Envisioning bodies and architectures of care: Reflections on competition designs for older people

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ABSTRACT

Architects shape future dwellings and built environments in ways that are critical for aging bodies. This article explores how assumptions about aging bodies are made manifest in architectural plans and designs. By analysing entries for an international student competition *Caring for Older People* (2009), we illustrate the ways in which aged bodies were conceived by future architectural professionals. Through analysing the architectural plans, we can discern the students' expectations and assumptions about aging bodies and embodiment through their use of and reference to spaces, places and things. We analyse the visual and discursive strategies by which aged bodies were represented variously as frail, dependent, healthy, technologically engaged and socially situated in domestic and community settings, and also how architects inscribed ideas about care and embodiment into their proposals. Through our analysis of these data we also attend to the non-representational ways in which design and spatiality may be crucial to the fabrication of embodied practices, atmospheres and affects. We end by reflecting on how configurations and ideologies of care can be reproduced through architectural spaces, and conclude that a dialogue between architecture and sociology has the potential to transform concepts of aging, embodiment and care.

Introduction

Bornat and Jones have called for researchers of later life to explore visions of the future as they are imagined in the daily activities of people in a variety of settings and at different stages of the life-course. Analysing imaginings of future users, they argue, 'tells us important things about the social construction of age, aging and the life-course' (2014, p. 6). In this article, we examine how young architects anticipate the future by exploring their designs of care homes for people in later life. Specifically, we review entries submitted for the *Caring for Older People* international student design competition (DWA/RIBA, 2009), in order to explore how aging bodies are implicitly and explicitly represented in their architectural plans.

This allows us to extend previous work which explored the accounts of established architects reflecting on designing care homes for older people (Buse, Nettleton, Martin, & Twigg, 2017). We begin by reviewing debates on the intersection of architecture and embodiment and, in particular, how architectural conceptions of bodies may facilitate the 'character' of places (Abel, 2013). We then proceed to decipher the various bodies 'imagined' and inscribed within entries for the *Caring for Older People* competition. We end by reflecting on the interconnectedness of place and lived experiences of care in later life, and

suggest that whether and, if so, how architects address and anticipate embodiment is critical to future challenges associated with planning care for later life.

Anticipating futures and architectural agency

Although we do not hold that architecture alters behaviour in any deterministic sense, we do argue that architects articulate ideas and ideologies of care, and contribute to the construction of aging bodies through their designs. Design reproduces cultural expectations and political visions about how we 'ought' to live (King, 1980). Spatial layouts and spatial vocabularies etched in architectural plans 'carry encoded messages of how bodies are expected to move in space' (Hofbauer, 2000, p. 170), and provide visible documentation of socio-cultural assumptions, power relations and the organisation of daily life (Prior, 1988, 2003). Furthermore, non-representational approaches look beyond what architecture might 'represent' and direct attention to experience, embodiment and practices as they play out through relations between spaces, places, people and things. They point to the potential for architecture to invoke atmosphere and affect and explore how materials and spaces may be choreographed to create 'mood catching environments' (Thrift, 2009, p. 123). Kraftl and Adey, for

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example, compared the design strategies of architects working on two contrasting settings – a school and an airport prayer room – and found similar methods were used 'to engineer affect' in order 'to encourage children, passengers, and airport workers to inhabit, and to inhabit "well," in their spaces' (2008, p. 227). Engineering atmosphere involved the recruitment of 'a wide variety of materials, practices, bodies, events, and memories' in order to invoke 'homely and retreat-like feelings' (p. 227). This speaks to an emergent literature on the 'materialities of care' (Buse, Martin, & Nettleton, 2018), which explores how everyday artifacts are imbued with meaning and impact on identity and comfort (Lovatt, 2018). Such mundane things may even hold political purchase through what Molnár describes as the 'domesticating power' of material objects that can 'mitigate the disruptive effects of social change (Molnár, 2016, p. 207).'

In their aspirational visions of places for inhabitation, designers work with implicit as well as more explicit notions of what they presume to be 'appropriate' spatial configurations for particular settings. Architectural plans may therefore provide a freeze frame of how anticipated buildings are represented. However, we can also recognise that design plans are embedded, active documents 'woven together out of on-going stories' (Massey, 2005, p. 131) that invoke emotional responses and debate. Houdart (2008) describes architectural drawings as 'cosmologies in the making' (p. 48); not only virtual renderings of buildings and space, but also of how human and non-human bodies fit into the picture. Design plans are inherently social and give clues into the relation between spatiality, materiality and projections of aging bodies.

Architectural artifacts such as drawings submitted for competitions can be viewed as 'paper architecture' (Prior, 2013) that gives scope for critical reflections upon past, present and future conceptualisations of the aging body. The very idea of a 'care home' designed for residents in later life to be occupied by men and women by virtue of their age and presumed inability to care for themselves, says much about our assumptions of later life, as does the way rooms are configured and classified. We can see how spatial norms have shifted over time as, for instance, when observing the current vogue of activity rooms and single en-suite bedrooms, as opposed to wards or dormitories in mid twentieth century care homes. Andersson documents changing ideas of aging by studying architectural competitions of care homes for older people in Sweden (2015), moving from small asylums in the early twentieth century (emblematic of the humane aspirations of emergent welfare policies) towards later homely designs that reflected the perceived therapeutic benefits of familiar environments. Designs, Andersson argues, are essentially 'socio-political statements that define spatial frameworks within an ideological view on how ethically to provide care for dependent and frail older people in a welfare regime' (p. 837) — now and in the future.

Architecture is intrinsically future orientated, with designers invariably 'perceiving in hypothetical mode' (Murphy, 2004, p. 269). According to Abel, architectural students are encouraged towards 'imageability' and 'this work resolves around the concept of a mental "image" by which individuals anticipate events and actions and generally find their way about the world' (Abel, 2013, p. 107). Engaging with literatures on architecture and embodiment, Abel argues that architects can engender a potent sense of place through 'creating intimate spaces' where 'people can identify with, and feel they belong to' (p. 111). For him the starting point should be the body. He cites Bloomer and Moore's suggestion that the most 'memorable sense of three-dimensionality originates in the body experience and that this sense may constitute a basis of understanding special feeling in our buildings' (1977, in Abel, 2013, p. 111–12).

Nevertheless, as Blaikie (1993) claims, designers will invariably be influenced by cultural representations of aging dominated by images of 'the elderly' as a 'problem category', alongside images of the third age – 'choice' and 'lifestyle' – and the fourth age — 'dependency' and 'decline'. Visions of old age tend to be negative and homogenised,

reflecting wider cultural representations of aging (Bytheway, 2011; Featherstone & Hepworth, 1991). Old age envisioned as a source of worry (Neikrug, 2003) seems to endure despite attempts to rearticulate later life narratives by cultural intermediaries in contexts where older people have resources to consume and participate in an array of cultural practices (Gilleard & Higgs, 2015). With this in mind, an exploration of how young architects anticipate and imagine the bodies of older people seems worthwhile.

The competition

The 2009 *Caring for Older People* competition was open to all students registered on a Royal Institute of British Architecture (RIBA) recognised architecture course. The design brief was succinct at only two pages long and students were asked to 'think about what the care home of the future might look like' and 'design a care home for older people that would be suitable 'in 60 to 70 years' time.' The brief did not pose any fixed assessment criteria, stating that there are 'no restrictions, for instance, your design may consider the larger design issues or maybe the smaller ones' and need not comply with current legislation or recommendations (DWA/RIBA, 2009). Instead the brief raised a series of questions for consideration, including: the location of the care home, and its relation to the community; what sort of 'activities' residents might engage in; how to make the care home a 'real home'; the implications of layout and level of accommodation for residents' experience (rather than just layouts for efficient and economic staffing levels). Sixty-nine international entries were submitted, with first, second and third prizes awarded and a further three highly commended designs. The judges comprised a professor of dementia studies, a director of a large commercial care home provider, the chief executive of an Alzheimer's charity, and the director of an architectural practice. The judges' assessments are concisely minuted in the judging report which notes that each entry was considered 'in relation to the brief, development of concept and the quality of presentation'.

The authors of this paper reviewed design entries, paying particular attention to the visual and discursive strategies by which aged bodies were represented and in which architects inscribed ideas about embodiment in the proposed care settings. Our analytic assessment of the entries was informed by our knowledge of the social science literature on the body and embodiment. This scholarship offers a range of conceptualisations of bodies such as; biomedical, technological, consuming, experiential, biographical bodies and so on (Blaikie, 1999; Crossley, 2001; Shilling, 2013, 2016; Turner, 2008). These notions served as sensitising concepts (Bulmer, 1979) as we studied and discussed the submissions. As well as attending to the bodies which are visible in the text and images featured in the designs, we also reflected on absent bodies, and what these absences might mean. When thinking about processes that link people to places (May, 2017; Rubenstein, 1989) we argue that design and spatiality is crucial to the fabrication of embodied practices, atmospheres and affect (Kraftl & Adey, 2008; Latimer & Munro, 2009; Schillmeier & Heinlein, 2009). First, though, we consider the variety of bodies imagined by architectural students.

Architectonic visions of the body in later life

Throughout the competition designs we find framings of five categories of bodies: socio-biological bodies, socio-technological bodies; active/consuming bodies; biographical bodies; and phenomenological bodies. We came to recognise these gradually through our analytic strategy that involved an iterative reading of the entries, knowledge of literatures on embodiment and debate between the research team. We focussed not only on the text included on some of the designs but also on how bodies were portrayed either explicitly or implicitly in the drawings. We were attentive too to how spaces and material things might encourage or constrain bodies and embodied practices, and the speculative designs could 'create sets of possible actions' and