

Housing and Ageing as a Global Problem: Perception and Knowledge Transfer in Socialist Hungary*

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ABSTRACTS

This study examines the connection between the challenges of an ageing society and the issue of housing. Specifically, it analyses how the Kádár government attempted to address the significant demand for housing for the elderly as it faced the problems of an ageing population and unresolved housing issue. Several factors made it necessary to explore innovative solutions. These included the increasing number of elderly people as a proportion of the population, the high number of apartments they occupied and struggled to maintain, the unmanageable burdens placed on social housing, and the lack of clarity regarding the government's precise responsibilities. Additionally, there was a growing desire among those over 60 to maintain their independence while having services readily available. What types of housing did the government use to address the problem? Which needs did it recognize as legitimate? How did it communicate about housing for the elderly to the public? This analysis also focuses on where the experts of socialist Hungary sought solutions to these problems, which were also being faced in other industrialized countries. This article thus contributes to closing a gap in the literature, which lacks a systematic mapping of these topics across social systems.

In dieser Studie wird der Zusammenhang zwischen den Herausforderungen einer alternden Gesellschaft und der Wohnungsfrage untersucht. Insbesondere wird analysiert, wie die Regierung Kádár versuchte, den erheblichen Bedarf an Wohnraum für ältere Menschen zu decken, als sie mit den Problemen einer alternden Bevölkerung und der ungelösten Wohnungsfrage kon-

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frontiert war. Mehrere Faktoren machten es notwendig, innovative Lösungen zu finden. Dazu gehörten der wachsende Anteil älterer Menschen an der Bevölkerung, die hohe Zahl der von ihnen bewohnten und schwer zu erhaltenden Wohnungen, die unüberschaubare Belastung des sozialen Wohnungsbaus und die Unklarheit über die Zuständigkeiten der Regierung. Außerdem wuchs bei den über 60-Jährigen der Wunsch, ihre Unabhängigkeit zu bewahren und gleichzeitig auf Dienstleistungen zurückgreifen zu können. Mit welchen Wohnformen begegnete die Regierung diesem Problem? Welche Bedürfnisse erkannte sie als legitim an? Wie wurde das Thema Wohnen im Alter in der Öffentlichkeit kommuniziert? Die Analyse konzentriert sich auch darauf, wo die Experten im sozialistischen Ungarn nach Lösungen für diese Probleme suchten, die auch in anderen Industrieländern auftraten. Dieser Artikel trägt somit zur Schließung einer Lücke in der Literatur bei, in der eine systematische Darstellung dieser Themen in den verschiedenen Gesellschaftssystemen fehlt.

1. Introduction

The view of history based on the divisions of the Cold War is increasingly in decline. In recent decades, historiography has drawn attention to the fact that even in times of the most intense political confrontation, transnational networks of experts worked on common issues.¹ Work on the history of globalization also suggests that links between socialist and capitalist countries, while limited, intensified since the 1950s.² The situation is no different in the case of ageing and housing for the elderly, where knowledge transfer and cooperation between experts also played an important role.³ However, a systematic mapping of these processes and channels across social systems is still lacking in the literature. The experience of state-socialist countries is not well represented in the historiographical discourse on ageing.⁴

In addition to the information revolution and the population explosion, longevity is one of the global social challenges facing humanity in the twenty-first century. It is a serious issue in Hungary, where the proportion of the elderly (i.e. people over the age of 60) is constantly rising, much as in other advanced industrial societies. By the end of the twenty-first century, Hungary will have become a society of retired senior citizens.⁵ The present study connects the global challenges faced by an ageing society to another major social issue: housing. It looks at how the Kádár government, as it began to face the problems caused by an ageing society and the unsolved problem of housing, tried to

1 W. Kaiser and J. Schot: *Writing the Rules for Europe: Experts, Cartels, and International Organizations*, London 2014.

2 B. Tomka, *Globalizáció Kelet-Közép-Európában a második világháború után* [Globalization in East-Central Europe after the Second World War], Budapest 2023; J. Osterhammel and N. P. Petersson, *Geschichte der Globalisierung*, München 2019.

3 N. Kramer, *Debatte Alter(n) als Thema der Zeitgeschichte*. Einleitung, in: *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* 10 (2013), pp. 455–463.

4 J. Chappel, "On the Border of Old Age". An Entangled History of Eldercare in East Germany, in: *Central European History* 53 (2020), pp. 1–19.

5 L. Iván, *Az Öregedés Aktuális Kérdései* [Current Issues of Ageing], in: *Magyar Tudomány* 47 (2002), p. 412.

meet massive demands for housing among the elderly. Several factors made it necessary to explore innovative solutions, including the growing number of the elderly as a percentage of the population, the high number of apartments they occupied and struggled to maintain, the unmanageable burdens placed on social housing and the lack of clarity concerning their precise responsibilities, and the growing desire of those over 60 to maintain their independence but at the same time have services readily available. What kinds of housing did the government use in its attempts to address the problem? Which needs did it acknowledge as legitimate? How did it communicate about the elderly to the public with regard to housing?

In particular, the focus is placed on the question of where the experts of socialist Hungary looked for answers to these problems, which were simultaneously posed in most industrialized countries. To what extent were they part of an international knowledge network, and how did they build up a national discourse on these issues? This article also investigates how knowledge acquired abroad influenced Hungarian practices in the field of housing for older people.

These questions are considered in the context of the “Old People’s Home” or “House for the Elderly” (Öregek Háza) built between 1966 and 1968, which was the first home designed specifically for the elderly in socialist Hungary and became the prototype for the homes that were built later. The answers will hopefully also offer a more nuanced understanding of the self-image of Hungarian socialist society in the increasingly globalized post-war world.

2. Transnational Knowledge Transfers and the Old People’s Home in Hungary

Clearly, questions concerning housing for the elderly were not only raised in Hungary, and the Old People’s Home as a response was hardly a Hungarian invention. Indeed, Hungarian experts on the issue repeatedly tried to stress the importance of dealing with the problems faced by an ageing society and the specific question of housing needs for the elderly by alluding to international examples. It is hardly surprising that, with regard to the growing rate of the elderly population, Western industrial societies were used as the basis for comparison – but it is worth noting that in the search for the most suitable type of housing for senior citizens, the literature also tended to focus on attempts by Western European countries to address this issue, and only then were the practices prevalent in socialist countries, especially the Soviet Union, taken into consideration.⁶

6 L. Zoltán and É. Spiró, Az öregek lakáshelyzete [Elderly People’s Housing Conditions], in: Magyar Építőművészet 10 (1961) 5, 44–45; J. Szinai, Korszerű lakásforma – Korszerű életforma [State-of-the-Art Flats – State-of-the-Art Lifestyles], in: Budapest 14 (1976) 3, 1–4; L. Zoltán, Öt tudományág közös gondja: Milyen legyen az öregek lakhatása [A Common Issue of Five Disciplines. What Housing for the Elderly Should be Like], in: Népszabadság, 2 February 1965, 9; F. I. Joós, Eltartási szerződés helyett: öregotthon [Instead of a Contract of Support. The Old People’s Home], in: Tükör 3 (1966) 22, 22–23; L. Teréz, A negyedik életkor [The Fourth Period of Life], in: Esti Hírlap,

From the perspectives of its size and thoroughness, the published proceedings of the colloquium organized by the Economic Commission of Europe of the UN (ECE) stood out among volumes on the problem of providing housing for the elderly.⁷

When the ECE was established in 1947, it was given the mandate of helping to rebuild post-war Europe, develop economic activity, and strengthen economic relations among European countries and between them and other countries of the world. However, the Iron Curtain, which separated East and West shortly after the establishment of the ECE (Hungary, along with the Soviet Union, joined the ECE only in 1955), forced the UN body to deal only with questions that were of common interest to East and West despite their different economic systems and their political and ideological confrontation.⁸ The housing problems of older people were clearly one of these common issues, which was why the ECE organized a colloquium on this topic in 1967.

The colloquium and the resulting report strove to deal with the problem systematically. They approached individual characteristics of ageing through a general analysis of the ageing of society; they examined how the health and socio-economic status of a given individual changed as he or she aged; and they then drew conclusions concerning the housing needs of senior citizens.⁹

Referring to international research, participants in the colloquium posited the possibility of continuing one's individual way of life as the most essential need of the elderly. The most natural way for this need to be met was to receive the help required while remaining in one's home. If it was too difficult or demanding for an elderly person to maintain their dwelling, a possible solution was to use the phrasing used at the colloquium, "apartment homes" – in other words, old people's homes, or, as a last resort, nursing homes (for those in need of continuous supervision and care).¹⁰

The goal of the colloquium was to develop an international action plan on the grounds that international problems needed international answers, so theoretically, guidelines applicable across the world should be developed. The claim was global, but a check of the participating states and examples used makes it clear that, in fact, the world meant Europe and North America.

Four guidelines or principles were elaborated in the report. First was the principle of state intervention: the state was to work to ensure that older people were placed in housing that met their needs. Second was the principle of solution diversity: several types of housing for seniors were to be developed. Third was the principle of the autonomy of older people: attempts to solve the housing problems should be aimed at enabling the

June 29, 1979. S. A. Horváth: Rózsadombon áll az öregek háza [The Old People's Home Stands on Rózsadomb], in: *Vas Népe* 11 (1970) 7.

7 Az öregek lakásproblémáiról. Az EGB kollokviumának rövidített rnyaga. VÁTI dokumentációs osztálya. [On Issues Concerning Housing for the Elderly. Abridged version of the ECE Colloquium, VÁTI Department of Documentation], Budapest 1967.

8 Y. Berthelot and P. Rayment, *Looking Back and Peering Forward. A Short History of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 1947–2007*, New York 2007.

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 11–30.

10 *Ibid.*, pp. 32–33.

elderly to maintain their autonomy/self-determination. And fourth was the principle of the employment of older people: the apartments built for elderly people were to enable them to feel useful, to feel needed.

The main initiator and organizer of this knowledge transfer from the UN to Hungary was László Zoltán, the chief engineer of the state-owned planning office, Lakóterv [Housing Design].¹¹ He wrote the first articles about the housing problem of the elderly in professional journals and daily newspapers and promoted the planning of the “House of the Elderly” on the basis of the ECE principles.

Zoltán was what might be dubbed a “global mediator”. He was not only the Hungarian member of the ECE Committee for Housing but also worked as a consultant for the Ministry of Sports and Youth in Algeria in the 1960s and later headed the office for Hungarian “intellectual exports” – Enterprise Technical and Scientific Cooperation (TESCO) – also in Algeria. Zoltán was trained in intercultural communication and gained a lot of experience in mediating between different social systems.

In his articles on the housing problems of the elderly, Zoltán treated the phenomenon as a general industrial-state problem and that the division socialist and capitalist did not play a role. Relatedly, the “good examples” he used were mostly Western European (from the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland, England, and Finland); the Soviet Union was actually almost never mentioned in his explanations. Thus, the intellectual framework on which the solution of the housing problems of the elderly was to be based was formulated globally, independent of social systems.

3. The Ageing Society from a Professional Perspective: The Elderly in post-1945 Hungary

Naturally, a population, unlike an individual, has no age. In this sense, the demographic ageing of a population generally means that, from the perspective of age, the composition of a population changes and its proportion of old people rises, but it may also refer to a change in the average age. Obviously, then, this is not a one-way process, as a given population may also become younger.¹²

Who is regarded as elderly? Stages of life are given different classifications and names in the literature.¹³ Both in Hungary and in international research, the theoretical literature on demographics links the concept of old age to the most prevalent retirement age of 60, although many believe that the age of 65 would be more suitable as a dividing line since it tends to mark the beginning of the loss of mental and physical strength.¹⁴ There are

11 Residential and Communal Building Designer Company, operating between 1952 and 1995.

12 E. Valkovics, A népesség öregedésének tendenciái [Tendencies of the Ageing of a Population], in: Statisztika Szemle 68 (1990), p. 869.

13 Ibid.

14 J. Tamásy, Az öregedés és néhány egészségügyi vonatkozása Magyarországon [Ageing and Some of its Health Implications in Hungary], in: Statisztikai Szemle 62 (1984), p. 801.

some who suggest the creation of an index based on a combination of physiological and functional performance.¹⁵ While these points are unquestionably relevant and justified, here, following the standard practice in the literature of the era, “elderly” is taken to refer to people over 60. It should be noted, however, that one of the most important findings in the research, both then and now, is that the population of those aged 60 years and above is heterogenous, not only in terms of financial background and family situation but also from the perspective of how active the people are.¹⁶

While the issue of ageing has always been a preoccupation, the economic and social effects of ageing were only given attention by economically advanced societies after World War II, in the early 1950s.¹⁷ The primary problems with ageing for the state were the increasing need to expand the pension scheme to a widening social strata and the impact of decreasing fertility and increased life expectancy on the composition of the population from the perspective of age. The increased attention was tied to the institutionalization of gerontology, that is, the study of ageing and old people as a discipline. Although in the UK and USA the institutionalization process had ended by the 1970s, in continental Europe, it began a decade later. As a consequence, European gerontology relied on the findings of English-speaking countries for a long time, and the perceptions of these countries shaped the European discourse. For example, the mantra still often quoted in Europe, “To add life to years, not just years to life”, was used by the American Society of Gerontology as early as 1949.¹⁸

Demographic research in Hungary has been of a comparatively high quality, in part, because the issue of the ageing society was the subject of research as early as 1955, when György Acsády’s work was published in *Statistikai Szemle* [Statistical Review]. This analysed “the ageing of the population” on the basis of the data of a census carried out in 1949 and provided an extremely – not to say frighteningly – accurate estimate of future tendencies.¹⁹

With regard to the process by which societies are ageing – and at accelerating rates – the literature on demographics categorizes societies as “young”, “mature”, or “old” according to whether the proportion of elderly people is below seven per cent, between seven and ten per cent, or above ten per cent, relatively.²⁰ József Tamásy determined the age of 65 as the beginning of what could be called “old age” (somewhat against common practice in the literature).

15 G. Vukovich, A népesség növekedésének néhány társadalmi-gazdasági összefüggése [Some Socio-economic Relations of the Ageing of a Population], in: *Statistikai Szemle* 64 (1986), p. 109.

16 L. Cseh-Szombathy, A nyugdíjasok helyzete és problémái [The Circumstances and Problems Faced by Old-age Pensioners], in: *Demográfia* 7 (1964), p. 89.

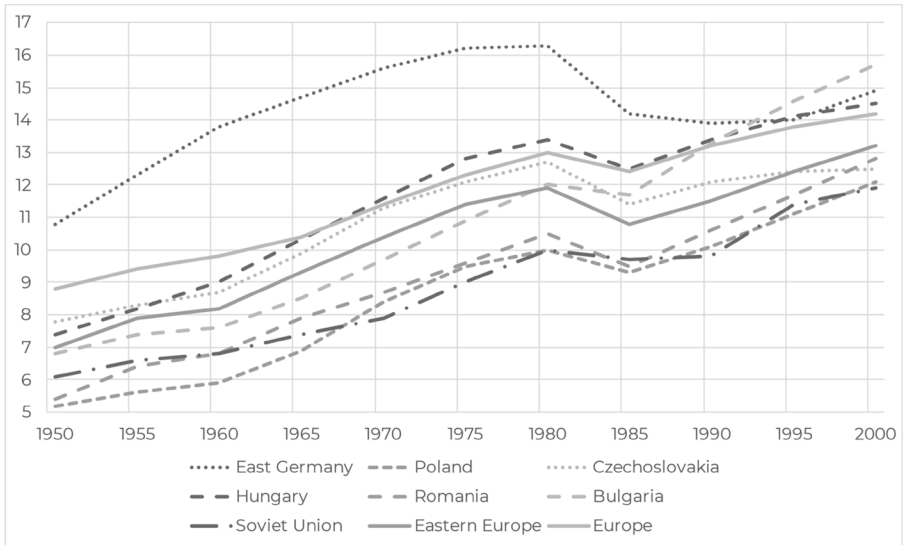
17 Tamásy, *Az öregedés*, p. 800.

18 M. Ruoss, “Aktives Alter(n)” in der kapitalistischen Arbeitsgesellschaft, in: M. Bolze et al. (eds.), *Prozesse des Alterns. Konzepte – Narrative – Praktiken*, Bielefeld 2015, pp. 162–163, 166.

19 G. Acsád, A népesség öregedése [The Ageing of the Population], in: *Statistikai Szemle* 33 (1955), pp. 879–899.

20 Tamásy, *Az öregedés*, pp. 802–803.

Figure 1. Proportion of the population aged 65 or older in Eastern Bloc countries, 1950–2000. Source: J. Tamásy, *Az öregedés és néhány egészségügyi vonatkozása Magyarországon* [Ageing and Some of its Health Implications in Hungary], in: *Statistikai Szemle* 62 (1984), p. 803.



Based on Tamásy's research, although Hungary in 1950 was below the European average in terms of the proportion of elderly people in its population, it was already a mature society. Among the Eastern European countries in a similar situation (due to similar social policy and political system), which lent them to comparison, only Czechoslovakia finished higher (i.e. in the 1950s), along with the GDR, which in many respects was a special case and was categorized as an ageing society as early as 1950.²¹ Hungary was only categorized as ageing from the mid-1960s, but by 1970, it was the oldest socialist country after the GDR (i.e. with the highest proportion of citizens over the age of 65). The increasing age of the population in Hungary – along with the other Eastern Bloc countries – continued through the 1970s. In 1980–1985, it was affected by the great number of children not born during the First World War (which again applied to all the Eastern countries), after which it continued again, unabated. All the socialist countries followed the same general path, albeit at different rates.

21 From the early 1950s, there was a large wave of refugees from East to West Germany, more than 70% of whom were under the age of 45. By 1955, 1,443,532 asylum seekers from the GDR had applied for asylum in West Germany; i.e. about one million people under the age of 45 were lost to the GDR during this period. This was about 5.5% of the total population in 1955 (17.83 million). Another factor that contributed to the higher proportion of older people was that the older generation of displaced persons (Vertriebene) was also generally stranded in the GDR either because they could not move on to West Germany or because they wanted to stay closer to their old homes. See K. Fiebich, *Die Bevölkerungsbilanz der DDR*, in: *Ost-Probleme* 8 (1956) 44, pp. 1526–1533.

Census and statistical data from the period provide reliable information on the elderly segment of Hungarian society, meaning those above the ages of 60 or 65.²² At the time of the 1949 census, 11.6 per cent of the population of Hungary was above the age of 60; this figure had increased to 17.1 per cent by 1980. If one further divides this group according to age, one sees that the rate of older people among the elderly grew considerably. In other words, the group of old people also grew older. While in 1949, the proportion of people aged 80 years or older comprised only 7.1 per cent of those over 65, by 1980, it had increased to 11.5 per cent. An even greater rise can be detected in the age group of people aged 70-79, which grew from 29.9 per cent in 1949 to 37.8 per cent in 1980.²³ Similarly to international figures, the proportion of women among those 60 years of age and older was higher than that of men – and growing more quickly (from 56 per cent to 58.6 per cent in those three decades, i.e. the 1950s–1970s), mainly because of the higher life expectancy of women.²⁴

In addition to the general characteristics of old people as a group, it is also important to consider what it means for a society when an increasing number of its citizens reaches the age of 60 (or 65) and becomes a pensioner, that is, when they no longer work. It should be no surprise that many of the publications on old-age pensioners (OAPs) and the elderly examined the costs of having individuals leave the workforce. Demographers used the dependency rate of the elderly population – the number of people aged 60 and above compared to 100 citizens between the ages of 15 and 59 – to identify and quantify a dramatic increase in this area, from 18.27 in 1949 to 27.99 in 1980. This increase seems even greater when considering the number of inactive wage earners (i.e. pensioners) per 100 active wage earners. This grew from 7.27 in 1960 to 29.64 in 1980, so more than a four-fold increase in 30 years.²⁵ If one puts these figures in an international or, more precisely, Socialist Bloc context, one sees that Hungary came second only to the GDR in terms of the number of old people (60 years of age and older) per 100 active wage earners in 1980.²⁶ This kind of increase in the rate of dependent citizens has economic consequences. In 1952, the Hungarian state spent 1.9 per cent of its national income on pensions, a figure that had grown to 3.8 per cent by 1962 and reached 8.9 per cent in 2018.²⁷

22 Henceforth, following the practice in the Hungarian and international secondary literature of the era and today, people aged 60 years of age and older are regarded as elderly.

23 Vukovich, *A népesség növekedésének*, p. 111.

24 Tamásy, *Az öregedés*, p. 805; Hungarian Central Statistical Office: Main indicators of population, population movement. https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/nep/hu/nep0001.html.

25 Vukovich, *A népesség növekedésének*, p. 112.

26 Tamásy, *Az öregedés*, p. 806.

27 E. Szabady, *Az öregedés gazdasági és társadalmi következményei Magyarországon* [Economic and Social Impacts of Ageing in Hungary], in: *Statisztikai Szemle* 41 (1963), p. 1060; Központi Statisztika Hivatal, *Nyugdíjak és egyéb ellátások* [Retirement Pensions and other Provisions], (2019) 8. <https://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xfstp/idoszaki/regiok/orsz/nyugdij/nyugdij19.pdf> (accessed 27 December 2023).

Despite a rapid growth in financial sources for pensions, the amount of pensions paid for individuals ages 60 and over in the 1950s and 1960s remained relatively low. Table 1 shows the distribution of the amount spent on pensions in 1963.

Table 1. The distribution of pensioners according to the amounts of their pensions

Amount of pension (HUF)	All pensioners	Old-age pensioners
	%	
–200	3.4	0.7
300–399	21.4	5.7
400–599	29.0	32.2
600–799	23.5	30.8
800–999	11.2	15.1
1000–1199	5.5	7.4
1200–1399	3.2	4.4
1400–1599	1.2	1.6
1600–1999	1.2	1.5
200–	0.4	0.6
Total	100	100

Source: E. Szabady, *Az öregedés gazdasági és társadalmi következményei Magyarországon* [Economic and Social Impacts of Ageing in Hungary], p. 1060.

The data indicate that 88.5 per cent of OAPs received less than HUF 1,000 pension a month. Furthermore, the majority (53.8 per cent) was paid less than HUF 600. This amount was especially low given that in 1963, the average monthly salary of state employees was HUF 1,684.²⁸ Retirement meant considerable financial losses in the lives of individuals. In the winter of 1963–1964, as part of a Hungarian Central Statistical Office (*Központi Statisztikai Hivatal*, KSH) research project, Rudolf Andorka and László Cseh-Szombathy examined the situation of OAPs in Budapest. Their investigation revealed that over two-thirds of pensioners in Budapest received pensions worth only 50–69 per cent of their salaries at the time of retirement, and a fifth of them were paid less than 50 per cent of their former salaries.²⁹ Clearly, this kind of drop in income at such a scale had to lead to a reduction of personal expenses and a transformation of lifestyle. As a result, many individuals did not retire when they reached the age of retirement. The percentage of those who continued to work or remained employed after having reached

28 Cseh-Szombathy, A nyugdíjasok helyzete és problémái, p. 96.

29 L. Cseh-Szombati and R. Andorka, Budapesti nyugdíjasok [Old-age Pensioners in Budapest], in: *Statisztika Szemle* 43 (1965), p. 685.

the age of retirement was 19.8 per cent in 1960; in other words, one in five people who reached the age of retirement continued working.³⁰ The need to continue work after retirement is even clearer when the data are examined by gender: almost a third (32.4 per cent) of men above the age of retirement were still active wage earners. Another significant reason for this, in addition to the meager pensions, was the simple fact that in the 1950s and 1960s, not every old person had the 10 years of state-provided employment required for pension payments.

There is relatively little data available on housing conditions for the elderly (and for the various ages in general) due to the particularities of the (census) statistical records.³¹ Surveys of pensioners conducted by the KSH provide some points of reference, but the first research specifically discussing and analysing the housing conditions of the elderly was conducted only in 1980 when Gabriella Ernst examined the housing conditions of the elderly, primarily from the perspective of the possibility of their maintaining an independent lifestyle. Ernst's analysis revealed that the housing conditions of people at the age of 60 and above were worse in every respect than those of younger people.³²

Concerning the amenities of the dwellings, Ernst found that almost half (49 per cent) of the apartments inhabited by old people did not have a bathroom, and just over a quarter (26.4 per cent) had no gas installed, as compared to only 29.6 per cent and 15.6 per cent of the lodgings used by those under the age of 60. Analysis of the data according to settlement types shows clearly that in Budapest, in other cities, and in villages, those over 60 lived in dwellings with a much lower comfort level than the homes of younger people.³³ Likewise negatively affecting the quality of life and making individual living more difficult, the homes of the elderly were likely to be farther away from grocery stores, pharmacies, and public transportation than those of people under the age of 60.³⁴

Problems with housing were intensified by the fact that the elderly had to pay to maintain their homes, which were of a lower quality and situated in unfavourable places. According to various studies, this was a consequence of the fact that most old people above the age of 60 owned their dwellings or were related to the owner (as family), and only a fraction of them lived in rented (state or council) apartments.³⁵ The situation was particularly detrimental to the elderly, as the authorities kept the rents and maintenance costs of state-owned and municipal rented housing artificially low during the socialist period.

30 Szabady, *Az öregedés*, p. 1057.

31 F. E. János and A. Vajda, *A lakásstatistikai adatközlések, 1920–1990 (III.)* [Statistical Data Concerning Housing, 1920–1990], in: *Statistika Szemle* 68 (1990), pp. 245–246.

32 G. Ernst, *Az öregkorú népesség lakáshelyzete* [The Housing Conditions of the Elderly Population], in: *Szociálpolitikai Értesítő* 3 (1985) 3 pp. 127–147.

33 *Ibid.*, pp. 131, 134–135.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 139.

35 *Az öregek helyzete és problémái*, *Statistikai időszaki közlemények* 249 [The Situation and Problems of the Elderly. Periodical Statistical Bulletins 249], Budapest 1972, p. 220; Ernst, *Az öregkorú népesség lakáshelyzete*, pp. 145–146.

4. The Issue of the Elderly in Scientific Discourse

The statistical data available explain why, in part, the issue of the elderly and the problems faced by an ageing society became increasingly prominent for the Hungarian scientific community from the mid-1950s on. At this early stage, scholars approached the issue primarily from the perspective of demographics. During the second half of the 1950s, attention was predominantly called to the economic burden derived from the increasing rate of the elderly population.³⁶ A change in approach and a more thorough discussion of the age group of old people came later, with research conducted on behalf of the KSH by Rudolf Andorka, László Cseh-Szombathy, and Egon Szabady between 1963 and 1965.³⁷ The publications show that these three experts had a good knowledge of the international literature and were active members of an international network of population experts. Accordingly, their research was in line with international trends. They produced the first systematic investigations that aimed at assessing the conditions of the elderly. Alongside the general tendencies, this work focused primarily on their cultural consumption, financial situation, and positions within families of OAPs. One important finding of this research was the comparative diversity of this group.

In mid-1960s Hungary, “social care” for the elderly was provided only through nursing homes, as official home care did not exist at the time, so the research carried out in 1965 by the KSH analysed problems in these social institutions. The extensive research included the investigation of all state institutions and administrative departments, as well as questionnaire-based interviews with a third of the residents.³⁸ It revealed that these institutions offered housing not exclusively but predominantly for the elderly and that they provided nursing care and homes for the lonely. Thus, they were fulfilling quite different functions, which could be difficult to coordinate.

Another important finding of the research was the discipline characteristic of these homes. This resembled the routines and rules in a hospital and made it difficult or near impossible to keep residents active, even if they were still relatively healthy mentally and physically, which made them increasingly apathetic. At the same time, due to the lack of suitable staff, the homes could not offer proper nursing care. Thus, the KSH report concluded that the nursing homes needed to be reorganized and restructured; hospital-like and home-like institutions should be separated and further developed.³⁹

In the scientific discourse on the elderly, a change in approach occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s, KSH studies, which had formerly been conducted according to a demo-

36 G. Acsády, *A népesség öregedése*; Tamásy, *Az öregedés*; G. Acsády (ed.), *Az öregedés* [The Ageing], Budapest 1957.

37 *A nyugdíjasok helyzete. A Központi Statisztikai Hivatal Népeség tudományi Kutató Csoport Közleményei 2* [The Situation of Pensioners. Publications of the Population Research Unit of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office 2], Budapest 1963; Szabady, *Az öregedés*, pp. 1055–1062; Cseh-Szombathy, *A nyugdíjasok helyzete és problémái*, pp. 88–103; Cseh-Szombathy and Andorka, *Budapesti nyugdíjasok*, pp. 675–700.

38 E. Heinz, *A szociális intézetek és gondozottaik helyzete* [The Condition of Social Institutions and their Inhabitants], Budapest 1966, pp. 99–100.

39 E. Szabady, *Előszó* [Prologue], in: Heinz, *A szociális intézetek és gondozottaik helyzete*, pp. 9–10.

graphic approach, opened to new directions, and the issue of ageing became “socialized” – that is, several state institutions and social organizations joined forces to find a solution to the problems arising from the ageing of society.⁴⁰ The most fundamental sign of this process was a symposium entitled “An Increased Involvement of Social Forces in the Social Support of Senior Citizens” organized by the Department of Health in September 1970 with the participation of a range of (state and voluntary) organizations.⁴¹

As outlined by László Parádi, the first deputy of the Minister of Health, the main issues for symposium participants were the inadequate attention given to the problematics of ageing and a need to nurture more empathy for the elderly in Hungarian society and a greater readiness to provide help. In order to deal with these, increased cooperation was needed between the state and social organizations, and more effective methods had to be developed.⁴² To this end, the participants suggested creating a national action plan and setting up a working committee.⁴³

It was probably in preparation for the symposium that, in 1968, a study had been commissioned by the Ministry of Health to conduct a new, comprehensive survey of social institutions and care leavers. However, its findings were only published after the conference. One of the most exciting results of the study – with which the research initiative came to a close – was the observation that old age and poverty do not always go hand-in-hand – in fact, it was noted, the proportion of elderly people with relatively high incomes had risen. This was the first time such a perspective had appeared in the literature. For this reason, it was argued, the needs of those with a higher income should be considered when developing new institutions, and new types of institutions and new forms of care were required.⁴⁴ In short, this represented progress from the provision of a minimal standard of care to improvement and a concern for well-being.

The 1970s was the period when, in addition to “socialization”, gerontology also began to thrive in Hungary. More and more books were published that did not simply examine old people as a group in need of help but (drawing on Cseh-Szombathy’s and Andorka’s research) also tried to analyse ageing from a complex demographic, medical, and sociological perspective (with reference to the research conducted). In 1972, the first volume on socio-gerontology was published (in which an argument was put forward in support

40 Az időskorúak helyzete és problémái (1955–1980) [The Circumstances and Problems Faced by the Elderly], in: M. Andrassy (ed.), *Öregék az írások tükrében* [Elderly People in Writing], Budapest 1989, pp. 10–20.

41 The Department of the Treasury, the Information Office of the Council of Ministers, the Central Commission For People’s Oversight (Központi Népi Ellenőrzési Bizottság), the National Council of Trade Unions, the National Council of the Patriotic People’s Front, the National Council of Agricultural Cooperatives, the Hungarian Young Communist League, the National Women’s Council, and the Red Cross. See: *Az időskorúak szociális támogatásának fokozása a társadalmi segítség fejlesztésével. tájékoztató az állami és társadalmi szervek 1970. szeptember 7-én és 8-án megrendezett országos ankétjáról*, Szociális Intézetek Központja [Increasing Social Support for the Elderly by Developing Social Aid, Proceedings of the National Conference of National and Social Organizations on September 7–8, 1970], Gyula 1971, p. 11.

42 *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 21.

43 *Ibid.*, pp. 48–49.

44 L. Malinszki, *Szociális otthoni statisztikai felmérés és tanulmány* [A Statistical Survey and Study of Social Housing], Budapest 1971, p. 14.

of the value of ageing workers), and in 1976, the first handbook on gerontology was written.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, the KSH continued collecting data on senior citizens reaching the age of retirement.⁴⁶

Despite the increasing diversity of the research field and the increasing intensity of the work being conducted, the conclusions drawn by these publications were always the same: first, they contended that the proportion of citizens 60 years of age and older in Hungary was growing rapidly (even more so than in Western European countries), and second, they concluded that the country was not prepared for this situation, which needed to be dealt with in its entirety at an economic, social, and individual (psychological) level. Based on these conclusions, the researchers identified potential steps to be taken, which also tended to be similar.

Pensioners needed to be given adequate representation so that they would not suffer passively from the changes that were to be made but would be able to participate actively in them, and improvements had to be made to the general circumstances in which OAPs lived, much as improvements also had to be made to the regional and institutional care that was provided, partly by drawing a clear distinction between the two. Providing training for professional staff and, eventually, elaborating a national socio-political plan were seen as vital ongoing tasks. From today's perspective, one observes all too clearly that these tasks were not really addressed until the late 1970s.

5. The Old People's Home at the Experimental Housing Estate in Budafok

5.1 The Old People's Home

In light of the above, it is apparent that the growth in the proportion of the elderly in Hungarian society was not only detectable on the basis of statistical data, a fact that became the subject of scientific research, but that this also became a challenge to which state institutions sought to respond. This is true also of the questions that arose when it came to providing housing for the elderly. When it came to the steps taken by the government to address housing problems in general, the elderly could not be left out. In 1961, senior engineer László Zoltán joined forces with Éva V. Spiró, a celebrated award-winning architect at Lakóterv, to publish an article entitled "Housing for the Elderly" in *Magyar Építőművészet* [Hungarian Architectural Art]. In calling for a solution to the elderly housing issue and drawing on examples from abroad, they identified the dilemmas to be resolved and suggested some possible answers. The type of building ensemble that they

45 N. Hun, Bevezetés a szociális gerontológiába [Introduction to Social Gerontology], Budapest 1972; G. Pogány, Öregedés – foglalkoztatás [Ageing – Employment], Budapest 1971; P. Villányi, A szociális gerontológia [Social Gerontology], Budapest 1976.

46 G. Illés, A nyugdíjasok foglalkoztatása 1970-ben [The Employment of Pensioners in 1970], in: Statisztikai Szemle 50 (1972), pp. 1142–1154; Az öregek helyzete és problémái Statisztikai időszaki közlemények 249; L. Cseh-Szombathy et al. (eds.), Magyarország legöregebb lakói [The Oldest Inhabitants of Hungary], Budapest 1977.

proposed, which was given the name “hotel home”, essentially bore all the features of the Old People’s Home later designed by Spiró.⁴⁷

The early proposal was partly realized because, in 1965, the UN-ECE dedicated a colloquium to problems concerning housing for the elderly. Hungary was represented by Zoltán,⁴⁸ a leading advocate for the design of different building types to meet the needs of the elderly. It was no coincidence, then, that the designs for the building planned specifically for the elderly as part of a new housing estate in Budafok were made at Lakóterv. The needs and expectations concerning the housing problems of elderly people, it was thought, were most likely to be met by a rather new type of housing that had already been tried in some places in Europe: “hotel homes” or “apartment homes”.⁴⁹ The first, very deliberate implementation of this new type of building was the Old People’s Home designed by Éva Spiró and constructed in 1968 at the Experimental Housing Estate (*Kísérleti Lakótelep*).⁵⁰

The Experimental Housing Estate in Budafok, including the Old People’s Home, was built between 1966 and 1975. The plans for the estate were made at the Design Development and Type Design Institution (*Tervezésfejlesztési és Típustervező Intézet*, TTI) with the aim of providing a practical response to the problems arising from the “communal, welfare, cultural, and housing needs of huge building estates established on the basis of manufactured housing”.⁵¹ The emphasis was on prefabricated industrial structures; the designers were not simply looking for new technological solutions but also to develop a socialist lifestyle and socialist use of dwellings. The intention was to go beyond traditional uses of residential buildings with the help of modern technology.

The result of this lifestyle experiment was the concept of “managed housing”.⁵² According to this conception, the functions that had traditionally been filled by apartments could and should be socialized or, in other words, replaced by communal services. For Tibor Tenke, one of the main architects of the estate, these functions included cooking, washing, having guests, and providing for children. The estate was to have two advantages: it would have smaller, individual dwellings, while the residents could be guided towards a more communal use of residential space, which was seen as more in harmony

47 Zoltán and Spiró, *Az öregek lakáshelyzete*, pp. 44–45.

48 Residential and Communal Building Designer Company, operating between 1952 and 1995.

49 Naturally, there were several “boarding houses” and “apartment hotels” built in Europe and Budapest that offered various services for their residents, but their target community was not the elderly or pensioners.

50 Lira és Logika. Beszélgetés Spiró Éva Ybl-díjas Építésszel [Lyrical Poetry and Logic. An Interview with Éva Spiró, Ybl Award-Winning Architect], in: *Budapest 7* (1969) 5, pp. 15–16; J. Kovács, Éva mérnököt [Architect Éva], in: *Lányok, asszonyok* 26 (1970) 7, pp. 14–15; M. Csákváry, A fogadalom [The Pledge], in: *Lányok, Asszonyok* 31 (1975) 12, p. 13.

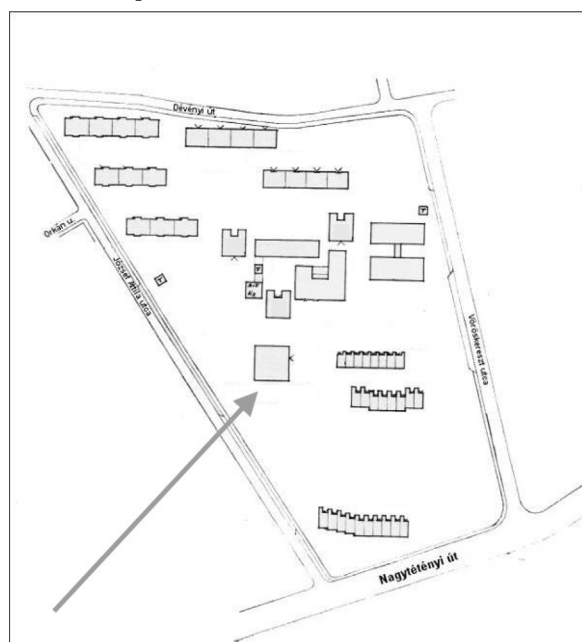
51 T. Csorba, Építési Kísérletek – kísérleti lakótelepek [Building Experiments – Experimental Housing Estates], in: *Műszaki tervezés* 12 (1972) 1, p. 34.

52 Budafoki Kísérleti Lakótelep [The Experimental Housing Estate in Budafok], written and directed by L. Babura László. ÉM Építésügyi Tájékoztatói Központ Filmstúdiója. Budapest 1966, <https://bit.ly/2DKn18c> (accessed 5 December 2023).

with the ideology of a socialist society. The service building, which played a crucial part in the estate and the concept of managed housing as well, was finished by 1968.⁵³

The idea of liberating people from the burden of housework also played an important role in the designs for the Old People's Home in Budafok. Almost all of the newspaper reports on the subject made note of this consideration. Years later, even, the Old People's Home in Budafok and the homes modelled on it were referred to as examples of the way in which, in Hungary, collective housing had been achieved.⁵⁴ The Old People's Home was completed together with other main buildings of the estate, in 1968, in an environment "where families can live together with their parents" – so the idea was that the elderly would be living near their children and grandchildren, no longer isolated (by being left in family property while the youngsters moved away).⁵⁵

Figure 2. Site plan of the Experimental Housing Estate in Budafok, with the Old People's Home indicated by an arrow. Source: T. Csorba, *Építési Kísérletezések – kísérleti lakótelepek* [Building Experiments – Experimental Housing Estates], in: *Műszaki tervezés* 12 (1972) 1, p. 35.



53 Csorba, *Építési kísérletezések – kísérleti lakótelepek*, p. 36.

54 Zs. Varga, *Családi szálloda* [Family Hotel], in: *Népszava* 29 (1979), p. 4; Szinai, *Korszerű akásforma – korszerű életforma*.

55 Budafokon épül az első Óregék Háza [The First Old People's Home is Being Built in Budafok], in: *Népszava*, 19 December 1963, p. 8.

The Old People's Home in the Budafok Experimental Housing Estate had 25 residential units. Upon entering, the elderly residents found themselves in a spacious lobby. Modest apartments were arranged around the lobby on the ground and first floors. The largest and most important room in the apartments was the 17.1 m² living room, and there was also a 3.77 m² bathroom with a toilet and a 4.62 m² hallway with a small cooking table. This table was deliberately designed to be suitable only for minor cooking purposes, as catering was to be provided by the service building of the housing estate.⁵⁶ Other communal rooms were created where the residents could engage in various pursuits. These included a radio, television, and card-playing room, a library, and heated workshop areas overlooking the garden.⁵⁷

The apartments were all furnished. The furniture included two beds, a dressing table, a desk, a chair, an armchair with a colourful slipcover, and a wardrobe that was "larger than standard".⁵⁸ The residents' lives were made more comfortable and secure with central heating, hot water, a refrigerator, wall-to-wall carpeting, a sunken bath with bars to prevent slipping, a hotplate that gave a warning if it overheated, and a bell to call the nurse.⁵⁹ The services offered by the Old People's Home also included weekly cleaning, a professional nurse who resided in the building and worked flexible hours, and a general practitioner who received patients onsite. For an extra fee, the residents could order lunch as well.⁶⁰ In subsequent years, old people's homes in Budapest and Tatabánya were built with only minor alterations.⁶¹

5.2 Target Group

One of the main arguments for building the Old People's (later Pensioners') Home [*Nyugdíjasok Háza*] was the need to draw distinctions among the benefits provided for elderly citizens, as the research indicated that too many people with diverse needs were being packed tightly together in social housing facilities that were already inadequate, making these homes unable to meet residents' needs.⁶²

Based on press reports, official statements, and admission criteria from the period, a rough picture emerges of the needs that the Old People's Home sought to meet – or, in other words, of the OAP target group for the new type of social care. First, the apart-

56 M. Szamos, *Öregek Háza a Budafoki Kísérleti Lakótelepen* [The Old People's Home in the Budafok Experimental Housing Estate], in: *Műszaki tervezés* 8 (1968), pp. 8, 16.

57 Csorba, *Építési kísérletezések – kísérleti lakótelepek*, p. 37.

58 Szamosi, *Öregek Háza a Budafoki Kísérleti Lakótelepen*, p. 16.

59 Á. Fedor, *Felépül az első "Öregek Háza"* [The First "Old People's Home" is Being Built], in: *Magyar Nemzet*, December 30, 1967. 5. Sz. Pongrácz, *Házak – nyugdíjasoknak* [Houses – For Pensioners] in: *Budapest* 13 (1975) 5, esp. pp. 12–15.

60 P. Vándor, *Az első albérlők háza Kelenföldön, az első öregek háza Zuglóban Épül* [The First Tenants' House and the First Old People's Home are Being Built in Kelenföld and Zugló], in: *Népszava*, 24 January 1971; Pongrácz, *Házak – nyugdíjasoknak*.

61 J. Újhelyi, *Zuglói Lakótelep, "öregek háza"* [The Housing Estate in Zugló and the "Old People's Home"], in: *Műszaki Tervezés* 11 (1971) 8, p. 16.

62 Heinz, *A szociális intézetek és gondozottaik helyzete*, pp. 99–100.

ments were intended for relatively healthy retirees, as one prerequisite of moving in was the ability to live independently and care for oneself, as certified by a general practitioner (medical doctor). Second, the pensioners who were admitted to the Old People's Home had real estate of a relatively high quality; the only applications accepted were submitted by elderly people who, in return, were willing and able to give up a council flat with all modern conveniences in the capital.⁶³

Third, the Old People's Home opened its doors in 1969 to people whose pensions were higher than HUF 1,400 a month (HUF 1,900 for couples) – the amount was later increased.⁶⁴ When the Old People's Home in Budafok was opened, the average pension in Hungary was HUF 664 – even five years later, it was still only HUF 1,120, still below the amount the City Council required from prospective residents.⁶⁵ The justification given for this high figure was that the residents would have to pay service costs (not including lunch or electricity) of HUF 400 (later 600), so it was important to ensure that this would not place too heavy a burden on them.

Thus one sees that, with the Old People's Home in Budafok, the Kádár regime “responded to the needs of a well-defined group of pensioners who were in a particularly favourable financial situation. To the question concerning who the designers ultimately expected to move into the Old People's Home, Éva Spiró replied, “lonely elderly people who have a decent pension but no one to talk to”.⁶⁶

5.3 Advantages of the Old People's Home

A turn away from the question of need as a criterium also appeared in the discourse about the old people's home in the descriptions of the advantages and positive aspects of the institution. Arguments in support of the Old People's Home can be divided into two groups. One emphasized economic questions, probably not unconnected to the new economic mechanisms introduced by the Kádár regime; the other focused on psychological and lifestyle benefits.

At the core of the economic argument was the fact that the construction of old people's homes was in itself financially profitable for the state. This was true in part because the elderly citizens who moved into these new dwellings gave up their council flats, which had modern comforts and were usually larger than the apartments they were given in the new homes. This helped reduce the shortage of housing, and the state received a larger flat in return for a smaller one. Furthermore, according to calculations done at the time, it was cheaper to build an apartment in an old people's home than it was to build a small flat of the same size, so the costs of accommodating senior citizens in this type of housing

63 Ö. Dobos, *Nyugdíjasok Háza Budafokon* [The Old People's Home in Budafok], in: *Budapest 6* (1968) 8, p. 24.

64 Vándor, *Az első albérlők háza Kelenföldön*, 24; I. Szenes, *Nyugdíjasok háza – több és olcsóbb Lakás* [Old People's Home – More and Cheaper flats], in: *Népszava*, 28 February 1969, p. 3.

65 I. Baranyai and E. Eiler, *A nyugdíjasok számának és ellátásának alakulása* [Developments in the Number of Pensioners and Care Provided for Pensioners], in: *Statisztikai Szemle 47* (1969), p. 679; B. Barta, *A társadalmi szolgáltatások fejlődése* [Developments in Social Services], in: *Statisztikai Szemle 53* (1975), p. 693.

66 M. Várkonyi, *Tatabánya már jelentkezett* [Tatabánya Has Already Signed Up], in: *Népszava*, 19 September, 1969, p. 3.

were less burdensome than the costs of building new flats for them. This reasoning was further strengthened by the observation made a few years after the homes had been built, according to which, with the HUF 600 usage fees, the old people's homes were self-sustaining and did not require any support from the state.⁶⁷

As a logical continuation of this line of thought, a rather optimistic argument began to be put forward in many places according to which soon there would be a stratum of senior citizens with pensions so high that they would be able to cover the costs to the state of accommodation for the elderly. Indeed, some believed there was a realistic prospect that active wage-earners would independently solve the issue of their (own) housing when they retired. Thus, according to this (ultimately mistaken) reasoning, it would not be necessary for the state to undertake large-scale construction of flats for the elderly.⁶⁸

Along similar lines, there were some who recommended the construction of old people's homes in which the residents would purchase their own apartments (the buildings would thus resemble condominiums). These proposals also emphasized relieving the state of the financial burdens of providing housing for the elderly, and they also called attention to the possibility that citizens would have savings.⁶⁹ Some of those who focused on economic considerations also suggested turning over the task of construction the buildings to companies (these proposals met with at least some support, as one such home was built in Tatabánya, co-financed by the City Council and the coal mines).⁷⁰

The arguments that emphasized lifestyle benefits can be grouped around the oppositional pairing of individual-community versus care-independence.⁷¹ From this perspective, one of the primary advantages of old people's homes over social housing was the fact that the residents of the former could choose the degree of their involvement in social life. If they found the amount of interaction too burdensome, they could retire to their own apartments. This meant a kind of housing that would enable the elderly to preserve their former way of life to the greatest extent possible despite the newness of their surroundings and its community orientation.

This argument was further strengthened by the possibility of having guests and the reminder that "nothing is compulsory here", which appeared in various sources at the time. Naturally, the reverse argument was also used; the claim was also made that the Old People's Home was the best cure for loneliness since the floor plan and layout of the building "made the individual's isolation impossible", "most of the shared spaces [would] become living spaces", and "the apartments [could] be reached from a large communal room".⁷² Thus, residents would always have opportunities and (communal) spaces to chat and spend time with one another. In connection with this, it was also claimed that it would be easier for the elderly to keep in touch with younger generations and family

67 Szinai, *Korszerű lakásforma – korszerű életforma*, p. 4.

68 Zoltán, *Öt tudományág közös gondja*, p. 9.

69 J. Kovács, *A lakás* [The Apartment], in: *Magyar Nemzet*, 17 December 1967, p. 5.

70 Várkonyi, *Tatabánya már jelentkezett*, p. 3.

71 J. Gábor, *A szociálpolitika néhány kérdéséről* [On Some Socio-Political Issues], in: *Budapest 13* (1975) 7, p. 2.

72 Szamosi, *Öregek háza a Budafoki Kísérleti Lakótelepen*, pp. 15–16.

members, as the old people's homes were always built as integral parts of the housing estates, where many young people also lived.

Another (often mentioned) advantage of the Old People's Home was that it offered a high quality of life through the quantity, quality, and selection of available services. The interviews published in the press at the time suggested that the elderly would be willing to put up with intrusions on their independence if it meant relief from the burdens of housework, heating, cleaning, and even cooking.⁷³

It is thus hardly surprising, in light of these kinds of positive assessments, that the experiment with the Old People's Home was deemed a success by the state, and the construction of several such buildings was scheduled in the fourth five-year plan.⁷⁴ Thus, in 1976, the capital city council official responsible for socio-politics could boast about 600 rooms for OAPs, a massive leap from the 50 rooms available in 1968.⁷⁵ Not only the state but also pensioners considered the Old People's Home a success.⁷⁶ Immediately after the first press releases in 1968, more than 3,000 elderly citizens applied for just 50 places, and if we can believe reports in the press at the time, interest in the homes did not wane later on.⁷⁷

Naturally, some negative assessments were also voiced. Interestingly, these criticisms did not come from the outside – from gerontologists, sociologists, and architects – but were always formulated from the perspective of the pensioners themselves. One typical critical assessment touched on the question of maintaining one's former way of life. Naturally, the objects one has accumulated over a lifetime are closely connected to one's lifestyle. Furniture, an essential group of these kinds of objects, could not be taken to the furnished apartments in the Old People's Home. Many perceived this as a limitation on their independence since they would thus be left with no furniture if they decided to move out. Others complained that they had to sell the furniture they had accumulated at prices below their value.⁷⁸

Another group of complaints concerned the communal spaces that were so frequently mentioned in reports by journalists and architects. These spaces, it was contended, went largely unused and took up too much space; the private apartments should have been made larger instead. This feedback from pensioners is particularly interesting, as it constituted a criticism of the lifestyle associated with the old people's homes. Washing, cleaning, cooking, and other household chores were “socialized” to guide the individual's

73 Olvasói levél [Reader's letter], in: *Magyar Nemzet*, 3 December 1967; Pongrácz, *Házak – nyugdíjasoknak*.

74 Csorba, *Építési kísérletezések – kísérleti lakótelepek*, p. 37.

75 T. Csizmadia, *Jelentős fejlődés előtt az egészségügy* [Health Care on the Verge of a Major Development], in: *Budapest 14* (1976) 1, pp. 2–3.

76 A Budafoki nyugdíjas ház lakói (Levél a Szerkesztőségnek) [Residents of the Old People's Home in Budafok (Letter to the editor)], in: *Budapest 6* (1968) 10, p. 24; Olvasói levél [Reader's Letter], in: *Magyar Nemzet*, 3 December 1967.

77 D. Miklós, *Első lépések a korszerű gondozási formák felé. Beszélgetés a Lakóterv főmérnökével* [The First Steps to a Modern Form of Providing Care: In Discussion with the Senior Designer of Lakóterv], in: *Népszava*, 5 November 1967, p. 4; J. Ráthonyi, *Öreg-lak* [Old Home], in: *Magyarország*, 20 September 1970, p. 32.

78 Pongrácz, *Házak – nyugdíjasoknak*, 12, 14.

life towards the community. This incomprehension and insensitivity on the part of the citizenry to a communal vision was not unprecedented.⁷⁹ In any case, it is important to note that the individuals who were critical of these homes were precisely the people who were regarded as the main target group by the people who had designed the experiment.

6. Implementation of Global Knowledge in Socialist Circumstances

The Old People's Home constructed in Hungary can be usefully compared with the framework for the institution of the apartment home as discussed in detail by the ECE colloquium. The first two questions raised in the document concerned who would serve as the directors of these institutions and how much rent the residents would pay. The committee did not make any specific recommendations but rather examined international examples. The report established that, in most cases, these apartment homes were directed by some institution (e.g. the Socio-Political Department of the Capital City Council in Hungary). In connection with the rent, the report only stated that (and Hungarian practices were in line with international practices here) the amount of the rent to be paid was generally determined by the costs of maintenance, and only rarely would social considerations play a part in this type of housing intended for the elderly.⁸⁰ In contrast, specific recommendations were made concerning the size of the apartments and the amenities to be provided. Since the elderly tended to spend a lot of time at home (or at least this contention was made), the studio apartments had to be big, at least 15–25 m² each, and there could only be two floors in each building.⁸¹ Apartments in old people's homes in Hungary were constructed at around this size, thus conforming to the recommendation. The report also stressed the importance of heating (the elderly required a room temperature two or three degrees above the needs of the average population), lighting, the importance of fitted wardrobes, and household appliances that were easy to use.⁸² These expectations all appear to have been met in the case of the Hungarian buildings – the old people's homes in Budafok, Kelenföld, and Zugló were equipped with storage space that exceeded the average, larger windows, and kitchens meeting the needs of the elderly residents – and even exceeded the recommendations regarding the bathrooms. While the colloquium materials found it acceptable to equip these institutions with communal bathrooms on each floor, this option was not even considered in Hungary, where each apartment came with its own bathroom. The services offered by the Old People's Home also met all the international standards; catering, cleaning, ensuring

79 Az öregek lakásproblémáiról. Az EGB kollokviumának rövidített anyaga. VÁTI Dokumentációs Osztálya [On Issues Concerning Housing for the Elderly. Abridged version of the ECE Colloquium, VÁTI Department of Documentation], Budapest 1967, p. 53.

80 *Ibid.*, pp. 36–38, 40.

81 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

82 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

a live-in nurse, and the organization of community programmes were included in the services provided both abroad and in Hungary.⁸³

However, the question of how many such apartments should actually be included in the complexes and the precise locations of the buildings that were being constructed for the elderly were subjects of debate. With regard to size, economic considerations and the desire to create communal spaces collided (as usual). Apparently, the more apartments a building contained, the cheaper was the cost of construction, but when too many apartments were built, it was impossible for the residents to develop a meaningful sense of community. With its old people's homes containing 22 to 25 apartments, Hungary was among the countries building on smaller sites. The "record" was held by Switzerland and the USA, in which the comparable edifices had 150 apartments per building.⁸⁴

The issue of location consisted of two problem areas. First, it had to be decided whether the elderly residents should be accommodated separately, in a kind of colony or as part of a larger community. Second, it had to be determined whether the buildings should be close to the city centre and public transport hubs or situated in a more peaceful area distant from nodes of urban life.⁸⁵ In this respect, in the case of old people's homes Hungary followed the majority approach of Western European countries and built the apartment homes as parts of housing estates in areas with good transport links – although this was not the case for its nursing homes.

In summary, the old people's homes built in Hungary in the 1960s and 1970s met Western European standards with regard to the methods of maintenance, the amenities and services provided, and the approach to providing care. This is crucial in light of the frequency with which the literature at the time constantly emphasized – justifiably, as the statistical data indicate – the notions that Hungary was a step behind and the infrastructure for providing care for the elderly was inadequate.⁸⁶ And it is true even if we keep in mind the fact that the old people's homes in Hungary provided a comfortable old age for only a handful of wealthy senior citizens.

7. What Are Old People Like? The Elderly in the Discourse About the Old People's Home

Finally, the image of old people/the elderly in reports and discussions on old people's homes should be considered. As noted (above), both international recommendations and domestic architectural concepts gave priority to independence and the possibility for the elderly to continue living independently. To what extent, then, was this approach,

83 Ibid., pp. 51–54.

84 Ibid., pp. 58–59.

85 Ibid., p. 60.

86 Heinz, A szociális intézetek és gondozottaik helyzete; Malinszki, Szociális otthoni statisztikai felmérés és tanulmány; Illés, A nyugdíjasok foglalkoztatása 1970-ben; Az öregek helyzete és problémái. Statisztikai időszaki közlemények 249; Cseh-Szombathy et al. (eds.), Magyarország legöregebb lakói.

which shows a certain degree of respect for the elderly, also part of the discourse about the Old People's Home?

If one analyses the discourse on housing for the elderly, it is quite striking that, with only a few exceptions, the public discourse on the Old People's Home appeared mainly in daily and weekly papers. There were, of course, scholarly publications on questions that arose in connection with an ageing society, but the first sociological study focusing specifically on the housing conditions of the elderly was only published in 1985.⁸⁷ This may be due to the fact that the discourse on housing for the elderly was actually initiated by architects, just as it was architects who appeared in the press as experts on the issue.⁸⁸ As the experts, architects then invited representatives of other disciplines (demographics, sociology, gerontology, and economics) to analyse the issue together⁸⁹ – and it was noticeably always the architects who spoke about dealing with loneliness and building a community.⁹⁰ This observation is even more interesting, bearing in mind the fact that the position of architects as intellectuals since social engineers were gradually undermined from the 1960s, both in Hungary and the rest of Europe. From then on, voices complaining about the importance of technology and of profits over architectural thought grew increasingly strident.⁹¹ Naturally, alongside the “experts”, journalists, reporters, and article writers also shaped the picture that emerged of the Old People's Home. Much is revealed about the ways in which people thought about the elderly by the simple fact that pensioners themselves were hardly present in published texts on the issue – and when they were, they would typically appear as mere illustrations, snapshots, and definitely not as individuals who exerted influence on the discourse.⁹²

As discussed (above), according to the official stance, the two primary concerns of the elderly were to maintain their independence and to lead an independent life. This desire also appeared in the public discourse of non-professionals. Of course, the press also wrote about other needs attributed to old people, such as an alleged longing for a community. This need was expressed as the desire to be together with one's family members and to remain in contact with (other) elderly people. The desire among the elderly to belong to a community was always mentioned alongside the importance of providing opportunities for retreat and seclusion. At the same time, these conflicting desires – for community and for seclusion – were presented as problems to be solved by society, for which old people's homes offered a solution because of their location within estates where they offered both private and communal spaces.

Another element of the image of old people's needs was work. Naturally, the need for calm and health services came up as well, but work, engagement, and the feeling of

87 Ernst, *Az öregkorú népesség lakáshelyzete*, pp. 127–147.

88 Zoltán and Spiró, *Az öregek lakáshelyzete*, pp. 44–45.

89 Zoltán, *Öt tudományág közös gondja*, 9; Miklós, *Első lépések a korszerű gondozási formák felé*, p. 4.

90 G. Szabolcsi, *A XXII. Kerület*, p. 42; Fedor, *Felépül az első “öregek háza”*, p. 5; Várkonyi, *Tatabánya már jelentkezett*, p. 3; Varga, *Családi szálloda*, p. 4.

91 M. Keller, *Szocialista lakhatás [Socialist Housing]*, Budapest 2017.

92 Joós, *Eltartási szerződés helyett: öregotthon*, pp. 23–24.

usefulness were much more frequently mentioned. Work was rarely presented as a productive form of activity; it was cast more as a form of entertainment, a hobby, or sometimes simply spending time with grandchildren. In other words, the insistence on the importance of work had nothing to do with taking advantage of the possible experience or knowledge of the elderly. Rather, it was seen as a way of keeping them busy. The notion that they might actually perform some socially useful function was thus secondary. Overall, regarding the picture of the elderly that was painted in the discourse at the time, the predominant image was one of a lonely, sick old person in need of financial and moral support, afraid of being left alone, and not being able to look after him or herself. This image is best summarized by the words of László Zoltán, senior engineer of Lakóterv: “ageing people require institutional, complex social care just like children do”.⁹³

8. Conclusion

Socialist Hungary did not give a typically “socialist” answer to the problem of providing housing for the elderly, which arose when the problems of an ageing society collided with an ongoing housing crisis. From the outset, Hungarian authorities and professionals dealing with the issue turned to examples from abroad? in the search for solutions, and then adopted approaches that were surprisingly in line with international trends and recommendations.

The global – i.e. Western – strategies and solutions were used even when they were in clear contradiction with official socialist ideology, as illustrated by the fact that the Old People’s Home only provided accommodation for wealthy pensioners. The latter were treated as a priority by the state, while poorer old people with no real estate were relegated to nursing homes that were openly declared to be dysfunctional. In so doing, the state seems to have abandoned everything it had once proclaimed concerning the importance of eliminating financial disparities.

The discourse on housing for the elderly and the related actions is a global phenomenon. Globalization has several definitions, but some important aspects of the definitions appear in the process studied. First, at the end of the 1960s, a *global consciousness* emerged around the problem of how elderly people should live. This was a sense of things that could emerge despite the Iron Curtain and notwithstanding the differences between the two world systems.

Second, it is clear that at the end of the 1960s, there was an interaction among the industrialized countries about the problem being dealt with, which also led to an *integration* in this field – what transpired in Hungary may be the best example of this. Principles created jointly under the auspices of the United Nations were able to take hold in the Hungarian socialist environment, too. The homes for the elderly built in Hungary in the

1960s–1970s were not much different from their Swiss, British, and American counterparts. So, we can speak about a real global knowledge transfer.

Glocalisation as a phenomenon that is strongly related to globalization puts the interaction of the local, the regional, and the global at the centre of its understanding. It does not exactly hold that external cultural influences suppress local culture, but it also doubts that a community is capable of total isolation. It is the intersection and interaction of the global and the local that appears interesting and worth exploring. In this interpretation, local communities are not merely the sufferers of external global influences but active shapers of the responses to them and, thus, of globalization itself. If we examine the Old People's Home from this perspective one most important question that arises concerns why it was so easy to implement the globally elaborated principles in socialist Hungary. First, we should highlight that this cross-system thinking (which aided the implementation) was actually not so new in Hungarian politics in the 1960s. The Hungarian government had tried to create a new image of the Hungarian state for foreign countries since the World Exhibition in 1958 in Brussels. In this new image, communism and socialism came second; it was more important to position Hungary as an industrial and cultural state. The aim was to show that Hungary, through its history, culture, art, and science, was first and foremost a part of the modern world, and the ideological differences are important only after this commonality.⁹⁴

Another reason for the smooth implementation could be the optimistic mood that dominated the 1960s – in both East and West. The “Golden Age” in the West and the “awakening mood” in Hungary and the Eastern Block at the beginning of the decade offered fertile ground for projects aiming to raise living standards and increase the quality of life. A third reason may have been the international acceptance of modernization theory. Together with the theory of convergence, this supported the assumption that industrial societies have similar problems to which globally valid solutions can be found.⁹⁵ But glocalisation is not just about implementation; it is also about change. How different was the Hungarian way of thinking about ageing from the Western, globally valid one? The scholarly discourse on ageing and the elderly is often normative. It does not strive to determine and pass on specific facts and experiences but rather formulates expectations concerning how the elderly should think of the young and how society as a whole should consider the elderly. In this sense, these discourses are moral discourses.

If one takes the question of providing care for the elderly out of its national framework and examines what people thought of the elderly and how the image of the old was used in Europe at the time, an interesting light is cast on the situation in Hungary. In Western Europe after the Second World War, with the development of the pension insurance system and parallel with the growing number of those retiring, ideas about the elderly and old age changed considerably. The concept of leading an active old age came to be valued over the notion of a more reclusive, contemplative way of life. According to

94 G. Péteri, *Transsystemic Fantasies: Counterrevolutionary Hungary at Brussels Expo '58*. in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 47 (2012) 1, pp. 137–160.

95 W. Meyer, J. Boli-Bennett, and C. Chase-Dunn, *Convergence and Divergence in Development*, in: *Annual Review of Sociology* (1975) 1, pp. 223–246.

the view supported in the scientific research in gerontology, the secret to a happy, well-balanced old age is an active, productive, and socially useful lifestyle.⁹⁶ If one examines the discourse on the Old People's Home from this perspective, the differences are clearly visible. Although the notion that it is important to remain active and creative was certainly present in Hungary, it was hardly given the same emphasis as that given in the discourse in the "West". On the contrary, the image of the lonely, abandoned old person in need of support was much more prevalent.

According to the experts' reports, Hungary was unable to cope with the accumulating social problems and turned its eyes to the "West" but also fell behind the advanced industrial societies. It was a country that increasingly failed to solve the problems of the older generation. In the broader public discourse on housing for the elderly, however, the picture presented was of a prosperous, increasingly affluent socialist society looking westward and comparing itself favourably – or at least, not too unfavourably – it was a socialist society in which (also) an increasingly populous, affluent pensioner class was emerging. Thus, contrary to the discourse of experts, when Hungary looked abroad? in the 1960s and 1970s, it did not do so to determine how far behind it was but rather as a deliberate means of "catching up", and it was proud of what it had achieved. This tension between professional and lay communication at the time, often not consciously experienced, still shapes the image many people have of the Kádár system and subsequent regime change, and it partly determines their attitudes and expectations toward the social welfare system even today.