

*Baroness  
Sally Greengross &  
Helen Castle*

# ‘REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE DESIGNING FOR’

## AN INTERVIEW WITH BARONESS SALLY GREENGROSS OBE

**Baroness Sally Greengross** has a long and deep knowledge of issues surrounding ageing. Until 2000 she was Director General of Age Concern for 13 years, and also joint Chair of the Institute of Gerontology at King’s College London and Secretary General of Eurolink Age. She is now President/Chief Executive of the International Longevity Centre-UK (ILC-UK), an influential think-tank impacting policy on longevity, ageing and

population change. Since 2000, she has been a crossbench (independent) member of the House of Lords and she chairs five All-Party Parliamentary Groups: Dementia, Corporate Responsibility, Intergenerational Futures, Continence Care, and Ageing and Older People (Co-Chair). Here, the Editor of  $\Delta$ , **Helen Castle**, interviews her on shifting attitudes to ageing and the importance of designing for the older population.



Baroness Sally Greengross OBE, CEO of the International Longevity Centre-UK and a crossbench member of the House of Lords.

Sally Greengross first became involved with ageing over 35 years ago when in 1977 she was appointed an assistant director at Age Concern. Through her activities at Age Concern and now as CEO of the International Longevity Centre-UK and the ILC Global Alliance and as a member of the House of Lords in Parliament, she has become one of the most influential campaigners for the aged in the UK at a time of unprecedented demographic change: the generation that were born during the post-war spike in births are now at retirement age, and there is a strong awareness that in its wake there is to be an even wider bulge in the ageing population, with those born during the 1960s baby boom reaching their late 40s and early 50s.<sup>1</sup> One in six of people in England and Wales is now aged 65 and over; this is an increase of 900,000 just since 2001.<sup>2</sup> Greengross sums up the current situation as 'positive and scary'.



## Campaigning for Change

The 'scary' or pressing nature of demographic transformation has meant that ageing has risen up the political agenda to 'positive' effect. When Greengross joined Age Concern at the end of the 1970s it was a relatively small organisation; it was transformed by the innovative programmes she initiated such as the Employment Forum on Age and the provision of financial services for older people, but perhaps most significantly through her unrelenting pursuit of political awareness. Age Concern was the first organisation to get a parliamentary office, and Greengross spent 27 years lobbying for the aged and attending annual party conferences. (Sitting in the House of Commons' canteen together for this interview during conference season, her relief at no longer having to be on the political trail is palpable.)

Political advancement has led to age discrimination legislation in the UK becoming more wide ranging than in the US. Even though the US has had legislation against age discrimination in the workplace since the 1960s, the UK now has laws on equality that extend to goods and services, facilities and the built environment. These should be better integrated by the implementation of the forthcoming Care and Support Bill, which Greengross has supported by sitting on the bill's Joint Pre-Legislation Scrutiny Committee. The intention is that it should bring together existing legislation around people's wellbeing, needs and goals.<sup>3</sup> She emphasises the importance of integration in services for the elderly whose illnesses cannot be singled out or boxed. An older person may be suffering from multiple conditions at any one time, such as dementia, arthritis and a broken leg. Her loyalty to issues surrounding ageing also means that she often gets involved with less appealing but no less important causes. She chairs committees, across the House of Commons and the Lords, on Dementia and Continence Care. As she says, she is prepared to take up what others won't!

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PRP Architects, Pilgrim Gardens, Evington, Leicestershire, 2013  
top, centre and bottom: A recipient of the HAPPY Project Award for the Housing Design Awards 2012, this close-care housing, managed by the Pilgrim's Friends Society, provides 31 'state-of-the-art' assisted living apartments. Supporting those with dementia, it avoids internal corridors. The use of colonnades and external walkways offer connection to the garden, aiding orientation.



PRP Architects, Plan of Rooftop Garden, James Terry Court, Croydon, 2013  
above and top: Raised beds make plants viewable and reachable for wheelchair users  
and those who have difficulty bending.

## Age-Friendly Living

Greengross is an advocate of providing suitable housing for people in their later years: accommodation that caters appropriately for different stages in life. For this reason, she is sceptical that 'ageing in place' is always the solution. She regards isolation as one of the greatest enemies of old age. It is a condition that the UK shares with the US, where older people have built-in barriers and do not want to be a burden to their family and friends. This is very different from Southern Europe where there is a much stronger sense of familial obligation and the climate lends itself more to social interaction. To remain healthy, older people must want to get up in the morning. They can only do this by regularly meeting others and being engaged in cultural and physical activities. There is a need to overcome the stigma attached to providing the right housing with the option of care built in, so that people can enter their later years able to draw on on-site extra support, close care and nursing provision when and if they require it. To be effective, though, this type of accommodation has to be promoted as a positive lifestyle choice.

Age-friendly communities also need to be designed to cater fully for the needs of those with dementia. As there have been gains in life expectancy, there have not particularly been the same gains in healthy life expectancy.<sup>4</sup> People can live a long time with dementia, and providing housing and external spaces that fully accommodate their needs greatly enriches their quality of life. Simple considerations like the placement of a flowering window box or a view of an attractive outside space can greatly enhance day-to-day living. Those with dementia also have a tendency to wander, which needs to be catered for. In Australia, the use of circular walking routes were pioneered that enable occupants to wander in safety and return to where they started. In addition to specially designed paths, gardens can be further enhanced by sensory planting to evoke memories, and areas with shaded and sheltered seating also included in the design.<sup>5</sup>



[Isolation] is a condition that the UK shares with the US, where older people have built-in barriers and do not want to be a burden to their family and friends.

The rooftop garden of this nursing home is organised around a central circular walking route, which returns residents to the point from which they started.

### Sensory planting as advocated by PRP Architects

Plants for the landscaping of outside spaces can be chosen for their high colour or textural 'contrast' to aid those with poor vision. Strongly scented plants, such as lavender, also help to evoke memories and can be strategically placed along footpaths to release fragrance when residents pass.

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## Designing for the Whole Population

Providing for the elderly extends far beyond housing for the most vulnerable and into the wider built and urban environment, enabling active agers to get around and live independently. For example, cobbles are not suitable for those who are less stable on their feet, and pavements should be level and well maintained. Pavements and roads also need to be adapted so that crossings are timed to take into account slower rates of mobility. Buses need to bend over to let people in. Signage needs to consider impaired vision, and there needs to be better lighting for security and visibility.

Appropriate design in the urban environment is being spearheaded by the World Health Organization's Age-Friendly Cities and Communities programme, which through a consultation project with 33 cities in 22 countries has produced a checklist of age-friendly features.<sup>6</sup> This care in how the environment is designed is not a matter of catering to a minority group, but, as Greengross states, a matter of 'remembering who the population are'. What works for older people also often works for mums. For Greengross, Queen's Park in Northwest London, maintained by the City of London Corporation, is a prime example of a lively park that has become a magnet for all generations. There are a successful cafe, children's playground and sand pit, bandstand, pet's corner, pitch-and-putt course, pétanque, tennis courts and plenty of seating for older people.



In line with this, newly built public buildings and housing should be designed for the whole population rather than just the first-time buyer. There should be plenty of natural and artificial light internally for visibility, and switches and sockets should be reachable from wheelchairs. Cupboard doors also need to be positioned so as to be accessible for those who find it difficult to reach down and those with poorer eyesight. Stairs and doors should be wide enough for everyone as the whole of the population becomes broader and heavier. The impact of not fully considering people's needs can have a disastrous impact on individual lives. Greengross gives the example of the practice many years ago of enveloping terraces in Wales, which joined existing housing stock together to create housing for the elderly without effectively adapting it. The steep narrow staircases meant larger and less mobile occupants who had accommodation upstairs became imprisoned in their rooms.



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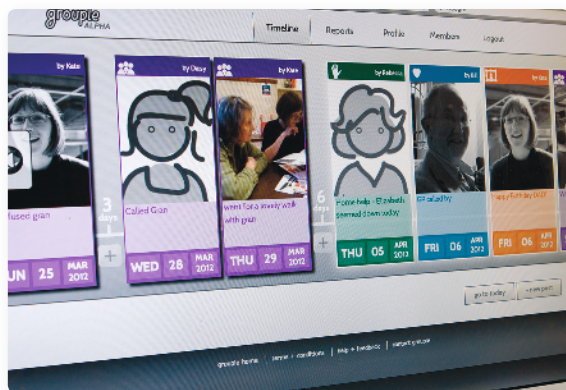
**Queen's Park, Northwest London**  
above and right: The 12-hectare (30-acre) park founded in 1887 provides green space and leisure facilities for all generations in one of the capital's most densely populated areas.

## Innovation as a Tool

Opportunities for design extend beyond physical space. Technology can be enormously beneficial for an ageing population, especially in the battle against social isolation. It can bring friends and family closer, regardless of distance. An elderly gentleman that Greengross knows, now in his early 90s, gets up every day at 6am for a swim and then returns home to have breakfast with his grandchildren over Skype. To appropriately apply new technologies and innovative thinking, designers need to be able to tap into professional expertise in healthcare and geriatric services. In August 2011, Greengross with the Design Council launched a 12-month national design challenge in partnership with the Department of Health, which brought together designers, innovators, service providers and health experts to create products and services as real initiatives for those with dementia. The five innovative solutions that were developed included: Buddiband, a wristband personal alarm that alerts support services when needed; Grouple and Trading Times, two online/social media services that helped to support carers; Dementia Dog, a service providing assistance dogs to people with dementia; and Ode, a fragrance-release system designed to stimulate appetite among people with dementia.<sup>7</sup>

Greengross's knowledge of designing for the older population is informed by the real needs of the ageing. It is gleaned through many years of working in the sector talking to those on the front line: support groups, carers and the vulnerable elderly. There is no single solution in terms of housing and the wider built environment. Designers, as she states, need to 'remember who they are designing for'. Design must be inclusive to cater for the needs of the whole population that is getting proportionately older, but it also needs to get cannier and more innovative in the way that it aids those who in the last years of their lives require specialist care in order that they may also live actively, comfortably and with dignity. ▽

*This article is based on an interview with Baroness Greengross at the House of Lords on 11 September 2013.*



## The Dementia Dog, assistance dog for the mind, one of five innovative solutions to help people with dementia live well, 2012

*below:* This overall initiative to develop innovative solutions with multidisciplinary teams was developed by the Design Council in partnership with the Department of Health. The Dementia Dog was brought together by a team from Dogs for the Disabled, Alzheimer Scotland and the Glasgow School of Art. The provision of an assistance dog counters the disruption of dementia by prompting its owner to stick to a consistent living routine, enabling the person suffering from dementia to eat, drink and sleep at set times.

## Notes

1. See 'Ageing, Longevity and Demographic Change: A Factpack of Statistics from the International Longevity Centre-UK, July 2013', p 3: <http://www.lic.org.uk/>.
2. *Ibid*, p 2.
3. At the time of writing in October 2013, the Care and Support Bill is being reviewed in the House of Lords.
4. 'Ageing, Longevity and Demographic Change', *op cit*, p 5.
5. 'Housing LIN Factsheet 35: Landscape Design for Dementia Care', written by Tom Delhanty, Associate Director at PRP Architects and published by the Housing Learning & Improvement Network, July 2013: [www.housinglin.org.uk/\\_library/Resources/Housing/Support\\_materials/Factsheets/HLIN\\_Factsheet35\\_Landscape.pdf](http://www.housinglin.org.uk/_library/Resources/Housing/Support_materials/Factsheets/HLIN_Factsheet35_Landscape.pdf).
6. For the World Health Organization's Age-Friendly Cities Checklist see: [www.who.int/ageing/publications/Age\\_friendly\\_cities\\_checklist.pdf](http://www.who.int/ageing/publications/Age_friendly_cities_checklist.pdf).
7. [www.designcouncil.org.uk/our-work/challenges/Health/Living-well-with-Dementia1/Solutions1/](http://www.designcouncil.org.uk/our-work/challenges/Health/Living-well-with-Dementia1/Solutions1/).



## Grouple, collaborative caring, one of five innovative solutions to help people with dementia live well, 2012

*left:* Also part of the Design Council initiative, this scheme highlights the potential of new technologies to enhance the lives of those with dementia and their carers. This secure, private online social network, developed by design consultancy Studiohead with the aid of a technologist, media artist and social innovator, helps people share the responsibilities of caring for someone with dementia.