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## Not ageing in place: Negotiating meanings of residency in age-related housing

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** This article explores the experience of residing in age-related housing. The focus is on the negotiations around the multiple meanings assigned to place of residency among older people – in a situation where the official policy objectives of growing old in one's own home are not achieved.

**Design and methods:** Narrative analysis is employed to study the experiences of older people aged 75 or older living in special types of housing due to actual or anticipated difficulties associated with age. The interviews are part of a larger body of data gathered in *MOVAGE Moving in Old Age: Transitions in Housing and Care* research project.

**Findings:** The storyworld was structured by the romantic canonical narrative associated with the policy of 'ageing in place'; growing old at home is idealised and moving is constructed as a disruption. This breach was resolved through explaining deviance from canonical expectations by causes constructed as legitimate, through encountering trouble by constructing oneself as a non-typical resident, and through creating counter stories of natural transitions and choices. As a result, despite the commonly negative meanings associated with the residency in age-related housing, positive storylines respecting values embedded in the canonical narratives of home and endurance were achieved.

**Implications:** A living environment that is experienced as suitable, and that has adequate formal help available, supports and enables wellbeing and independence. This is true within age-related housing as well as in other forms. Thus, even though the important meaning of a long-term home should continue to be acknowledged, various other kinds of forms of housing should be made available in order to enhance older people's sense of security and feeling that they are autonomous, independent agents in their everyday life in accordance with their subjective life experiences.

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### Introduction

The housing and care policies of many countries openly promote the idea of home as the best place to grow old, and moving to special housing as a life transition that should be postponed or avoided by any means possible. In Finland, the

official emphasis of the policy of 'ageing in place' is interpreted as an aged person's right to continue living in the current physical home, and to receive adequate care services there, for as long as possible. Supporting older people to continue independent living in regular housing has been prevalent in government policies since the 1990s, but it has been given greater emphasis in recent years. It is promoted as a principle honouring older people's wishes, and in accordance with shared cultural values related to home and ageing as well. In addition, it has also been presented as a necessary way of restraining the increase of expenses in a financing crisis of

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publicly funded care services related to the rising dependency ratio. (Housing development programme for older population for 2013–2017, 2013; Institutional care and housing services in social care 2011, 2012; Quality recommendation to guarantee a good quality of life and improved services for older persons, 2013.)

Normative prescriptions of home and the proper place and manner of ageing frame understandings of what are considered to be acceptable ways of arranging one's housing and care. They also define the available alternatives, and circumstances that allow and enable members of a community to deviate from the expected. Under the recent normative emphasis on policy of ageing in place, support provided to enable one to live at home is seen as a means to postpone the declining life transition from independent, regular housing to serviced housing. However, with the current changes in the provision of welfare services (Anttonen & Häikiö, 2011; Kröger & Leinonen, 2012; Mathew Puthenparambil, Kröger & Van Aerschot, 2015) and law reforms (Act on Supporting the Functional Capacity of the Older Population and on Social and Health Services for Older Persons, 2012, enf. 1.7.2013), growing concern has been expressed over the question of whether the climate of austerity has begun to weather the very basis of Nordic universalism. Critical voices are beginning to appear questioning the validity of this unilateral policy emphasis, and the overall possibility of older people with care needs to find suitable ways of arranging housing and care in old age in practice.

Recent studies on older people's housing have been more focused on the implications of the current policy recommendation, and thus concerned with the experiences of those who continue to reside at their own long-term homes. Whilst this kind of research is valuable, there is a lack of knowledge on the experiences of those whose housing paths do not follow the official policy preferences. Even if they represent a minority, there will always be those who are unable or unwilling to continue living in their long-term homes. Moreover, as it is beginning to appear that 'one size fits all'-kind of practices are losing their footing (e.g. Golant, 2015a), more detailed understanding on the experiences of residing as well as subjective interpretations of the circumstances and reasons leading to relocating to currently available forms of special housing is needed. This kind of knowledge can be used to evaluate whether and what kinds of alternative arrangements for housing and care should be made available in the future.

Thus, based on narrative interviews conducted among residents in age-related housing, the purpose of this paper is to discuss the experiences of those who for various reasons have not chosen to or found it possible to age in place. In order to shed light on the transitions in housing and care in old age, this study explores what kinds of shared understandings were assigned to residing in age-related housing, and what kinds of negotiations were involved in legitimating one's compliance or deviance from the expected.

### Housing alternatives in old age

The overall aims in Finnish housing policies are ensuring an adequate volume of new as well as affordable forms of housing and improving the overall housing conditions, especially of those in need of special support. Older people, along with the

homeless and mentally disabled, are acknowledged as groups in need of separate programmes to facilitate their needs. (Housing development programme for older population for 2013–2017, 2013; National framework for high-quality services for older people, 2008; Quality recommendation to guarantee a good quality of life and improved services for older persons, 2013.) Continuing residency in regular housing is strongly encouraged, but the lack of suitable accessible dwellings is acknowledged as a future challenge. Different forms of sheltered housing and institutional care facilities exist, but they are presented as the last resort in a situation where the safety and wellbeing of an older person is considered to be otherwise impossible to assure. (Housing development programme for older population for 2013–2017, 2013; National framework for high-quality services for older people, 2008; Quality recommendation to guarantee a good quality of life and improved services for older persons, 2013.)

Forms of age-related housing are differentiated by the level of services offered (varying from 24-hours to very limited), and the funding management, from publicly provided to privately purchased. The concepts and practices concerning older people's housing vary due to historical reasons and geographical differences. The most common housing alternatives include regular apartment buildings with age restrictions without any special services but with a convenient location near services, such as municipality-owned rented apartments for those with modest income, or more recently built right-of-occupancy apartments or private senior houses. They may offer quite independent living, or service provision may be available in an assisted living unit close by or provided by private or third sector agencies. There are also housing alternatives with 24-hour services, but eligibility for residency in them must be evaluated by a group of care professionals. Places are limited and reserved for those most in need, and they often have long waiting lists. In addition, some interest has been shown towards co-housing units and senior villages by older people themselves and by housing developers, but retirement communities have not been established in Finland.

In practice, only a small minority of old people reside in age-related housing. Almost 90% of Finns over 75 years of age continue to reside in their own regular homes, most of which are owner-occupied homes where they have lived for decades. (Dwellings and housing conditions, 2012; Institutional care and housing services in social care 2011, 2012.) The percentage of those using institutional care and housing services has steadied at around 10%, but the actual number of older people in the age groups of 75 or over has continued to grow over the last two decades (Institutional care and housing services in social care 2011, 2012, p. 19). The amount of older people receiving sheltered housing with 24-hour assistance has increased, whilst the numbers in residential homes and sheltered housing have declined. This reflects targeting of services more strictly towards those with the greatest needs. Official policy aims are set at only five to six per cent of over 75-year-olds living in sheltered housing and three per cent in institutional care facilities. (Housing development programme for older population for 2013–2017, 2013; Institutional care and housing services in social care 2011, 2012; Quality recommendation to guarantee a good quality of life and improved services for older persons, 2013.)

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