

Michael Heenan: Watch out for peak youth

19 September 2013

By Tina Perinotto

19 September 2013 — According to architect Michael Heenan, chief executive of Allen Jack + Cottier, we're quickly heading into an era of peak youth. It's world wide and we haven't even started to grasp the consequences.



Michael Heenan

The implications struck Heenan recently when he was invited to speak on the subject at the World Architectural Festival in Singapore in early October, which is expected to attract up to 1000 architects.

He's also been asked to be a judge of 10 top global student groups on their submissions for retirement housing design.

The subject matter for his talk is intense: define the picture for the latter half of this century; what are the architectural implications of designing for older people; can we design to accommodate three generations under one roof? And what role can technology play?

By coincidence, Heenan is in the early stages of designing a high-rise retirement property for one of the major developers so is interested to track down the latest thinking. Sadly he's struggling. In Australia not a lot of thought has been placed in that direction. But it should be.

It's not much better elsewhere, he says.

"The world has its head stuck in the ground" on this one, says Heenan.

"Child youth will soon peak world wide and then start to diminish."

Including in the developing world as urbanising populations typically have fewer children.

"There will be 700 million people in aged care in China in the next 20 years. Already there's something like 400 million because of the one child policy, which will exacerbate the situation.

"There's a growing proportion of aged people whose children have passed away."

But it's more than housing at stake for the old.

Heenan thinks technology can sideline the old more than ever before as it provides an easy repository of information that can almost double for the wisdom of the old, making older people even more irrelevant.

But technology could also help. That doesn't just mean bigger fonts and app controls on an iPad. For

the impaired, voice commands are now highly sophisticated.

Siri on the iPhone for instance can phone or text someone with voice commands and even talks back, making quips such as, "What would you do without me?"

Heenan sends emails and texts by voice commands. "The application of these technologies as an aid to connecting an aging population is immense," he says.

In the Australian culture, he says, "we sit 25 people around a television controlled by a nurse".

"They should all have iPads so they can watch what they want, Skype who they want and remain connected to their families and the outside world."

If they say the grandkids don't visit enough, then they should be able to keep up through Facebook and find out what they're doing.

"Technology should be a major part of this. Someone needs to come out with an app so if you're incapacitated you can press a button. Technology will be very important.

"A lot of people are thinking about it," Heenan says of the ageing issue.

Some of the results are wonderful, he says.

In the hills above Barcelona in Spain, for instance, he visited an aged care facility that is eight storeys and overlooks the town square with big windows and "beautiful screens that could open up" so that elderly could watch children playing and enjoy the views and activity.

"No-one was hidden from view."

The designers of this development were "certainly not treating it as a secondary architectural opportunity", he says. The feeling was "this is the smartest we can do... using beautiful materials".

An opportunity starting to be considered in Australia is to mix up the young and the old. In retirement villages or apartment buildings there can be graduated levels of care, he says.

A downside in Australia and possibly elsewhere is that accessible housing requires bigger bedrooms and bigger bathrooms and can make these types of apartments more expensive than regular apartments.

In the future what might be possible is aged care apartments from the ground floor to say the ninth floor and regular apartments above.

In the development he's currently working on the requirement is for about 9000 square metres of floor space.

But how and what to include? There's a lot of thinking and a lot of ageing baby boomers starting to turn their minds to their twilight years.

Heenan mentions an 80-year-old Olympic gold medalist he sails with; who tells his friends he has another 20 years with a lot still to do.

For architects and developers that's a brand new market sector that needs a lot of urgent attention.

Comments

2 Responses to "Michael Heenan: Watch out for peak youth"

Mary Ann Jackson says:

23 September 2013 at 1:46 pm

“ I second Nicholas' comments regarding dwelling size v accessibility. Our (Visionary Design Development) architectural project work consistently demonstrates the ability to provide very satisfactory practical accessibility in 'tight' spaces. Combining bathroom, toilet and laundry facilities into one main 'wet' area assists with this. Provision of 'family' bathrooms rather than multiple ensuite type bathrooms is another useful tactic. Considered placement of rooms and indoor/outdoor connectivity can also minimise building footprint while maximising accessible space. I also agree with Nicholas' sentiment about ditching the 'standards'. An informed understanding of what is actually required is a much better approach. We advocate that designers should be educated in this area of design within their university curricula and that they should speak directly with people with disabilities. Feel free to contact me to discuss further. Mary Ann Jackson, Architect, Planner and Access Consultant, Managing Director Visionary Design Development P/L.

Nicholas Loder says:

20 September 2013 at 1:11 pm

“ An interesting topic on a concerning phenomena.
An ageing population with I suspect most of the capital and the political influence at the ballot box will see diminishing government funds directed towards the largest cohort (themselves), disenfranchising the youth unfortunately as places become increasingly 'age-friendly' and less truly (age) inclusive. Does anyone know a youth worker anymore?
Australia will possibly see more and more community decisions favour the elderly and retiree, if a decision made in Forster by the more powerful retiree cohort about 10 years ago is anything to go by. (pers comm.)

As to larger dwellings because of accessibility requirements - this is a bit moot - many councils have minimum dwelling size caveats, despite smaller lot sizes, making the compact home of the 60's too small (ask Pettit+Sevitt about their rebirth at Kellyville), a lot of Councils are also happy to see McUnits as well as McMansions (with 400m2 not uncommon), and finally the use of AS4299 in Seniors Living Sepps have been unhelpful in delivering more modest dwellings.

The best thing is to ditch AS4299 and hook into the Livable Housing Design Guidelines and see how compact good accessible housing can be - Im seeing 60m2 (admittedly with no ensuite) at 'Gold' level for a two bedroom unit.

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