

Age: The Final Frontier

Attentive readers of the *ArchitectureBoston* online editorial calendar — and we know they are numerous, dedicated, and in need of a hobby — will notice that the theme for this issue was originally billed as “Age.” The journey from the Age issue to the Generations issue tells a lot about attitudes in our culture. We had planned an objective exploration of the influence of age on the design professions as well as on building and product design. Instead we found that discussions of age became synonymous with discussions of aging. Before we knew it, our March/April issue threatened to morph into the Boomer issue. And even boomers are sick of talking about boomers.

By shifting the discussion to generations, we hope to restore some of the objectivity we had originally intended. “Generations” suggests connections, not only because of implied cohorts of related birthdays, but also because a generation cannot be defined without reference to the people who were born before and after. Those connections deserve a close look, because they have profound social and economic implications. Somewhere between sighs about “kids these days” and muttered complaints about geezers lies the opportunity to change the way we look at the world, not only to provide a more comfortable old age for retirees, but also to provide more choices and a more comfortable life for their children and grandchildren.

According to the MIT AgeLab, within the next few years, 50 percent of the European Union’s population will be over 65 years old. By 2030, retirees in Italy will outnumber active workers. Similar statistics saturate the news every day; the Chinese might call 2006 the Year of the Dog, but the media know this as The Year the Boomers Turned 60. This means that policymakers are suddenly ramping up discussions about aging populations, marketing people who have not been paying attention are suddenly rediscovering the spending power of an entire demographic, and politicians will begin the search for new ways to court favor with an activist voting bloc increasingly in need of government aid. All of which will probably turn off tens of millions of Gen-Xers and Millennials who are trying to navigate around the potholes of daily life.

Architect Michael Crosbie predicts that design with a new perspective on aging will supplant sustainability as the hot topic in architecture in the next decade. Certainly, the looming size of the over-65 population joins the civil-rights and feminist

movements as an agent of profound social change. Beyond the earnest examinations of ageism that will surely come our way lies the steady if too-quiet mantra of universal design advocates: what is good for one is often good for many. Their observation that a wheelchair ramp is also a baby-stroller ramp suggests that one way young designers can contend with the frustrations and annoyances of boomer-centricity is to recast the way design problems are presented and solved.

Young designers and entrepreneurs who embrace this shift will find, once again, that need equals opportunity. Product designers are way ahead of building designers in introducing universal design concepts to the marketplace; the beauty and utility of some of the results, such as OXO and Zyliss kitchen utensils, offer the hope that the phrase “universal design” might some day give way simply to “good design.” More broadly, universal design attitudes might address a range of issues that are not typically treated as

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design problems. Already, some daycare centers are offering programs that benefit both the elderly and young children. Community-based delivery services can meet the needs of both housebound elders and working parents. Certainly, some issues of affordable housing, property tax burdens, and homecare assistance could be addressed by promoting accessory apartments — the “apartment over the garage” rented to singles or couples, or perhaps occupied by a caregiver or in-law — a solution largely ignored, a housing advocate once candidly observed, because it lacks a role for developers.

Evidence of the enormity of the social shift ahead can be found in the accelerated creation of euphemisms for old. At some point soon, “boomer” itself will be synonymous with old. In the meantime, the elderly, senior citizens, and golden-agers have given way to retirees, over-65s, seniors, and, increasingly, the aging. Fans of the term seem to have forgotten that we are all aging the minute we are born.

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