housing self-sufficient seniors.

Our main source of data and information was visits to selected facilities over the past three years. As part of these case studies, we spoke with residents, administrators, and providers of facilities for self-sufficient seniors. An important standard for this kind of building is the Community House for the Elderly (“KoDuS”), a subsidy programme from the Ministry of Regional Development.

This is housing for younger seniors who, while still independent of the help of others, want to take advantage of the benefits of companionship as a possible additional equivalent to help from family or public or social services (Ministerstvo pro místní rozvoj ČR 2016).

Although some of the buildings described below weren't constructed under KoDuS, their architecture meets the conditions of the subsidy programme.

Storage space as a means of preserving dignity

In the semi-floored ground floor of the Residential House for the Elderly in Staříč, in addition to the entrance, there are two multi-purpose spaces - a common room, which, however, provides services to local clubs more than to the residents of the house, sanitary facilities, one larger warehouse and basement storage units. (Fig. 1)

It is the seemingly uninteresting storage spaces that are often a neglected aspect of similar buildings. A separate enclosed space for storing seasonal items and even seemingly unnecessary sentimental artefacts is a prerequisite for the dignified use of a small-size apartment (Feddersen and Lüdtke 2018, Váňová 2014); this is especially true for senior citizens who have lived most of their life in their own family house. The pragmatic approach of architects and developers often dictates that the (economically unprofitable) area of individual storage space should be limited or completely suppressed. Apart from the practical storage of things that would get in the way in a small apartment, it is also a question of

privacy and personal identity. In similar facilities, the developer often resists designating separate cubicles for individual units for fear of uncontrolled overcrowding. (Fig. 2)

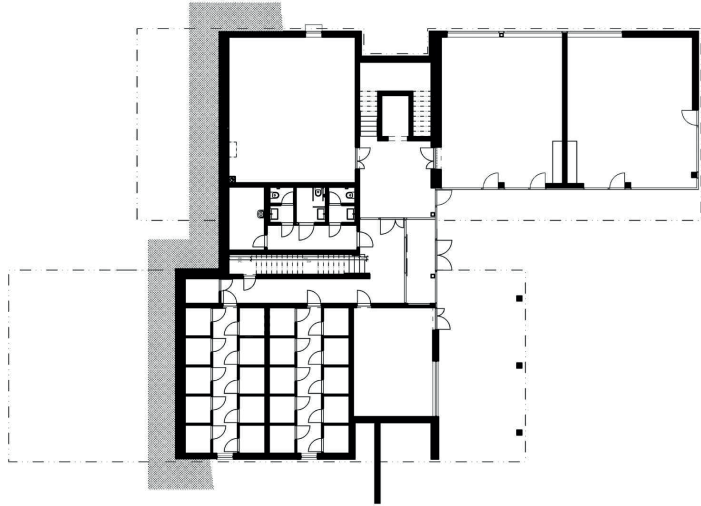


Fig. 1 Apartment building for the elderly in Staříč, first floor plan, Kamil Mrva Architects



Fig. 2 Community home for the elderly in Řečany nad Labem, storage room

Another often neglected storage space is the bicycle room. In the countryside, the bicycle serves not only as a basic means of transport for short and medium distances, but often as a support for walking or just a “carrier” for shopping bags. It is also a kind of status expression of activity - “As long as I use a bicycle, I am active, self-sufficient”.

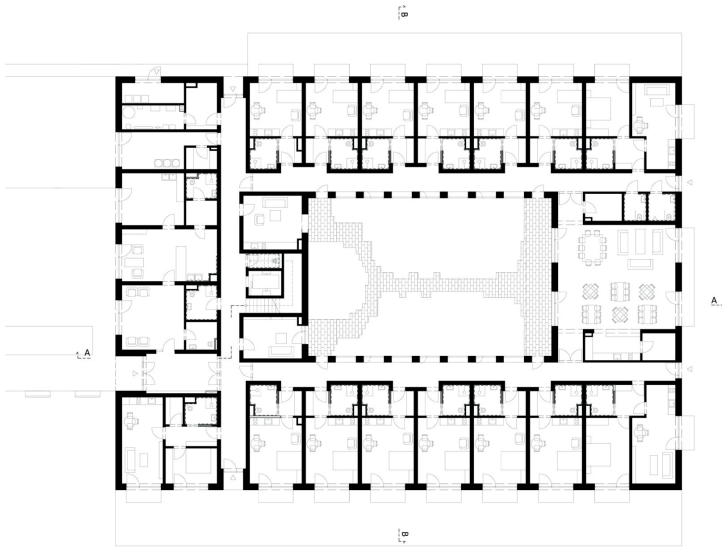


Fig. 3 Community home for the elderly in Křenovice, first floor plan, Kota Atelier

In the community home for the elderly in Křenovice, the desire for a clean and efficient floor plan has gone so far that virtually all the storage areas have fallen victim to it. Not only does the home not have enough storage space for its management, but there are also no storage areas for residents and not even a bicycle storage area. Thus, there is also no place to store residents' compensatory aids or seasonal car accessories, which, like bicycles, are still used by most residents. (Fig. 3)

Social interactions

A great benefit of the house in Staříč is the generous dimension of the horizontal roads, especially in its centre. This creates a kind of inner village square, well-lit and widely used by the inhabitants for sitting and everyday chats. To some extent, this compensates for the unused common room. During our visit, we were struck by the immediacy and naturalness of these spontaneous gatherings of mostly female residents. They show that the generous communal space in the house can to some extent substitute the role of the village square and the garden, creating a safe semi-private space where the inhabitants are accessible for chance encounters and communication (Kohout et al. 2014). In the countryside, there tends to be a difference between who we exchange a few words within the garden and who we invite into the house. And it is this graded intimacy of spaces for different levels of relationships that a good qual-

ity community house (whether it is officially called that or not) should allow (Tichý 2015). (Fig. 4)



Fig. 4 Apartment building for the elderly in Staříč

In Křenovice the architects took a different path, the community house is arranged around a central courtyard (atrium). The individual flats are oriented along the longer outer sides of the rectangular plan on the ground floor, with generously lit corridors running along the courtyard, and the axially positioned common room against the rear wall, that is directly connected to both the inner courtyard and the exterior. Both of the above solutions contrast well with the widespread problem of long narrow corridors.

Gardens - outdoor private space

All the ground floor apartments in Křenovice have a small garden on the outer edge. A year after their construction, the gardens already looked well-used, the number of their own plants and small accessories shows that the inhabitants have easily accepted them as their own, which is certainly due to their clear, if seemingly subtle, spatial demarcation. (Fig. 5)

An intimate outdoor space, which they could perceive as their own, is often lacking for residents of rural retirement buildings. Instead of gardens for the residents' own cultivation and recreation, community buildings have mostly created banal parks for everyone, so to speak. (Fig. 6)

One resident of the Community House in Janov confided to us during our visit that she had attempted to grow her own plants in her "garden", but these had been identified as

weeds and removed to preserve the sterile appearance of the beds of ornamental flowers covered with mulch bark. This is yet another example of where, no doubt well-intentioned, pragmatism leads us away from empathy and understanding of the needs of others.



Fig. 5 Community home for the elderly in Křenovice

At the time of our visit, however, two raised beds for growing residents' own plants were being installed near the terrace, which is directly connected to the lounge. Some of the residents had already prepared tomato and other plant seedlings on the terrace and it was evident that for at least some of the residents this was a welcome development. (Fig. 7)

The immediate surroundings of the house in Staříč consists of a garden or rather a park, part of the front area is of course occupied by a parking space. Although the plot is not fenced from the front side by the road, the back part wedged between the gardens and the

cemetery wall gives a cozy impression. The mature apple trees certainly contribute to this. Unfortunately, the generic parkland layout of the walking areas, as well as the rather sloping terrain, does not lend itself to activities other than a short walk and sitting on a bench.



Fig. 6 Community home for the elderly in Janov

There is no possibility for the residents to grow their own plants in the garden. When asked if they had such a possibility, the residents answered unanimously “I don’t, I have it at home.” This answer, I think, sufficiently illustrates the relationship of rural seniors to rental housing. Younger members of the seniors’ family continue to live in their old house, and seniors living in a rented apartment in a communal home still tend to call the family house their own home. Almost as if they were there only on a vacation. (Fig. 8)



Fig. 7 Community home for the elderly in Janov



Fig. 8 Apartment building for the elderly in Staříč

Conclusions

Although buildings for individual housing in rural areas are responding dynamically to the changing perception of privacy and intimacy, buildings for senior housing are lagging behind in this respect. In particular, there are deficiencies in the transition between public and private, both in the exterior and interior. In our efforts to create the cleanest and most efficient layout possible, we as architects often neglect the need for storage spaces of sufficient size to provide for the operation and maintenance of the home as well as for dignified living. Privacy and intimacy do not end and begin with the threshold of the home.

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