

Wishes for Furniture Design among Persons in the Third Age

Interviews with Users in their Homes

Oskar Jonsson* Lena Sperling**

**PhD Candidate*

Lund, Sweden, oskar.jonsson@design.lth.se

***Associate professor*

Lund, Sweden, lena.sperling@design.lth.se

Abstract: Designers' work sometimes originates from a simplified view of human demands and needs, which may result in furniture that does not fulfill the user requirements. If we consider old people as one group with fairly similar needs and demands rather than have realistic images of old people as a heterogeneous group there is a tendency that it will result in misguided efforts to design for wellbeing. The aim of the present study was to get understanding and insight in modern ageing and individual needs, wishes and aspirations for interiors and furniture, by thematic interviews of users in their homes. Eighteen persons aged 53-82 took part in the study. A thematic interview guide was used, covering themes such as comfort, pleasure, interaction and ideas of improvement of furniture and interior design. The results demonstrate that products perceived as comfortable, flexible and pleasurable leads to attachment and emotional experiences as dignity, meaningfulness and freedom. It is also the case that different kinds of relations to furniture and interior design are valued and prioritized differently depending on the situation and the individual's preferences.

Key words: *Furniture design, Interior design, Experience, Emotion, Ageing population*

1. Introduction

Sweden and other industrial countries stand in front of a demographic development that results in the fact that the group of old people, within the next decades, is becoming larger both in relation to the present size of the group and to other age groups. From 2020 there will be substantial increases in the number of old, especially among those over 85 years [1]. An international comparison shows that the pattern is the same in most Western countries. Many citizens go into the so called "third age" at the same time as the lifespan is expected to increase. The "third age" is an ageless and provisional concept articulated by Peter Laslett [2] in order to capture new lifestyles among old people. The "third age" refers to the period when people fully or partially leave the job market, career and the most demanding family obligations, but still live a life of relative independence of others' help and support. People in the "third age" constitute a growing market segment, and the characteristics of this market are changing. It is also the case that both purchasing power and consumption increase in connection with retirement [3]. A lot of persons in the "third age" feel the definition of old age needs to be expanded, not least of all because their experiences are an underestimated source for innovations. If we consider old people as one group and do not consider the fact that younger generations is continuously replacing older there is a tendency that it will result in misguided efforts to capture this new market. It is also the case that persons in the "third age"

find it difficult to find furniture that meets their present and future needs. To meet this growing market the project *Development of the Swedish Wood and Furniture Industry for Consumer Oriented and Competitive PLUS-products* [4] started. This study has been carried out within that project which is further on in this paper referred to as the PLUS-project. PLUS-products are a conceptual category of products attracting a wide range of different users and are functioning during an as long period of life as possible. Until now, the Swedish furniture industry has met customers from the public and private sector that bought furniture to different kinds of care housing. However their contact with today's old age end-users seems to be very limited. By involving persons that choose, pay and use their furniture themselves, it is the PLUS-project intention to create knowledge that is valid in a wide range of different circumstances. There is a gap between furniture designed for the care sector and mainstream furniture designed for the consumer market, where the user often is seen as healthy and well functioning. The gap are depending on the structure of the business and leads to too much focus on activities and usability in the care sector and too much focus on the surface, aesthetics and current trends and lifestyles in the home sector. There is a need to meet people in their homes with a perspective that they are experts on their personal everyday life.

Current research shows that the home is very important and has a great impact on the basis of different dimensions like self-determination, independence, safety, meaningfulness and freedom [5]. Findings also indicate that the home has a central place in the lives of very old people because this is where they live and spend so much time [6]. It is important to be conscious about patterns concerning how old people moves between homes change over time, not only between some persons in a "third age" that get into a "fourth age", which are characterized of dependency and decrepitude, but probably also between different generations of old people [7]. The aim of the present study was to get understanding and insight in needs, wishes and aspirations of persons in the "third age" concerning furniture and interior design. The results of the study were to be used in design of new or improved PLUS-products.

2. Method

The perspective of the study was that users are experts of their everyday lives and that their experience and knowledge are needed as a resource for design of PLUS-products. The ambition was to gain enriched knowledge about product experiences by meeting persons in their own homes, listen to their lived experiences, get an insight in their view and understand how they use furniture and interior design. As the author is a furniture maker and a furniture designer, his pre-understanding influenced the direction of the dialogue with the participants and also which results that was selected for presentation in this article. The advantage of situated interviews is that it gives a close connection to how people use and are affected by the environment. A situated interview was expected to give a deeper understanding of people's emotions, thoughts and wishes of furniture and interior design, than a written enquiry.

2.1. Participants

Table 1 presents selected socio-demographic characteristics of the 18 study participants. Six persons were living singly and were interviewed individually. Twelve were couples living together and were interviewed in pairs. Eight persons belonged to and the others were on their way into the "third age". The interviews were done in

Lund and Stockholm. Eight of the participants had recently moved from single-family houses to apartments specially developed to fit the needs of seniors by a Swedish company. They develop apartments for people over 55 years with their business idea to offer living in beautiful and functional homes as long as oneself wishes (Fig. 1). All the persons were well educated and had a good financial situation. The majority of the participants had recently participated in a survey or a focus group interview and shown interest in continuing to participate. The ambition with the recruitment was to get reflecting and interested persons.

Table 1. Selected socio-demographic and health characteristics of participants (n=18)

Variable	n (%)
Gender and age	
Female aged 55, 56, 58, 60, 64, 67, 69, 70, 71 and 79	10 (56 %)
Male aged 53, 59, 63, 66, 69, 75, 79 and 82	8 (44 %)
Occupation	
Working	8 (44 %)
Retired	8 (44 %)
Work part-time and partial pension	2 (11 %)
Marital status	
Married/common law	14 (78 %)
Widowed	3 (17 %)
Single	1 (6 %)
Place of birth	
Sweden	17 (94 %)
Iraq	1 (6 %)
Level of education	
Some/completed secondary school	6 (33 %)
Post-secondary or higher	12 (67 %)
Type of housing	
Apartment	7 (39 %)
Apartment specially developed to fit the needs of seniors	7 (39 %)
Single family house	4 (22 %)
Also has a country cottage	6 (33 %)
Self reported financial situation (Range 1-7*)	
Very good (Score 1)	12 (67 %)
Good (Score 2)	2 (11 %)
Rather good (Score 3)	4 (22 %)
Self reported health problems that has effect on interaction with furniture	
	8 (44 %)

*Lower score means better self reported financial situation



Figure 1. Two of the interviews were done in this house specially developed to fit the needs of people over 55 years

2.2. Interviews

In the situated interviews an open, thematic interview guide was used, covering themes such as comfort, pleasure, interaction and ideas of improvement of furniture and interiors. The interviews were audio recorded. The interview procedure started sitting in an appropriate place chosen by the participants. In this first part of the interview the participants were informed about the research project, the specific study and that the attention was on everyday situations. Some opening questions were asked:

1. Which room means most to you?
2. What are you specifically pleased about in your home?
3. Where do you prefer to sit in your home?
4. Do you experience any problem with furniture and interiors?
5. Do you have any wish for improved furniture and interior?

The interview continued with a go-along method c.f. [8]. According to how the persons answered two-three places in the home were selected that were considered central to look closer into and questions from an open thematic interview guide (Table 2) were asked in each of the chosen places. Consecutive questions that were asked were e.g: in what way, how do you mean, why don't you use certain things, what feelings do you want to give expressions for with this place. The interview guide was designed with the intention to elicit needs of usability aspects as well as product experiences. Photos of the interior were taken during the go-along. The go-along part was followed by sitting down again and the persons were asked two questions: (1) Which qualities would mean added value to furniture and interior design? (2) What kind of furniture would you buy if you got a check on 25 000 SEK (appr. 3 375 \$)? Ten photos of different easy chairs from companies cooperating in the PLUS-project were also shown and the persons were asked if they could consider having that particular furniture

in their home. Finally some questions were asked to get information about the participants. The interviews lasted between one to two hours. After the interview a sketch of the house plan was made by the researcher.

Table 2. Themes and questions for the go-along part of the interview.

Themes	Questions
Comfort and pleasure	Can you describe a good day in this room? Can you describe a bad day in this room? What do you feel in this room?
Interaction with furniture	How do you use furniture and home furnishings in this room? How does it come that the room is furnished in this way? Do you consider that some piece of furniture in this room has particularly positive qualities ? Do you consider that some piece of furniture in this room has particularly negative properties ? Do you experience any usability problems?
Ideas of improvements	How should the perfect interior in this room look like? Do you have any ideas of improvements of furniture and interior design in this room? Is there anything you want to do in this room that you can't do today?

In order to concentrate on the dialogue, no field notes were taken during the interview. The audio-recorded data were captured by means of a tape based approach [9]. This is slightly less time-consuming than a transcript-based strategy. The tape based approach relies on listening to a tape recording of each interview and then developing an abridged transcript of the relevant and useful portions of the interview. It is a condensed version of the interview with irrelevant conversation removed. Only a member of the research team with a thorough understanding of the purpose of the study can develop an abridged transcript [9].

3. Results

Not unexpectedly, the group of participants was very heterogeneous. Humans have dissimilar demands, experiences, preferences, dimensions and capabilities. Also houses have a variation of demands and shapes.

3.1. Result of the introductory interview

For the first part of the interview, the kitchen and the living room were chosen as the most appropriate place followed by the dining room. This was in agreement with the fact that the kitchen and the living room were regarded as the rooms that meant most to the persons, followed by the bedroom. When the participants was asked what he/she was especially pleased about in the home, two major aspects dominated: (1) Space and daylight and (2) Outdoor contact and view, each aspect commented on by more than half of the interviews. Other frequent aspects were: central location of housing, charm of the house and the fact others could not look in from the outside. Almost all answers about perceived pleasure in the home had to do with feelings of freedom and not being confined into one's home. In half of the interviews, the living room was regarded the most preferred place for

sitting, followed by the kitchen and the veranda. The reason for preferring these places were watching television, reading and eating. Other reasons mentioned were comfortable sitting, nearness to a table and a lamp, the daylight and the view from a window.

The questions about problems with and wishes for furniture and interior design lead to answers related to usability and affective experiences. Several participants thought that light and airy rooms with comfortable furniture are more important when you get older. Examples of answers were: "I would like to see the air right through the easy-chair, then everything feels nice and airy"; "As a matter of fact, new-built houses demand small and dainty furniture" and "You need handy and flexible things in a new-built apartment when you don't have so much space". One person mentioned that she did not feel as old as the security function of the oven indicated when it turned off the heat non-intendedly. Some persons suffered from a mix of styles in their home and ugly things like the TV set. Others missed outdoor contact or a balcony. Some felt that visual balance in the rooms is worth striving for. Wishes were expressed for tasteful details like handles and built-in solutions that make rooms look more open, spacious and practical. "We gladly pay for what gives us pleasure, we do not only buy something" thought the youngest interviewed couple, also pointing out that they were interested in design furniture. Among the oldest participants there were persons saying that they were careful with their money. Some persons would rather use money for aiding the third world than for private furniture.

3.2. Go-along part of the interview

This part included questions about what makes a good and a bad day in the home. Aspects like outdoor view and contact, daylight, breathing-space, being together with others, memories and having things to do were all experienced as positive and improving wellbeing. Among aspects that caused bad days were poor health, bad weather, boredom, feelings of being confined and malfunctioning things.

From the participants' comments during the go-along, we can draw a picture of modern ageing in Sweden. The interviews gave a picture of individuals with a strong desire to avoid losing their independence and a fear of being forced to move to a nursing home. Many persons said that they tried to avoid this by keeping healthy in all possible ways. Most of the participants seemed to be active persons. An apt choice of words was: "I am active and cannot sit still - I want to come up with a variety of things". A couple in their 80's (Fig 2) thought that they were occupied all the time: "You should know that we are out sailing in the summer and travel a lot. Major parts of our life take place outside our apartment". Participants had aspirations that their homes should express feelings of peace and quiet but also provide inspiration and motivation for coming up with a diversity of things. Several of the wishes for changes of the home interior had to do with improved possibilities for being together with others, like more space in general or improved furniture qualities such as dinner tables with easy extension. All participants had computers, internet access and a permanent, and in some cases impressive place for the computer (Fig. 3) and they appreciated the internet, which is supported by the fact that the retired Swedish population are in top in international studies of internet use and that 80 % of persons aged 45-65 uses internet in Sweden compared to 68 % in the US [10].



Figure 2. The photo shows a living-room of a couple who felt that they had succeeded in getting rid of things. This area was also used for morning gymnastics. The fireplace without smoke or smell was appreciated by the couple and gave warmth, coziness and memories.



A.



B.



C.

Figure 3. Examples of computer places in homes of persons in the “third age”. A. One of the wardrobes in the hall was used for home office supplies, B. The computer placed in a separate room that also was used as a guestroom and C. The work station placed on a computer furniture in a bedroom.

Many participants expressed that the interior should be suitable, comfortable and pleasurable for them here and now in a practical way. The experiences of getting rid of things, some of them old and inherited seem to give an

overall experience that makes quality more and current design trends less important, and some of the persons' wished that also the next generation should be delighted by their furniture. Furniture with history and charm was appreciated by the participants, as well as furniture associated with memories of the past. One person said: "The connection with an object is nice as long as you can keep it, it gives meaning. You are not just thrown into life without roots - interiors and furniture can help representing a link to the past."

When it comes to physical relations to furniture, the participants mentioned needs for breathing materials that could transport moisture and help keeping one's thermal comfort. The author also observed and several persons showed that they used cushions on their chair seats to make them more comfortable and not that cold and hard, a need that increases with age, according to the participants.

In the interviews a perfect interior in general was described as more coherent, modern, comfortable as well as lighter and airier. Stereotypical and conventional furniture was considered as boring while, on the other hand, funny form and small details could bring joy to users. Several persons thought that cords of telephones, computers and lights caused a lot of problems. Wishes were expressed for a secluded corner for the workplace as well as needs for adjustable and mobile light next to or integrated in the easy-chair. Some persons needed space for physical exercises or for home video games in front of the TV. One person commented that "It is important to keep one's things in order when you get older - everything must have its place when living in a small apartment". To facilitate activities in the kitchen, wishes were expressed for a smart and mobile stool for easier work in a semi-sitting posture, but also a kitchen sofa that makes it possible to rest and listen to the radio while cooking a meal. Almost all persons were in need of a chair or stool in the hall for sitting on when putting on one's shoes. Because of lack of space in the hall, some of the participants solved this problem by a wall-mounted folding chair.

3.3. Concluding questions

The last part of the interview started with questions about the participant's ideas of added values to furniture and interior design. The answers show a mix of usability and product experiences elicited by different kinds of interactions; instrumental, non-instrumental and non-physical [11]. For example such as: "An added value might be that a piece of furniture is comfortable and has functions and a shape that are nice and satisfying". Answers demonstrated that it is not enough with one improved quality - a combination of positive values co-act and reinforce each other. Many participants valued pieces of furniture with narratives, old as well as new, that gives a feeling, a relation and charm. Also different aspects of sustainability were highly valued: timeless appearance, functionality and beauty over time, non-breakable quality, adaptable and with possibilities for cleaning, maintenance, change and reuse.

The participant was further asked what furniture he/she would buy if he/she got a check of 25 000 SEK (appr. 3 335 USD). A fictitious furniture check was used in the interview. This question resulted in a great variety of furniture. Couches were mentioned in four interviews, followed by easy-chairs, beds and chairs. Other examples of furniture were different kinds of tables, kitchen table light, a rug and outdoor chairs. To bring the interview to a close, ten pictures of different furniture, from the PLUS-project companies, were shown to the participant (Fig.

4). The participants were asked if they could consider having that particular easy chair in their home. To get more specific data the answers were followed up with consecutive questions. The pictures and the questions were used to elicit reflections of the furniture in relation to their home. The most preferred easy chair was favored by six out of the eighteen persons. Examples of positive associations elicited by the most preferred easy chair were that it looked beautiful, lovely, not too modern, safe, comfortable and inviting. It had rounded, soft and nice armrest and a high back that looked suitable. Examples of negative associations with this easy chair were; didn't suit the interior, too conventional, space demanding as well as big and bulky.



Figure 4. Photos of easy chairs that were showed during the interview. The numbers refer to how many of the eighteen participants preferred that particularly easy chair in their home.

Some participants regarded that some pieces of furniture gave associations to an office, an institution or a nursing home and that they were not considered to suit a private home. Further negative aspects of furniture, mentioned by several persons were visual proportions between design elements and that some chairs looked difficult to get up from.

4. Discussion

The results show a variety of different needs, wishes and aspirations not only for usability aspects but also for product experiences in three components or levels: aesthetic experience, experience of meaning and emotional experience [11]. Common usability aspects that were needed and valued were comfortable, ergonomically, practical and sustainable furniture and interior designs that are easy and convenient to handle, move, clean and maintain. A comfortable home means a series of different things, comfort includes various factors such as efficiency, ease of use, recreation, wellbeing and intimacy and the participants used such aspects to describe both usability and experiences of the home. General positive aesthetic experiences expressed by the respondents are dainty, light and airy furniture and interior design that has visual balance and makes the rooms seems more

spacious. Warm, soft and rounded are some tactile experiences commented as positive. Interaction with furniture and interior designs that elicit positive experience of meaning can in general be characterized as reflecting the user's identity, creating a homelike feeling, and not being seen as typical for elderly or disabled. The results show that general emotional experiences worth striving for are attachment, inspiration and motivation, feelings of freedom, dignity, independence and spirits of togetherness.

When it come to user requirements on furniture and interior design it seems like all three kinds of interaction; instrumental, non-instrumental and non-physical [11], can be the most vital for eliciting desirable product experiences depending on circumstances and individuals. Therefore it is necessary to be conscious about the heterogeneity among the persons in the "third age" and the increasing complexity and variability among needs, wishes and aspirations. The results indicate that many of the persons in the "third age" do not identify themselves with elderly and they feel the definition of old age needs to be expanded. Knowledge about them and their experiences seems to be an underestimated source for innovations. A basic condition for a design work is a description of the intended target group. It is also vital to know what the products compete with. It might be things in other categories or services. The results show examples of that it can be journeys and tourism, products for health and wellbeing that manage to retain ones independence or charity like giving aid and distributing money to the poor. It also seems common that persons in the "third age" have several houses that they maintain into their later years.

Consideration has to be taken to the fact that the presented results are based on the experiences by eighteen persons that voluntarily participated in the study and welcomed a researcher in their home. The participants' were chosen to represent the intended target group of the PLUS-project. The researcher also has a certain pre-understanding of furniture design. It is difficult to say how much the participant's answers and comments were influenced by current fashions and trends. However, the context and proximity to everyday situations and living persons in homes made the researcher gain enriched knowledge and an insight in needs, wishes and aspirations among Swedish persons in the "third age". Focusing on the participants positive comments on qualities, a series of user requirements could be formulated for future PLUS-furniture and PLUS-interior design (Table 2).

Table 2. User requirements for PLUS-furniture and PLUS-interior design.

<i>Usability aspects</i>	<i>Aesthetic experiences</i>	<i>Experience of meaning</i>	<i>Emotional experience</i>
Comfortable	Dainty	Charming	Gives feeling and relation
Space saving	Light and airy	Unconventional	Intimacy
Flexible	Open	Suit the interior	Spirit of togetherness
Practical	Makes rooms more	Reflect users personality	Pleasurable
Reachable	spacious	Tells a history	Inspiring
Functioning over time	Coherent	Fun	Motivating
Easy to use	Beautiful over time	Peace and quiet	Connection with the past
Safe	Harmonious	Modern	Inviting
Healthy	Soft	Timeless appearance	Dignity
Sustainable			Meaningfulness

5. Conclusions

Results of the present study demonstrate that most of the old people want to stay in their home as long as possible, that the home is very important and that it has great impact on the basis of various personal dimensions: self-determination, independence, safety, meaningfulness and freedom. It is of vital importance to have insight and respect for the fact that the individual variation among individuals in different phases of the of the age process are as huge as in between individuals in other phases of the life.

This paper indicates that it is possible to get a better understanding of how product experiences can contribute to wellbeing, comfort and pleasure in homes. The used method with situated interviews in homes gave the participants a connection with time and place and elicited rich information and significant stories about everyday life. A study in an artificial laboratory environment would probably not elicit the same amount and validity of qualitative data. Pictures taken on interiors and pieces of furniture in their context contribute to give a deeper understanding and enriched empathy for the users. Results will hopefully lead to that the companies get clearer information of their target group. Results may also be of value for designers, because it can be used to facilitate their structured attempts to design for experience, that is, attempts to deliberately influence the experiential impact of new design. The study explicitly focuses on the end-user perspective. In the design process there are more views to consider and balance.

6. Acknowledgement

The PLUS-project is supported by VINNOVA (The Swedish Governmental Agency for Innovation Systems). External collaboration partners are researchers in Wood and Production Technology at the Department for Management and Engineering at Linköping University, the Swedish Federation of Wood and Furniture Industry (TMF) and seven Swedish furniture companies, Lammhults, Swedese, Nelo, Allinwood, Stolab, NC Nordic Care and OH Sjögren. The author also acknowledges all the participants.

7. References

- [1] Iwarsson, S (2008). *Utformning av olika boendemiljöer för äldre*. Uppdrag för Äldreboendedelegationen. SOU 2008:113, Bilage-del B.
- [2] Laslett, P (1991), *A Fresh Map of Life. The Emergence of the Third Age*. (pp. 140-158). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- [3] Daunfeldt, S-O., Gustafsson, N., Hortlund, P and Rosén, E. (2008), *Äldres konsumtionsmönster och preferenser, [Consumptions pattern and preferences among old consumers]* Stockholm, Sweden: The Swedish Retail Institute, No S118.
- [4] Vinnova (2008). *Development of the Swedish Wood and Furniture Industry for Consumer Oriented and Competitive PLUS-products*, Project number 2008-00453, Vinnova, Stockholm.
<http://www.vinnova.se/sv/misc/VINNOVA-projekt/Projekt---Listhuvud/Utveckling-av-svensk-tra--och-mobelindustri-for-anvandarinriktade-och-konkurrenskraftiga-PLUS-produk/> [Accessed 15 March 2010]
- [5] ENABLE-AGE (se <http://www.enableage.arb.lu.se>). [Accessed 15 March 2010]

- [6] Dahlin-Ivanoff, M., Haak A., Fänge A., Iwarsson S. (2007), The multiple meaning of home as experienced by very old Swedish people, *Scandinavian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 14:25-32.
- [7] Oswald, F. & Rowles, G. (2007). Beyond the relocation trauma in old age: New trends in elders' residential decisions. I: H-W. Wahl, C. Tesch-Römer & A. Hoff. *New dynamics in old age: Individual, environmental and societal perspectives*. (pp. 127–152). Amityville, NY, USA: Baywood Publishing Company, Inc.
- [8] Carpiano, R. M. (2009), Come take a walk with me: The “Go-Along” interview as a novel method for studying the implications of place for health and well-being, *Health & Place*, 15 (2009), 263-272
- [9] Krueger, R., Casey, M.A. (2000), *Focus Groups, 3rd edition, A practical guide for applied research*, Sage Publications, Inc., s. 131
- [10] World Internet Project Report (2009), Sweden in World Internet Project 2009, World Internet Institute, <http://www.worldinternetproject.net/> [Accessed 15 March 2010]
- [11] Desmet, P. M. A., & Hekkert, P. (2007). Framework of product experience. *International Journal of Design*, 1(1), 57-66.