

HOUSING AT THIRD AGE - A MULTI-CRITERIAL PROPOSITION

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Abstract

This paper is part of a series of studies aimed at the issue of the third age, while being a continuation of a research published in the PARS journal, in 2017. Compared to the previous approach, this article comes with a set of criteria in terms of the choice of housing at the third age. The approach based mainly on demographic arguments, involves necessarily social, urban and cultural connotations. The structure of the research includes, in the first part, the theoretical approach to housing for the third age as a challenge that will importantly influence the future public policies, and in the second part, a practical analysis, composed of sets of criteria on housing.

Keywords: house, ageing, questionnaire, residential

1. Housing in Romania - an introduction

There is a lot of analysis about housing and residential aspects, in general and dwelling, in particular, involving specialists in different fields, from architecture and urbanism to economics and psycho-sociology. The statistics, together with the studies aimed at a specific problem, point out some features of housing in our country. Thus, a first feature concerns overcrowding.

From this perspective, Romania has one of the most delicate situations on the European continent, particularly in the EU, as the Romanian dwellings have, on average, only half of the EU average area. Romania ranks undesirably first in terms of overcrowding rate, with almost 48.4% of Romanians living in overcrowded households, compared to the lowest overcrowding rates in countries from southern parts as Cyprus (2.4%), Malta (2.9%) and Spain (5.4%), or north-western areas as Ireland (3.2%), Belgium (3.7%), and the Netherlands (4.0%) (fig.1).

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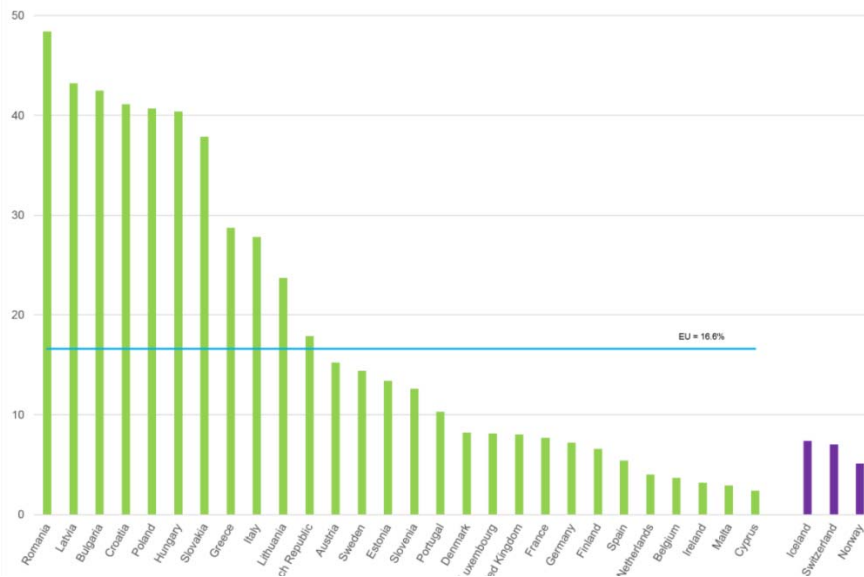


Fig. 1 Overcrowding dwellings rate in UE in 2016 (source Eurostat)

In addition, there is another indicator - the average size of a house - that indicates one of the lowest European values, respectively 44.6 sqm, with quite small differences between the urban (42.1 sqm) and rural area (45.9 sqm) (fig.2).

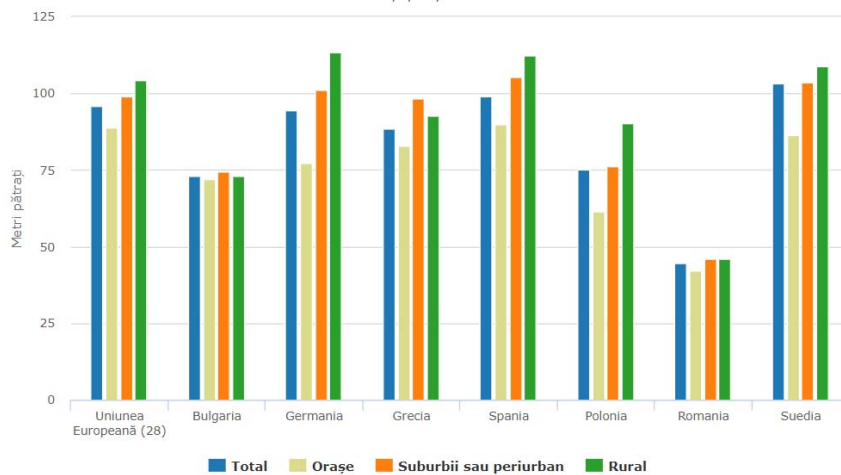


Fig.2 The average size of a dwelling by degree of urbanisation (source: [Locuirea în România – Monitor Social](#))

Just at the opposite pole, there is the home ownership. In this respect, in Romania, 96.1% of population live in owned flats or houses, our country being thus in the first place in the European Union. The official statistical correlations prove that the higher the level of general development of the countries, the lower the rate of ownership of a privately owned home. (Europe: home ownership by country).

The reports on housing made by numerous institutions and bodies at national and macro-regional level outline in unison the challenges that housing policy will face in the coming years. Among these, demographic aging, climate change and new energy needs are on top positions.

In this context, and derived from the reality indicated by statistics, we notice one more feature of the current housing stock in Romania, in direct connection with our subject of interest - the houses occupied by older people. In most cases, they either own a flat in a building, with the specific configuration of standard constructions from the 70s and 80s, or live in the country, in an old house where not infrequently they lack some of the main utilities (toilet, sewer, water).

Definitely, the phenomenon is not unique to Romania, studies showing that other ex-Communist states also have situations like this. However, most of them either have improved their housing stock or have a positive dynamic in the sense that the population trade their dwelling at various stages of life. Taking into account the perspective of accentuated structural demographic changes in Romania for the next 10 years, as the first children of the Decree reach the third age, an increase in housing problems is to be expected.

In this regard, an analysis of the relevant criteria for choosing a home for the third age is to be necessary and welcomed.

2. Methodology

From a methodological point of view, the article is based on data obtained after we applied a questionnaire made up of two sequences.

More specifically, a group of 50 seniors aged between 55 and 75 responded successively, both to the questionnaire on the quality of dwelling they currently own and to the one concerning the representation of the ideal of housing.

Following sequencing, 20 criteria have been retained and structured into seven categories of analysis variables. Although the picture obtained can be considered relevant for a majority of people aged over 50 years, there is still a limitation of the results obtained, because the number of respondents coming from rural areas is very small.

In terms of practical implications, the criteria developed in this study provide additional knowledge and an easy tool that can be applied both individually by anyone interested in their own home and by large real estate developers of residential complexes who want to meet the needs and expectations of their beneficiaries as well as possible.

The originality of the present study lies primarily in the identified criteria, in accordance with the specific Romanian culture and demographic specific of Romania.

3. Criteria for the analysis of housing adapted to the third age

The list of aspects inventoried and considered relevant for those aged over 55 includes more than 30 items that have been grouped into six large categories of criteria.

Technical criteria

The post-December Romanian practice shows the flourish of the construction of oversized houses, as a sign of a kind of economic maturity of the customers. Interesting is the fact that, in the spirit of an older cultural tradition, these super-houses turn out subsequently to be too large for everyday use. That is why we consider relevant to begin the list with these criteria including aspects related to the total area of the house, the number of rooms and the floor on which it is located.

We point out the relevance of these variables at least from the following perspectives:

- the cleaning and maintenance effort for a home that is too large for a person that is getting old.

- the difficulty in going up or down, or in moving between the rooms with various functions (bathroom, kitchen, bedroom), when disease and limited mobility occur. The argument of the existence of an elevator in the building is not upheld in the face of numerous possible frailties associated with the third and fourth age.

Within the scope of the technical criteria, we include the age of the building, a direction of analysis little taken into account. Depending on this, a newer dwelling should be preferred, due to the problems usually associated to age – cracks, low earthquake resistance, higher repairs and maintenance expenses.

In the same category of technical elements, there are the various environmental hazards, although, to a certain extent, they can be associated with the position / location of the dwelling. Among the most relevant, depending on the frequency of their occurrence, we can mention landslides, floods, pollution, extreme weather events and earthquakes.

Costs

Costs are the second major category of criteria. Compared to the first category, they have the additional advantage of precise quantification. The two sub-criteria, the maintenance costs with the utilities (heat, water, energy, sanitation, etc.), respectively the various taxes and duties, can be found, calculated or at least estimated by each user, so that later they can be compared horizontally, with other similar situations, and also vertically, in relation to their own financial possibilities.

Location

The location or position of a dwelling becomes an extremely important element in relation to the accessibility it provides. It is a fact that mobility is reduced at the third age and which is why, paradoxically, the need for accessibility is greater. The classic parameters that are taken into account concern:

- the territorial connectivity of the dwelling, which can be provided by road, rail or air transport,
- distances from possible points of maximum interest, such as healthcare services, places for recreational activities or food supply (market, supermarket).

The psycho-emotional component

The social and psycho-emotional aspects of third age matter enormously in outlining the fourth category of criteria. Several types of parameters can be mentioned here, and the most frequently invoked were:

- the proximity / the distance from children and other close family members;
- the quality of neighbours;
- easy keeping in touch with friends or former colleagues.

But any other elements could be added according with each personal experience.

The socio-cultural environment is a parameter that has been added quite recently to the list of criteria and this is due to the fact that moving house at third age can occur not only within the same town, but often in other regions or even other countries, in which case the motivational and adaptive dimension matters a lot.

Adapting to another culture, learning a new language or switching to another network of radio-TV channel programs are aspects that can be extremely demanding at the third age.

Macro-economic criteria

This category includes the general standard of living, which is, in fact, an aggregate indicator, but also elements such as social security and safety, labor market dynamics, cultural and educational offer for the third age, although the latter is apparently of little importance.

4. Results and discussion

The target group we worked with consisted of people aged between 55 and 75, among which 75% females, who attended the online courses of the School for seniors pioneered by the author of this article in early 2021.

The basic questionnaire (tab.1) was applied in two sequences successively, initially the one regarding the evaluation of the current housing, followed by the questionnaire considered "aspirational". Thus, two sets of values were obtained that allowed to identify more accurately the distance between the quality level of the currently owned dwelling and the ideal one, as well as the criteria that have a greater importance in the conscious choice of a new dwelling.

Table 1. Criteria for the evaluation of the house at the third age

Directions of analysis	Assign a value from 0-10, where 0 = I'm not satisfied at all 10 = I am very satisfied
1. Technical aspects	
• Surface / number of rooms	
• Floor	
• The age of the building (structural problems, cracks)	
• External environmental hazards (eg. risk of frequent earthquakes, landslides, proximity to a landfill etc.)	

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exterior condition (e.g. the roof, the fences, the balcony, the doors and the windows (are they watertight, are they easy to open, do they have anti-theft / storm protection?)) 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water problems risk of infiltration, plumbing, electrical, gas systems, etc. 	
2. Costs	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annual/seasonal costs 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taxes 	
3. Location/positioning	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy access/distance from the airport 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy access/distance from the railway 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy access/distance from the road/express road/highway 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distance from hospital units and healthcare providers 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distance from recreation centres, parks, forests 	
4. Human relations	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distance from children 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distance from other relatives (parents, grandchildren, brothers, etc) 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • relations with close friends, co-workers, schoolmates 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • relations with the neighbours 	
5. Socio-cultural environment	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • local atmosphere, culture, customs 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • language 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the quality of the community which I frequently interact with 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the emotional importance (eg. the place where I was born /where I spent my childhood) 	
6. Economic environment	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standard of living and costs of living 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The opportunity to carry out some complementary professional activities or even getting back in the professional field 	

7. Others (you can suggest and add in the table other criteria that you consider relevant and that count in the evaluation of the dwelling you currently own)	
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The synthetic visualization of the results was done through the spider diagrams that made the comparisons possible and also revealed the diversity of options. However, summarizing the results, two categories of situations were obtained:

- a. conformity / quasi-overlap between the present and ideal.
- b. major discrepancy between the condition of the current dwelling and the configuration considered appropriate to personal needs and standards.

5. Conclusions

During the debate workshop that took place after the completion of the questionnaire and the analysis of each individual diagram, some important ideas emerged:

- The choice of housing is a socially built process resulting from the interaction of several factors – the previous housing experience, the local real estate market offer, the strictly individual options and limitations (income, health, family).
- In the case of the respondents, the preferences for a certain configuration of housing values are the product of the negotiated and symbolic sets of meanings.
- The group where we notice a comfortable consonance between the owned house and the one considered ideal includes rather people over the age of 65, while in the other category we prominently find “young” seniors, under 65. This finding serves to formulate the assumption that moving house should preferably happen before retirement.
- The criteria where similar responses were recorded, in the sense of underestimation, are those concerning the external risks and the economic environment. This is due, most likely, to the lack of information and to the poor awareness of the importance of these criteria.
- The technical and the psycho-emotional criteria got the most contrasting responses, in this case, being obvious the personal experience and the ease with which one can assess a housing reality.

Although the questionnaire also included the possibility of adding new items / possible criteria, no respondent completed that section.

The discussion about what qualities should have a house for the third age is just at the beginning in Romania. The most debates are based on the opportunity of keeping or moving house, in the context of a cultural tradition and of living in the same house over a lifetime.

Taking into account the prospects of demographic changes in the next ten years, in conjunction with the climate changes announced by all bodies and scientific circles, it is necessary to raise awareness among those who are currently in the fifth and the sixth decade of life.

Equally, the subject of housing and of the main categories of dwellings that can be addresses by the authorities and the investors must take into account at least the technical criteria presented in this article. The argument relates to the fact that dwellings have very direct effects on the quality of life of the elderly, with social, cultural and health implications.

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