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LOCATING OLDER PEOPLE AS IF THEIR HAPPINESS MATTERS

BASED ON A RADIO NZ
TALK,¹ THIS ARTICLE
EMPHASISES THE
IMPORTANCE OF OLDER
PEOPLE, WHEN
RELOCATING, TAKING
INTO CONSIDERATION
HOW THEY WILL
TRANSPORT THEMSELVES
WHEN THEY NO LONGER
HAVE A DRIVING LICENCE.

In most countries of the world older people are happier than people in their middle years. This is the joyful conclusion from a recent report for the UK government that summarises all available data on human happiness.²

For me (as a new arrival in the middle age cohorts) this finding made promising bedtime reading.

But happiness in old age, says the report, is not universal. It depends on whether one is healthy, in a supporting relationship, and whether one is Japanese, because according to the survey findings included in the report, older adults in Japan are among the happiest people on the planet. Why?

The UK government report speculates on three possible reasons. Firstly, older adults in Japan have a high social status and are therefore generally respected. Secondly, they are healthy compared to other nations (and they also live the longest). And thirdly, they have high levels of independence and mobility.

Reading this last explanation for happiness in old age made me sit up straight in bed.

As an urban planner I worry that our rapidly increasing elderly population will not be such a satisfied and happy group as they grow old in cities and towns that are designed solely around using the car to get places.

The reality of growing old in New Zealand came home to me when I sat next to a crying seventy-year old woman at a public meeting in Johnsonville last year.

Up front an urban designer was explaining how his elderly mother went from a vibrant, strong and independent person to a pathetic (and very unhappy) person within months after she lost her driver's License. Her crime was that she chose to retire in Phoenix in the United States, a city in which access to your own car is as necessary as your access to oxygen. The woman next to me told me that she is also about to lose her driving license and will therefore become trapped in her house, a thought that deeply depressed her.

Sadly there are going to be many tears shed among elderly New Zealanders in the coming decades.

The latest population data show that older New

Zealanders are increasingly living where the report on human happiness indicates they should not be living, namely on the outer edges of our cities and in provincial cities. Figure 1 shows how the 65+ population in 2001 lived mainly in the outer edges of Wellington and Auckland. This pattern is repeated at a national scale - Figure 2 shows that in 2001 the most significant concentrations of the 65+ population was in the metropolitan edge areas, notably Rodney and Kapiti Districts.

In the outer edges of a city it is very difficult to be independently mobile without your own car. This is because most neighbourhoods and retirement villages are laid out in a manner that will always offer poor public transport, and few opportunities to walk anywhere.

Unbelievably, the few areas in New Zealand where it is possible to live a full and independent life without having a car are exporting their older populations. The central parts of Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch all have declining populations of elderly, yet these are the areas that have the best public transport, walking infrastructure and public facilities.

In Japan the elderly (who are the happiest group in society) choose to live where they know they can remain active and independent for as long as possible, which is most often the inner city areas.

Some of the planners working in Kapiti, Rodney and Tauranga districts share my concern that the sun and sea retirement dream of many New Zealanders will turn sour when the large house in the car-dependent neighbourhood becomes a prison cell. They are now busily thinking of better ways in which we can lay out these rapidly growing areas so that it will be possible to go to the beach, shops and golf course by foot or bus.

But unfortunately in New Zealand the house buyer is king, and as long as so many of us remain happy to buy houses in places where one has to use the car to get to nearly everything, developers will build cities and towns that look and work like Phoenix in the

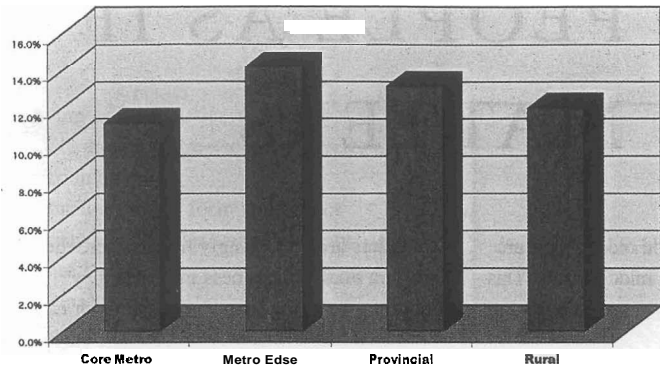


Figure 1 - Housing Choices of the 65+ Population as a % of the total population in various parts of the City (Data source: 2001 Census Statistics NZ)

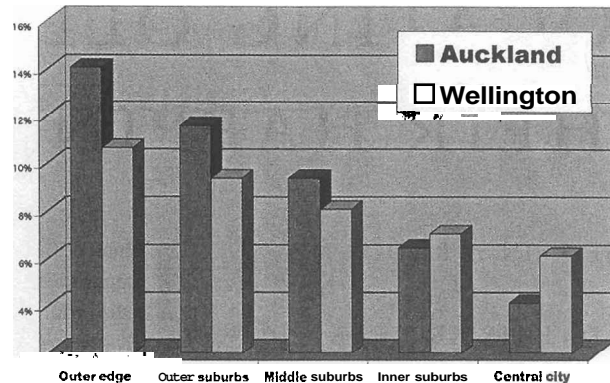


Figure 2 - Housing Choices of the 65+ Population in New Zealand as a % of the total population in different types of settlements (Data source: 2001 Census Statistics NZ)

US. And in Phoenix old age is golden only until the driver license is taken away.

The Japanese show us that old age and happiness can go together.

But they also show us that happiness in old

age requires careful thinking about where we choose to live in retirement. While it may make financial sense to sell the house in Mt Eden and move to a golf village on the coast, there may be a high price to pay in happiness later on.

FOOTNOTES

1. Radio NZ, Sunday 28 June, 2003.
2. This report can be accessed at www.odpm.gov.uk

