



What is a sustainable retirement village? Perceptions of Australian developers



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ABSTRACT

Developers are key stakeholders in delivering sustainable retirement villages. Understanding the way they perceive sustainability is of great significance in shaping the provision of sustainable living environments in this industry. This study explores village developers' perceptions of a sustainable living environment through a comprehensive content analysis of their online descriptions of sustainability features of their villages. Thirty-nine sustainability features were identified, with the most mentioned being "care and services provision and accessibility", "social interaction", "secure/safe living" and "independent living". The social sustainability of the retirement village environment was highly valued by developers, with the majority of the sustainability features relating to this feature, while environmental sustainability was largely ignored. Although there is no significant difference between the private and not-for-profit village developers regarding the numbers of sustainability features mentioned, the private village developers value "social interaction" more while the not-for-profit village developers prioritize "independent living" and "care and services provision and accessibility" the most. The research leads to a better understanding of retirement village developers' perceptions on a sustainable living environment, which further reveals the meaning of sustainable retirement villages in Australia. All these will ultimately benefit the development of the Australian retirement village industry in general.

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1. Introduction

It has long been argued that sustainable development should be incorporated into community development in order to deliver livable environments (Roseland, 2000). Sustainability is a holistic concept that incorporates social, economic and environmental aspects (Hopwood et al., 2005). As specially designed communities for older people, incorporating sustainability principles into retirement village developments is one way of providing residents with quality living environments (Hu et al., 2015b). Affordability is a major economic sustainability consideration for older people, particularly as they desire an active life-style (social sustainability) in which opportunities for participation in activities and

establishing friendship are offered (Finn et al., 2011; Xia et al., 2015c). Environmental sustainability, such as using environment-friendly materials, energy and techniques in their construction and operation, is a consideration for construction and on-going operation and maintenance (Zuo et al., 2014).

Village developers are key decision makers in delivering sustainable retirement villages, as they are both the investors and final decision-makers of the project (Hu et al., 2015a). An increasing number of both private and not-for-profit village developers in Australia are providing sustainable retirement villages (Xia et al., 2015c; Zuo et al., 2014). Consequently, various sustainable practices are being incorporated into the site planning, unit design, provision of facilities and services, selection of construction materials and management of construction waste during village development and operation (Xia et al., 2015c; Zuo et al., 2014). Additionally, the retirement village industry is working closely with the Green Building Council of Australia to introduce a customized Green Star rating tool into the industry (Green Building Council of

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Australia, 2015).

Given the important role village developers play in the provision of sustainable retirement villages, their perceptions and understanding of the meaning a concept such as sustainable development has been shown to affect behaviors in practice (Vithessonthi, 2009). Thus village developers' perceptions of a sustainable living environment shapes the future of their retirement village, which further affects the life quality of the residents (Kennedy and Coates, 2008). Given the increasing development of village living and Australia's rapidly ageing population, this represents a large amount of investment (Property Council of Australia, 2014). Those that truly understand the unique requirements of older people and embrace the idea of sustainable development will be most able to provide a suitably sustainable living environment to residents in future.

However, no effort has been made to date to fully understand retirement village developers' perceptions of the meaning of sustainable living environments. The present study addresses this research gap based on a content analysis of village developers' retirement village business information. The way village developers describe and implement the sustainable features of their retirement villages (i.e. behavior in practice) reveals their underlying perceptions toward sustainable development. The study contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the meaning of a sustainable living environment in retirement villages from the perspective of the most important stakeholder (i.e. the village developers). This will facilitate other village stakeholders' understanding of the newly proposed concept of "sustainable retirement villages" in the retirement village market. All these efforts will eventually promote the delivery of an age-friendly living environment in the Australian retirement village industry, and provide positive implications for the development of sustainable communities for older Australians.

2. Literature review

The study focuses on the sustainability issue of retirement villages in Australia. This literature review leads to a better understanding of the most closely related topics, including sustainable communities and sustainable retirement villages. By depicting a clear picture of related topics, the theoretical background of this study is provided.

2.1. Sustainable communities

Local communities play a crucial role in shaping regional sustainable development strategies (Yuan et al., 2003) and the development of a sustainable living environment, "sustainable community", at the community level is increasingly popular (Roseland, 2000; Yuan et al., 2003). Sustainable community development integrates economic, environmental and social objectives to meet the economic needs of residents, enhance and protect the environment, and promote more humane local societies (Bridger and Luloff, 1999; Roseland, 2000). Its core aims include the design of a healthy environment for residents, promotion of a prosperous economy and enhancement of residents' social well-being (Power, 2004). A healthy environment involves minimal environmental impact, such as the protection of ecosystems, conservation of resources and prevention of pollution (Bridger and Luloff, 1999; Power, 2004). Sustainable communities coordinate economic factors (e.g., investment, employment and consumption) and other elements of communities (e.g., the natural environment and humanity issues) to promote economic prosperity (Power, 2004; Xia et al., 2016; Yuan et al., 2003). Regarding social well-being, sustainable communities create a social atmosphere of

respecting different cultures, traditions and background to ensure the residents' sense of community, security, social inclusion, etc. (Bridger and Luloff, 1999; Power, 2004; Yuan et al., 2003).

Policy is an important driver of the development of sustainable communities (Xia et al., 2016). In Australia, for instance, the implementation of the Sustainable Communities package provided \$120 million to improve livability in cities (Major Cities Unit, 2011). In addition, local governments, such as in Queensland (QLD) and New South Wales, have also proposed sustainable community related strategies to ensure people live in a suitable residential environment (Department of Housing and Public Works, 2016; Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2011). The development of sustainable communities suggests the need for suitable rating tools to evaluate sustainability and facilitate decision-making relating to community development. Three sustainable community rating tools have been suggested in Australia, (Green Star-Communities PILOT, EnviroDevelopment, and VicUrban Sustainability Charter), from which customers can choose based on their own requirements as they focus on different aspects of sustainability measurement (Xia et al., 2015a).

The unique requirements of older people need to be specially considered in community development (e.g., the natural and built environment, social systems, participation, health and safety) (Fitzgerald and Caro, 2014). Although sustainable communities involve people of all ages, older people are usually not specifically emphasized. Nevertheless, community development initiatives specifically designed to provide older people with a suitable living environment have been proposed, such as the age-friendly community, livable community and lifetime neighborhood (Bevan and Croucher, 2011; Kochera and Bright, 2006; Lui et al., 2009; Menec et al., 2011). Although these initiatives do not adopt the term "sustainable" directly and vary in their specific features or themes covered, they focus on the creation of a sustainable living environment for older people especially in their social and economic aspects (Lui et al., 2009). For instance, a livable community has affordable and appropriate housing, supportive community features and services and adequate mobility options to facilitate the independence of older people and their engagement in civic and social life (Kochera and Bright, 2006). There is also the appeal of connecting the older population to environmental sustainability to offer older adults an environmentally friendly living environment due to the impact of the environment on their health and their potential contribution to solving environmental problems (MaloneBeach and Zuo, 2013; Pillemer et al., 2010; Sykes and Pillemer, 2009; Wright and Lund, 2000). An environmentally friendly living environment should have features such as energy and resource efficiency, and a high quality indoor and outdoor environment (MaloneBeach and Zuo, 2013; Sykes and Pillemer, 2009). It is believed that an environmentally friendly living environment can benefit older people in several ways such as improving their health (Sugiyama and Thompson, 2007; Sykes and Pillemer, 2009; van Hoof et al., 2010).

2.2. Sustainable retirement villages

Retirement villages are a specific community specially designed for older people. The major characteristics of a retirement village include independent living, institutionalization and an age-friendly environment (Hu et al., 2017). In Australia, around 5.7% of the over 65 population lived in retirement villages in 2014, a penetration rate predicted to rise to 7.5% by 2025 (Property Council of Australia, 2014). The reasons that contribute to older people's relocation in this way include the provision of outdoor living areas, support in maintaining independence, assisted living facilities and access to medical facilities (Crisp et al., 2013b). Social participation is an

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