

HOUSING FOR THE ELDERLY: A CASE STUDY IN THAILAND

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According to Thai statistics, it is estimated that by the year 2000, there will be 5.73 million elderly in Thailand, approximately 8% of the total population. In the following ten years, this number will increase to 7.1 million (National Statistical Bureau, Office of the Prime Minister, 1996). These numbers have created an urgent need for the Thai government to plan for this fast-growing older population.

Along with the expanding older adult population, other dramatic social changes have occurred in Thai society. In the past, Thai families were mostly extended families. Three generations living together was common. The elderly were given the status of the household head and were respected and well-taken care of by their children. The family has been the principal source of support for the elderly for generations. There are strong family ties among people living in the rural areas (Limanonda, 1995).

However, in the wake of industrialization and urbanization, this way of life has changed in response to the market economy. In rural areas, the elderly are left alone when their children migrate to the urban areas to work. Young people are choosing to leave the extended family structure and move away from their older relatives (Limanonda, 1995). Due to these social changes, housing and caregiver services are urgently needed as the population continues to age.

Since 1953, the Thai government has adopted some caregiving services for the elderly poor. The primary areas of these services have been in health care, recreation, and religious activities. The Ministry of Public Health has been the agency responsible for these types of services.

A long-range plan (1992-2012) for elderly health care services has been issued by the government but little has been included on elderly housing. The National Housing Bureau has adopted a policy of building row houses and apartments for low-income people, especially in the urban areas. But as yet, housing for the elderly has not been included in their projects.

Since 1955 only 16 room-and-board homes for the neglected and elderly poor have been built throughout the country, as well as 5 private nursing homes for the ailing elderly rich. With such limited options in housing and health services, Thailand's elderly find themselves in a vulnerable housing situation.

Due to the changing Thai family structure and shifting urban values, it is critical to determine the current situation in Thai elderly housing. A lack of existing information on elderly housing provided an opportunity to do a needs assessment. This allowed data to be collected that would define types, and severity of, elderly housing needs. Neuman (1997) has suggested that this is a first step before a government agency or non-profit

group could begin to develop strategies and/or policies to work on the defined social problem.

After exploration of the relevant literature, it was decided to investigate two types of homes for the elderly. The first was "Ban Bangkae" home, a public facility, and a privately run "Kluynamtai" nursing home. Both are located in Bangkok. Through on-site observations and informal interviews with staff and residents, a number of relevant points were identified. An observation checklist was used for gathering information on building structures. Informal interviews of staff which included the administrator, three building managers, and three elderly residents were conducted to ascertain the elderly's needs.

It was found that the 300 residents in the government's home in 1996 were mostly the poor and neglected elderly. They received minimal services and had to follow rules and schedules set by the administration. Some recreational programs were provided, but few elderly residents actively participated in them. The general atmosphere was rather dull, and the furniture was minimal and not specially designed for the aged. Overall, there were several items needing improvement; including the physical environment, health services, mental health, and spiritual care.

The privately run nursing home, which was situated in a hospital, had residents who were well off but very old and in ailing health. They were taken care of by nursing staff and physical therapists. When ill, they would be transferred to the hospital and would receive full medical services.

The provision of adequate housing options for the older population is relatively new to Thai society, since responsibility for the aged has been an important family function. The Thai government, through the Department of Social Welfare, has given limited support to the elderly poor. The projected rise in the older population and the increased formation of aged one-person households (Limanonda, 1995) created new challenges in the use of government resources and increasing gerontological knowledge at all levels of society.

Future directions in Thailand and other Southeast Asian nations might include the examination of social security programs, the identification of elderly housing needs, and the development of housing options to respond to these needs. All of these efforts will need the collaborative participation of housing educators, real estate developers, government officials, NGO agencies, and educational institutions.

Specific recommendations of this study include the following.

1. A media to increase awareness of the public and the government on the need to prepare for the aging population.

2. Thai National Council of the Aging, together with NGO pressure groups should work with the Thai government to develop a policy for the provision of adequate housing with support services for low- to middle-income elderly.
3. Thailand's National Bureau of Housing should concentrate on planning for elderly housing and request priority funding for these projects.
4. Non-profit, private organizations should facilitate the collaborative building of affordable houses that would encourage aging in place.
5. Vocational training and university curriculums should be developed to include study of elderly housing.

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