

# Why Do We Act Like Peter Pan When It Comes to Decisions About Aging in Place?

Posted On 2018-07-09

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*Linda Kealey, University of New Brunswick*

If you remember the story of Peter Pan, the boy who never grew up, you will remember his friend, Wendy. Imagine that Peter meets Wendy later in life — she is a 60-year-old woman in a wheelchair while Peter Pan has never grown up, still flies and never gets sick. As people age, they think, like Peter Pan, that they will grow old gracefully and in good health, displaying “imaginary thinking” about aging.

This was the essence of the message that **Dr. Don Shiner**, associate professor of marketing at Mount Saint Vincent University and a researcher with the Atlantic Seniors Housing Research Alliance, presented to a session at the 2018 CURAC/ARUCC conference.

Central to our identities as individuals is the concept of home. As we age “home” represents a protected refuge and symbolizes control over our lives. However, one of the hardest decisions anyone makes is leaving that home when they can no longer manage to live in it. An Atlantic region survey asked older adults what they feared most about aging. Only three per cent answered “death;” 26 per cent reported loss of independence and control, and 13 per cent said having to move to a nursing home. Dr. Shiner noted that 80 per cent of seniors will suffer depression after going to a nursing home or hospital. So why, he asks, don’t we plan ahead and be realistic about housing needs as we get older?

Citing familiar problems encountered with most single-family homes, such as stairs, placement of cupboards and microwaves, height of counters, and doorways that don’t accommodate wheelchairs, Dr. Shiner discussed a village in England (New Earswick, York) where many of the homes are “lifetime homes” built to handle these problems for older adults; this even includes a second-floor cupboard where the floor can be removed to become an elevator shaft. Similar to the idea of universal design, these houses are purpose-built to evolve with the needs of its occupants.

Our building designs and codes do not take into account the housing needs of an aging population. According to Dr. Shiner, the costs of planning and building housing that would accommodate older adults is not prohibitive. Governments and the code-writing authorities need to be lobbied to write codes that adopt the principles of universal design so that they are incorporated at the beginning of the design process. Governments also need to be pressured into providing tax relief for retrofitting projects. For those with means, a Trenton, Ontario company, Green Terra Homes, makes steel-framed, prefabricated, customized housing units that offer the kind of housing suited to older adults. Solutions for lower income seniors, however, would need to be found elsewhere.

Many older adults have no plan for future housing needs — it’s time to change that and leave “imaginary thinking” behind.

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Article printed from College and University Retiree Associations of Canada / Associations de retraités des universités et collèges du Canada:

URL to article: <https://www.curac.ca/newsletters/curacarucc-nl/nl-summer2018/why-do-we-act-like-peter-pan/>

