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Aging people living together: ambience of senior house in Brazil

Siva BIANCHI¹, Giselle AZEVEDO²

1. UFRRJ, Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro, Brasil
sivabianchi@gmail.com

2. UFRJ, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brasil
gisellearteiro@globo.com

Abstract. *Old people are found everywhere. Nowadays, like in most countries, Brazil sees its old population increase. This paper is part of an ongoing PhD. dissertation and discusses some conditions at São Luiz Elderly House, a long-term permanence institution located in Rio de Janeiro. The analysis was based on some aspects of architectural ambience and the aim of the study is to demystify the negative idea towards this type of housing and analyse user's satisfaction. The results indicate that the aspects considered most important were presence of open spaces, and ease of making daily activities.*

Keywords: *architectural ambience, elderly housing, quality of life*

Introduction

Old people are found in parks, streets, malls; they are working, walking and studying; they smile and cry; they are healthy, they jog and exercise, they are also reserved and domestic, while others are sick or recovering, reflecting the society's complex diversity. Like most countries, Brazil sees its old population increase though in different conditions from the countries which economical development preceeded population aged. This paper is part of an ongoing PhD. dissertation and discusses some conditions at São Luiz Elderly House, a long-term permanence institution located in Caju, Rio de Janeiro, a nearby port neighborhood of the city.

For Brazilians, this type of housing is still unwillingly accepted as it carries the stigma of housing poor and homeless old people. The aim of the study is to demystify the negative idea towards this type of housing and analyze the user's satisfaction with the rendered service. The results indicate that, the aspects considered most important were the open spaces and the ease of making daily activities, with ou without someone's help.

Analysis of the most recent census conducted by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE in portuguese) in 2010 indicates the irreversible growth of old population in Brazil, mainly in the state of Rio de Janeiro. This is a world phenomenon though it is happening faster in Brazil and differently from some developed countries such as Japan, France and Denmark.

According to data provided by the institution, São Luiz Elderly House has 224 residents, 79% of which are women. It assists old people over 60 with 24-hour medical service, 46% residents is between 80 and 89, 33% residents with high dependency level, 42% with medium dependency level and 25% independent residents. The research was conducted with medium dependency level and independent resident volunteers who were chosen by the house administration. The analysis was based on some aspects of architectural ambience by means of semi-structured interview conducted with capable residents and the collaboration of the responsible psychologist on behalf of the house administration.

Out of the potential 120 residents able to answer the questionnaire, 12 interviews (10% of the total) were conducted and the analysis of the answers was based on the following issues concerning São Luiz Elderly House: safety, mobility, privacy, territoriality and conviviality. The findings revealed that even though their family home continues to be the Brazilian old people's favorite place to live, life in the institution under analysis fully met their expectations and their perception of all issues above were positive to most of the resident interviewed.

São Luiz elderly house

São Luiz Elderly House opened on September 4th 1890 in an area of 18.000 m² to provide housing for former employees of a nearby textile mill. The first building, Santa Clara, was built on 1901 overlooking Guanabara Bay. From 1903 on, the expansion of the institution starts and develops to what it looks like nowadays. The catholic-origin house has a chapel, a ward for couple, single and double rooms of various sizes distributed in four other wards. In 1954, a ward was opened to serve French people. Until today, the house is run by the founder's family and it is acknowledged for its excellent accommodations and indiscriminate services to its residents.



Figure 1. Entrance courtyard; photo by the author

As São Luiz Elderly House was built at Quinta do Caju Hill, after passing by a gate, going uphill, we arrive at a pleasant arborous courtyard (see figure 1). The vegetation is distinctive and is appreciated by the residents because of the color of the flowers and the singing of the birds which make nests on the trees. The administration ward is located next to the main courtyard for easy access and assistance and, together with the responsibility for the sentry-box, it is a point of control to access.

The house is divided into wards in vertical edifications with access to private premises by means of elevators, which represents a certain level of dependency for the ones with moving limitations, though there is always the possibility of getting help from some of the institution's paramedics. All the floors have a generous porch which provides visual contact with the landscape and the house itself. It is one of the residents' main meeting points and even a place for contemplation.

In the common areas, there are several places where the residents can stay: living rooms with chair and tables, a TV/video room, a study, porches and gardens with lake and fish, flower-beds and under-tree benches. In the gardens, the floor is more uneven but, as in the rest of the house, there is a path with even floor and support bars.

Discussion

In previous activities with the residents, I could feel their difficulty to fill in the questionnaires, so I decided to do it myself, giving me the chance of paying closer attention to the interviewee's expression.

Safety at São Luiz Elderly House was approved by the residents, even by the ones who find it excessive since there is a rigid control of access and not all residents can leave unaccompanied. Another safety item pointed out was the "safe route": in every path there is a route with handrails and antiskid floors, even in areas subject to rain. Besides, there are other areas with stairs and uneven floors that were approved by a senior woman who uses this path as a daily exercise to go up and down the stairs. The safe route was remembered as a way to provide for free wheelchair movement or freedom of movement for ones in walkers. The various settings in the house were remembered by all the respondents for providing the opportunity of meeting various people, and not only the usual residents, of being each day in a different place and even of being outside the bedroom in isolation. Social relations are encouraged by the administrators and please all the residents interviewed by proposing different non-compulsory daily activities such as theaters, recitals, reading, cinemas.

São Luiz Elderly House open areas where various activities take place were approved by all the respondents. These areas provide for contemplation and outdoor exercises through a circuit where the activities are printed in sign-boards. There are areas with benches, armchairs, wheelchairs access, that is, various settings are created by the flower-beds providing the residents with diversified settings and places to stay, and one of the residents tells friends that he lives in a five-star hotel.

Final remarks

In Brazil, the elderly favorite place still continues to be home with family. According to the Brazilian legislation – The Elderly Statute – the family has been elected as the main caretaker of their ascendants, an issue posed as the "result of the dominant values and prejudices". The author also points out that other researchers have been questioning the quality and adequacy of assistance provided by a laymen caretaker or a relative since the familiar caretaker is not always aware of the elderly limitations and mainly how to deal with them.

Another issue raised on long-term housing is the negative evaluation of the residences exclusive for the elderly; though in the 20th century it starts to receive requirements of social and medical assistance with space arrangements. Even so, some institutions sustain the negative connotation of housing the poor elderly. On the other hand, public health policies have claimed healthy and independent aging. A result of this discrimination is the low provision of quality long-term institutions, but now this evaluation is changing.

Due to the aging and longevous population growth, studies on housing becomes relevant so this population does not suffer from their own aging limitations, since many times they live in low quality settings which were not designed to meet their needs.

As said by one of the residents, "São Luiz Elderly Home is a paradise". When I chose this institution for the current analysis, my first thought was to be in the first elderly house built in Rio de Janeiro and particularly concerned about the aspect of assistance provided for the poor old population. I was surprised with the quality of the rendered services and mainly with the residents' statements, mostly approving the quality of housing and assistance they are being provided with.

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Authors

Siva Alves Bianchi, Architect and urbanist, master of architecture from PROARQ at Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (1999), Prof. at Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro – UFRRJ, Brazil. Has experience in architecture design with emphasis in ambiental comfort, post-occupancy evaluation. sivabianchi@gmail.com

Giselle Arteiro Azevedo, Achitect and urbanist, PhD. in production engineering from Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (2002), Prof. at Federal University of Rio de Janeiro – UFRJ, Brazil. Has experience in architecture and urbanism design, with emphasis on architectural design and Urbanism. Mainly on the following themes: school environment, education, post-occupancy evaluation. gisellearteiro@globocom