

Title

Establishment of complex, modifiable housing and living facilities for the 50+ generation through conversion and the activation of partially used existing building stock in the “Szczecin Lagoon” model region, particularly affected by demographic change.

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Figure 1 – Book cover of the research study

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The responsibility for the content of the report lies solely with the author.

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Occasion/point of departure

In regions like the Szczecin Lagoon, which are particularly sharply affected by demographic change, 50% of all inhabitants will be older than 57 years by 2020, owing to the fact that young people are moving away. This population group desires a secure and lively residential environment with a solidly integrated offering of services and efficient networks in terms of the arts, culture and physical fitness, featuring short distances, since on-site mobility is being steadily reduced. Because, as a rule, they do not find these things or find them only in a rudimentary way, the regions are threatened with an even greater depopulation also owing to older people moving away or a whole generation being marginalized.

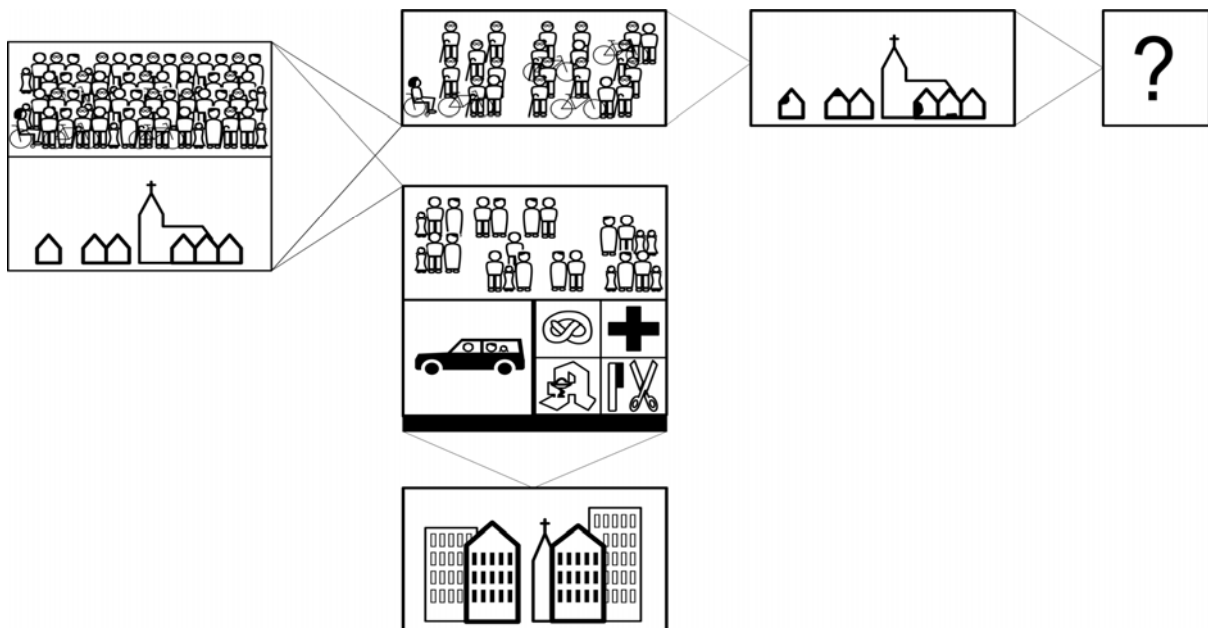


Figure 2 – Demographic development in the rural region: vacancies will spiral caused by the aging of the population, the exodus of people and services as well as decay

In the East German regions in particular, such problems are coupled with economic decline, huge vacancy rates and high unemployment. These difficulties are closely related to one another and will be analyzed as such in this study in order to discover how they can have a positive mutual impact and preferably neutralize one another.

Activating abandoned extant housing estates, like large farms or manor houses, among other things, can strengthen a region from the roots upward: the Szczecin Lagoon, for instance, traditionally an army location, has seen the step-by-step withdrawal of the army since German reunification, thus losing its biggest employer. The region will need sustainable model concepts for the development of its historical barrack areas, which have already been partly abandoned today. Moreover, the fact that active “retirees” have moved in has created a huge and multifarious potential for “voluntary community activities,” be they in sports clubs, cultural or charitable institutions or in child care.

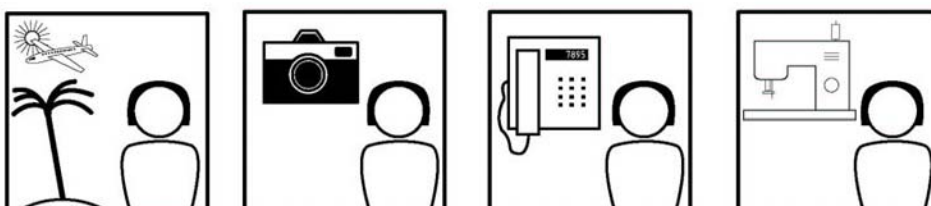


Figure – Free time and voluntary community activities: Creating spaces for the communication between the generations

The alleged “problem” of a high proportion of the population being +50 should be used to its advantage: by dint of this age group continuing to move into the region. In contrast to the American model of the sun city, the objective is not to plan hermetically sealed-off, self-insulated cities for senior citizens but the embedding of the 50+ generation in extant and partially unused structures. The growing demand for services this entails enables the creation of jobs and constitutes the precondition for younger “service providers,” in conjunction with their families, to settle in the region again simultaneously with the 50+ generation, reversing the trend of moving-away into a trend of moving-in.

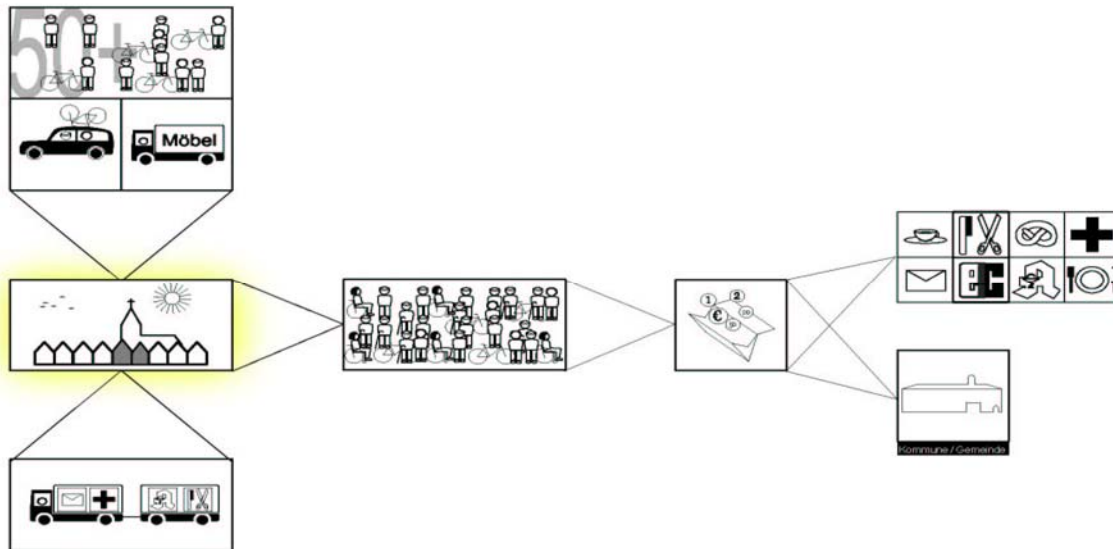


Figure 2 – The 50+ generation moves into rural regions: What it needs and what it brings along

Subject of the research project

The objective is the creation of new, special space structures in which the 50+ generation may live now and the 70+ generation may live later without having to change location again. The Altwarp village in the Szczecin Lagoon, featuring an abandoned barracks area with a historical officers’ settlement, was selected as a model project; it has a classical center, typical fisherman cottages and farm houses. The structures presented in this study are ideal for a diversified range of suitable, affordable living spaces for +50-year-olds—from the holiday home or second residence to a one-family dwelling to age-appropriate apartments up to a general care unit. On site, exemplified by the model region we visited, it becomes clear that we are dealing with presently well-functioning settlement areas with redeveloped towns, a remarkable history, an attractive landscape and a great recreational potential; these areas feature a sufficient, affordable range of property offerings, are relatively close to urban centers and have an existing, supra-regional infrastructure like airports, InterCity railway stations and highways into which subsidies have already flowed—yet will not have much of a future if the demographic development will not be regulated: the settlement of major commercial enterprises, which would encourage young people to move in, is not to be anticipated.

Similar to previous research studies, the authors deal exclusively with the “activation of existing buildings.” Not only from their perspective is a continued expansion in size of the villages and municipalities by dint of new housing estates unjustifiable, given the declining population figures.



Figure – Coexisting with the 50+ generation: expensive, uneconomical and unsustainable?

The argument that a sustainable and resource-saving use of our natural environment obligates us indeed to bank on activating vacancies instead of constructing new buildings is frequently countered by the claim that a barrier-free upgrading of buildings in particular requires too much, rendering the restructuring uneconomical or completely impossible. This is not the case, as not only the numerous contributions in the body of literature but many examples in practice have proven. The project examples in this study demonstrate how regions can be fundamentally modified by simple means. That's why, among others, the authors deploy the terms

“fewer barriers” instead of “barrier-free”

“suitable for assisted living” instead of “assisted living”

“appropriate for aging” instead of “age-appropriate”

in order to describe complex living facilities in various historical buildings that they present in this study. These terms are important particularly in the context of the restructuring of existing buildings, since they clearly define that modifiable and flexible spaces were developed that are attractive and livable for all generations alike, yet completely meet the additional requirements of old age. If these requirements are taken into account with the renovation planning right from the outset, a maximum standard—should it become necessary—may be added on later with a few simple measures.

Conclusion

According to the conclusions of this research study, problem solutions in rural regions by dint of complex and modifiable living facilities for the 50+ generation can be attributed to two concepts alongside the demographical and architectural aspects that have been discussed in great detail: community and individuality.

In so doing, “community” is synonymous for neighborhood, communication and social life; “individuality” is the synonym for personality, autonomy and dignity. They define not only the living space of the 50+ generation in rural regions, they also make clear the ultimately cross-generational approach of this study.

The existing potential of rural regions offers precisely the required basis for the meaningful establishment of central “retirement residences” and can also spark the success of extant or new plans for tourism. By dint of a skillful management of the rental offerings, an “enclave of old people” will be avoided, temporary holiday homes and second residences will be provided and a cross-generational neighborhood supported.

Through the combination with so-called “multiple houses,” i.e. multifunctional spaces for service and neighborhood, a medical and therapeutic basic care on-site, not requiring large spaces, can be guaranteed right from the outset; however, the “basic supply” with neighborhood, communication and culture can likewise be guaranteed. This combination, with its short distances and great flexibility, is able to ensure a maximum of autonomy and dignity for people in rural regions up to an old age.

Both in other countries and throughout history, there exist and existed living facilities for the aged, e.g. the beguine houses in Belgium or so-called “widow’s houses.” Every village can be a settlement “appropriate for aging” and “suitable for assisted living.”

What is especially important for rural regions is the range of offerings “on site” so as to prevent the uprooting of old people. To be able to reach friends, neighbors and acquaintances on foot is an important incentive for moving into a village appropriate for aging. If, on top of that, the living facility is situated centrally, in a historically attractive building and, in the best case, in a multiple house that has been restructured in a cross-generational way, it provides many options for a flexible use to the municipality, while concurrently stabilizing the center of the village or town in terms of its look and its economy.

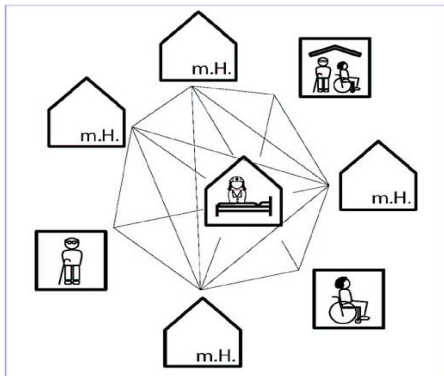


Figure – Networking of villages in rural areas

Based on the research study presented here, which might even constitute something of a “manual” for players and decision-makers in rural regions, the installation of modifiable living facilities is an immediate option, preferably in combination with a “multiple house.” Owing to the great feedback not only from mayors as well as the open-minded collaboration with the on-site players, the initial network of multiple houses planned at the Szczecin Lagoon, started as a 2011 model project, can be expanded by the village of Altwarp.

