



A UUM survey reveals that about 84 per cent of the 1,153 respondents would want to grow old in their own homes. — Bernama photos



File photo shows a senior citizen decorating her house for Chinese New Year. Experts say ageing in place is best for seniors' mental and physical health.

Nina Muslim

IT was just a day like any other when Assoc Prof Rahimah Ibrahim received a call from her mother telling her that her 77-year-old father had fallen and had to be hospitalised.

It was as if a switch had flipped. One day everything seemed normal and the next, the director of the Malaysian Research Institute on Ageing at Universiti Putra Malaysia and her siblings had to face the fact that their parents were becoming frailer.

With that, came several questions – can their parents still live on their own? Would living with one of their children be better for them instead?

How about sending them to a care centre? Can they continue to live at home when their house may not be friendly to their aches and pains?

Not once were her parents willing to entertain the idea of moving elsewhere, even to live with their adult children. Neither were they interested in moving to a new neighbourhood or development where things might be easier for them as they aged, from the design of the abode to the environment around them.

What Rahimah's parents wanted, and what research said would be healthier for them, was to age in place.

"I asked (mum): 'Please, let's move to another place'. She said, 'No, I have (friends among the neighbours) here. I built a relationship with (them) for 20 to 30 years,'" Rahimah told Bernama.

That left her and her siblings with the final question: since their parents wanted to remain at home, they would need some support. The first thing was to make their parents' house, which was built in the 1970s, as elderly-friendly as possible by incorporating universal design or barrier-free design in their renovations.

Like other Malaysians dealing with ageing, be it themselves or their children, they are now having to retrofit their home, one of the challenges of ageing in place.

Things like squatting or Asian toilets, as well as narrow stairs and hallways, are common characteristics of houses built before the turn of the century.

These aspects now pose a problem for the elderly as they grow less mobile and more prone to slips and falls.

'Ageing in place'

What is ageing in place? It is when people can grow old in the home and community they have spent much of their adult lives, with or without their children living with them.

Health organisations and ageing experts support the idea as staying independent and in their homes and their communities has many benefits, including having a positive impact on their mental and physical health.

According to the Department of Statistics (DoSM), Malaysia has hit the ageing nation milestone – where seven per cent of the population comprised people aged 65 and above – in 2021.

The next step is aged nation status, where the elderly will comprise 14 per cent of the population. The World Bank estimates that Malaysia will reach this point by 2044.

Experts: Ageing in place is best, but not enough being done



Khairul Azizi says it is found that residents within a 15km radius of the Boustead Properties' The Lines serviced apartments in Mutiara Damansara, as those in the 'very mature' group – meaning, many are middle-aged and senior citizens.



Cheah says considering the senior population in Malaysia is growing by the day, the government would be well-served to follow Singapore, which has implemented its action plan on ageing well.

Research done in Malaysia and elsewhere also found a common trend: people want to remain in their homes as much as possible.

A survey published in 2019 titled 'Growing old at own home: A study among pre-elderly adults in Peninsular Malaysia' by Shamzaeffa Samsudin of Universiti Utara Malaysia and her colleagues found that about 84 per cent of 1,153 respondents wanted to grow old in their own homes.

Few preferred to move into a retirement village or neighbourhood designed for the elderly.

Former chairman of the subcommittee on Retirement Villages and Aged Care with the Real Estate and Housing Development Association, James Tan, said the trend was evident worldwide.

"In Australia, last I checked, only seven per cent of their

senior citizens moved into a retirement village – seven per cent out of a mature Australian market," Tan, also the chief executive officer of Suntrack Development Sdn Bhd, told Bernama via a Zoom interview.

However, the wish to grow old at home likely remains unfulfilled for most of the elderly people in Malaysia. Unlike Australia, only about 30 per cent of Malaysian elderly folks are living on their own or with their spouse.

The rest are living with their children or in elderly care centres, according to the '2014 Fifth Malaysian Population Family Survey', which is published once a decade. The sixth report is expected this year.

Ageing experts said many elderly people ended up having to leave their homes and communities – either because of

the house or environment design not being conducive to ageing, or there was a lack of support services to provide them with the care that they needed.

Most of the elderly people in this situation required some care – just 'not a lot of care'.

"We are forcing people out of their homes because there are no services there to enable them to live independently, or to get services to where they are living," said Rahimah, adding that moving might still be on the cards for her parents if their care needs increased.

'Lack of action'

Even if Rahimah's parents had agreed to move as some elderly might want to downsize, there was no guarantee that they would be able to find or afford a place that fits their needs.

Despite the Ministry of Housing and Local Government's (KPKT) requirements for local councils and builders to employ universal design or barrier-free design in their projects, many buildings in Malaysia can still be hard to access for those with mobility issues, such as the elderly residents.

Over the years, the KPKT has sent circulars to several professional organisations and agencies, including those for architects, engineers and surveyors, reminding them to adhere to the Uniform Buildings By-Laws 1984 (UBBL) when planning new projects.

This is to make sure new developments are easily accessible to people with disabilities, which can include the elderly folks.

The ministry has also reminded them that local governments could make the UBBL a condition to approve



Rahimah talks about ageing in place during the interview in Kuala Lumpur.

building plans. However, the reality is much different.

Ageing experts say lack of action by authorities is one of the main challenges when it comes to ageing in Malaysia.

"Yes, they may have done some work but it is still on paper. It looks good on paper. When it comes to action or implementation, it is always very slow," said Cheah Tuck Wing, chairman of the Malaysian Coalition on Ageing.

While the federal and state governments have produced a game plan for the seniors, the Petaling Jaya City Council is the only one that has publicly released its plans for seniors living within its jurisdiction.

While it does not directly deal with ageing in place, it details the objectives to provide social support, financial advice, an accessible environment and infrastructure.

Bernama reached out to KPKT, a few city councils and professional bodies for comments, but was unable to get a response in time.

'Living spaces, from cradle to grave'

While some new buildings may lack universal design for multi-generational living, many developers are specifically incorporating aged nation considerations into their plans. In areas with high concentrations of seniors or soon-to-be seniors, developers are taking ageing in place into consideration.

For them, it is just a smart

business move to consider demographic changes.

Boustead Properties Bhd recently demolished the eCurve mall in Mutiara Damansara, Petaling Jaya, to make way for The Lines serviced apartments. The development offers 14 layouts suitable for people of varying ages and also adaptable for ageing in place.

Its chief executive officer Khairul Azizi Ismail told Bernama that market research found residents within a 15km radius of the property 'very mature' – meaning, a high number of them are middle-aged and senior citizens.

"We foresee they are also one of our target markets that we can approach. Whereby not only for new house buyers, the children but also for the parents and grandparents," he said.

"(The apartments) are ready to be turned into a senior living space, (such as) the switches are kept low and hallways are wider," piped in Mutasha Musa, head of design and planning at Mutiara Spaces, a subsidiary of Boustead Properties.

According to Boustead Properties, about 63 per cent of the estimated one million people within the 15km radius of the development are aged between 20 and 59, and nine per cent or about 100,000 are 65 years old and above.

"This means, moving forward, in five to 10 years coming, we are at least tapping into 30 per cent of the senior group," said Muhd Taufiq Jaapar, chief creative strategy officer at Boustead Properties.

Other developments centering universal design and multi-generational living include Tuai Timur by Suntrack Development in Setia Alam.

'Present reality'

There is no denying that ageing in place options are available for many retirees and seniors – if they could afford it. However, renovation costs may be prohibitive in the end, especially if the house involved is not very adaptable to ageing.

"(At my house), the doorways are not big, definitely not (big enough) for wheelchairs. There are no anti-slip floors, no railing here and there. It was never built for ageing in place.

"It's just a house," said Cheah. The 63-year-old said he and his wife might have to move to a more age-friendly place in the future, even though they preferred to age in place.

He added that while they could afford to move into a more senior-oriented dwelling, many did not have the same option.

"Considering the senior population is growing by the day, exacerbated by the falling birth rate, the government would be well-served to follow Singapore, which has implemented its action plan on ageing well.

"Singapore attained aged nation status in 2020, with the elderly comprising 16 per cent of its 5.6-million population, and is heading quickly to super-aged nation status, with at least 20 per cent of the population aged 65 and above.

"We are heading to that road already. We still have a little bit of gap to save ourselves so before that happens, learn quickly and implement those things," he said.

"Why are we always so reluctant to learn from Singapore? Maybe it's because of the history behind (our relations)," added Cheah, laughing. — Bernama



The environment surrounding the homes is also important for the elderly folks trying to age in place.