

## (Post-)Socialist Housing and Aging in Neoliberal Riga

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### Abstract

This article contends that envisioning the future of housing planning in post-socialist cities necessitates the acknowledgment of a pressing reality: Many societies are undergoing rapid aging and depopulation. Latvia’s capital city of Riga, the focal point of this study, stands at the forefront of these global trends. However, due to entrenched neoliberal practices that idealize youthful, robust, and entrepreneurial residents, considerations of aging are conspicuously absent from urban planning visions. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in the capital city between 2021 and 2023, this article establishes a link between urban lived experiences while aging and the intersecting dynamics of housing. The critical analysis is informed by data derived from observations, conversations, media sources, official discourses, and perspectives gathered through expert interviews. Ultimately, this article advances an agenda aimed at urging people to think about more hopeful futures for aging in cities, an issue of paramount significance in the post-socialist societies of the 21st century.

### Keywords

age-friendly cities; aging cities; Latvia; post-socialist societies; Riga; urban ethnography

## 1. Introduction

- Hello, how are you?
- Aija, darling, we are freezing!
- What is the matter?
- The central heating still has not been switched on in our building.

When I spoke on the phone with Anita (pseudonym), a 77-year-old resident of Riga, she was nestled under blankets in her bed on this late October evening in 2023. The acquisition of a spacious pre-war apartment

in the heart of Riga marked a pinnacle in her life during the 1990s. It symbolized her newfound sense of freedom: She was living well in the renewed independence of Latvia. Through a combination of privatization certificates and cash, she managed to make the purchase. The apartment had formerly served as a communal space for multiple families; it was dilapidated and even featured makeshift toilet facilities in some corners of the rooms. In the prime of her midlife, she undertook extensive renovations and lived contentedly for many years. However, the current situation was different; Anita felt the chill as the Riga municipality had yet to initiate central heating despite the dropping temperatures. One of the inhabitants of the large building had passed away back in 2017. Due to disputes among overseas relatives, the flat could not be sold, leading to a mounting debt for central heating. This debt burden affected all the other residents, as the municipality insisted that they collectively cover the deceased's arrears if they wished to maintain a warm household. Anita felt a sense of hopelessness, punctuated by fits of sneezing and coughing, contemplating the necessity to sell the spacious flat and relocate from Riga to sustain the quality of life she needed at this stage of her life.

Anita's situation is not unique. Many others have already departed. Hence, I set the atmosphere of an aging and depopulating city, a figure of the aging person, who could be imagined by the state as an ideal aging resident due to her resources and options, and the reality of housing for aging people. Riga is currently grappling with population decline; numerous individuals are struggling to meet the costs of heating and other utility bills, and they bear the brunt of others' debts, even though they have paid their own dues. Staircases and thresholds in both pre-war buildings and apartment blocks constructed during the Soviet era are becoming progressively challenging obstacles for elderly residents striving to maintain a good quality of life. This demographic trend is mirrored across Latvia, where the aging process is unfolding at a rapid pace.

Against this backdrop, I pose a critical question in this article: How do people envision the future of housing in Riga and its impact on aging well? With its diverse array of architectural heritage, ranging from opulent pre-Second-World-War buildings in the city center to more modest apartment houses and private properties in the outskirts, as well as densely packed Soviet-era apartment blocks in the suburbs (known as *mikrorajoni*), Riga presents a complex and multifaceted context for addressing this question.

The article unfolds as follows: Firstly, I present aging and housing trends in Riga. I further scrutinize the prevailing approaches to post-socialist cities and then delineate the diversity and inequalities within current housing in Riga, taking into account the realities of aging and depopulation. This analysis provides insight into the evolving nature of the city and its implications for so-called age-friendly urban environments. Subsequently, I delve into the theoretical and policy concept of an age-friendly city, keeping in mind that, in practice, official discourses have yet to fully embrace this notion in Latvia, and I unpack the reasons behind this. To progress and introduce a new perspective on the experience of aging within Riga's housing landscape, I draw on Imrie's (2021) extensive body of work, which astutely exposes how architects predominantly cater to able-bodied individuals. I provide a methodological note and justification for why I have chosen to set the atmosphere of aging and housing through a narrative approach and options considered by the key protagonist—a middle-class aging woman living in the city center. The aging body in this article presents a case of how architects and planners do not consider the aging population. This is complemented by data from various ethnographic sources, interwoven with Anita's reflections. In conclusion, I present key considerations for advancing more optimistic visions for aging in Riga and other post-socialist cities.

## 2. Riga: Diversity and Inequality of Housing

The following two sections will present discourses around Riga's and wider post-Soviet housing evolution, the influence of neoliberal management policies, and their resulting impact on the aging population. Riga has undergone significant transformation since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. This period witnessed the city grappling with the legacies of its Soviet past while simultaneously navigating the challenges and opportunities of transitioning to a market-oriented economy, which Latvia did in alignment with neoliberal principles, significantly shaping Riga's development. Neoliberal policies entailed privatization, deregulation, and reduced state intervention in economic affairs. This approach is evident in the urban development of Riga. The post-Soviet period in Riga witnessed a distinct shift in architectural styles and urban planning principles. While the rigid, utilitarian designs of Soviet-era architecture are gradually giving way to a more diverse and cosmopolitan architectural landscape in Riga, new buildings are not as prevalent. Riga's city center, especially, is characterized by early 20th-century architecture. There has been a resurgence of interest in Riga's rich historical architecture, particularly its well-preserved Art Nouveau heritage and Old Town. This renewed appreciation for architectural heritage aligns with global trends in urban development that emphasize the importance of preserving cultural legacies. Dense suburbs retain elements of Soviet architecture, but they also incorporate contemporary, international architectural trends. In the suburbs of Riga, certain approaches aim to improve public spaces for the benefit of local inhabitants. However, there are also approaches that tend to isolate new developments and their residents from the surrounding territory (Treija et al., 2018). Like many post-socialist cities, Riga grapples with challenges related to suburbanization, frequently experiencing traffic congestion due to commuters traveling to and from these suburban areas around the city (cf. Sýkora & Stanilov, 2014).

The median age of Latvia's inhabitants was 42.8 years in 2023. According to age distribution in Riga, some of the oldest populations currently reside in Āgenskalns, Bolderāja, Brasa, Dārziems, Dzirciems, and Ilģuciems (Apkaimes, 2023). In most areas, demographic aging will become even more pronounced in 10 years, as the currently middle-aged begin to experience aging. According to the Ministry of Economics (2022) and the Ministry of Welfare (2021), Riga has witnessed a decline of approximately 300,000 inhabitants since the 1990s. At its peak, Riga, along with its outskirts, boasted nearly a million inhabitants before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Presently, the population hovers around 600,000 (CSB, 2024). However, demographic projections do not paint an optimistic picture for the future. While immigration could potentially alter the demographics positively, policies and negative attitudes towards migration presently hinder such a shift.

Latvia has been undergoing a steady increase in the proportion of elderly individuals within its population. Currently, residents aged 45 and older comprise 46% of Riga's residents (CSB, 2024). Eurostat (2021) projections indicate that, by 2050, Latvia is anticipated to have a significantly higher percentage of individuals aged 65 and older, increasing from roughly 20% in 2021 to approximately 31% in 2050. Alongside the well-known challenges in healthcare and strains on pension systems, this demographic shift also presents significant challenges for urban dwellings. A dwindling urban population can have economic repercussions, including diminished tax revenues, reduced consumer spending, and slower economic growth. This, in turn, impacts local businesses and services. Emigration, especially among the young and skilled, has been a major contributor to depopulation in Latvia (Krišjāne et al., 2023). In 2023, the average pension in Latvia was €578 before tax (VSAA, 2024). Whilst the average pension has increased rather steeply in the past few years, as the article demonstrates below, pensions are usually not enough to rent a good quality or

new apartment, which could feature architectural qualities necessary for aging well. Before I turn to the proposed novel narrative on housing options and aging in a city, I want to scrutinize contextual discourses of post-socialist urban trends.

### 3. Aging in Post-Socialist Cities in Academic Discourse

Over the past three decades, researchers have increasingly turned their attention to post-socialist cities. Prevailing areas of investigation have centered around the social and spatial structures of cities and their transformation, closely followed by inquiries into urban planning and management, as well as trends in suburbanization (Kubeš, 2013). Persistent issues continue to define post-socialist cities, including the enduring legacies of central planning and land allocation (Borén & Gentile, 2007). The privatization of housing has been pivotal in reshaping the socio-economic landscape. As argued by Pichler-Milanovich (2001), a decade after the collapse of socialist systems in Central and Eastern Europe, instead of converging, the housing market indicated what he termed a “policy collapse.” This argument assumes even greater significance within the central focus of this article, which examines subjectivities and limited opportunities for aging well in a city. Frost (2018) contends that there is a pressing need to formulate a new conceptual framework for comprehending the diverse processes of urbanization in post-socialist cities. One aspect of this that begs for further research is aging in cities. However, there are a few examples (though, on Bulgaria, see Iossifova, 2020) where the glaring reality of rapid aging in post-socialist cities has been brought to academic attention. Iossifova (2020), a social researcher and an architect, is a welcome pioneer in demonstrating that Sofia, the Bulgarian capital, presents real and difficult challenges for individuals, the city, and the state in the context of rapid depopulation, old-age poverty, loneliness, and, importantly, architectural heritage from socialism, which does not meet the needs of an aging population. Taking a step towards the core theme of this article—the subjectivities of aging well and how housing relates to this—let us now turn our attention to a trend that has not yet permeated Riga’s official vision in 2023, but may do so soon: age-friendly cities.

### 4. Towards the Idea of the “Age-Friendly City”

The aspirations and needs of older individuals have emerged as a significant focal point for both social and public policy concerns globally. The policy discourse of “age-friendly cities” emphasizes that current research endeavors must grapple with the intricate dynamics of cities, which serve as complex arenas where commercial, social, and political interests intersect and sometimes conflict with the needs of aging people (Biggs et al., 2000; Buffel et al., 2012; Green, 2013; World Health Organization, 2002, 2007a, 2007b). In this context, city planning assumes a pivotal role in establishing a socio-spatial foundation that fosters age-friendly communities (Buffel et al., 2018). Additionally, the extant literature on age-friendly cities underscores the pivotal role of social participation and engagement in the success of interventions. Hence, subjectivities and the actual lived experience are valuable in this new discourse. The predominant focus in the literature revolves around person-centered approaches. As proposed by advocates of the idea of age-friendly cities, it is imperative that future research places greater emphasis on interventions that center on the environment and on formulating a comprehensive framework that integrates both person- and environment-centric approaches to healthy aging (Hong et al., 2023).

Notably, the concept of age-friendly cities within post-socialist contexts raises pertinent inquiries regarding how governmental bodies, municipalities, and other entities vested with power and decision-making authority

uphold principles of democracy and equity for all citizens, including the aging population. The inquiry extends to the challenges faced by city governments in translating rhetorical commitments to fairness into tangible reductions of injustices within the urban environment, as well as the resistance encountered in response to unjust processes and practices in everyday life. This underscores the intrinsic link between justice and democracy in the broadest sense (in the case of Newcastle, UK, see Bell & Davoudi, 2016). I propose to argue that we can begin to move towards a more felt and humanistic discussion of age-friendly visions by initially confronting the uncomfortable reality and subjectivities of aging people. Imrie's (2003, 2012, 2021) research has been at the forefront in demonstrating the idea that cities are built and planned according to a particular normative image of the body: fit, able-bodied, mobile, etc. His research turns on the fact that disability is often not "built into" the urban fabric. I want to raise comparable questions regarding the construction of apartment blocks, city environments, and everyday utility supplies, such as heating, considering that the occupants of Riga buildings will increasingly be aging, and that considerable numbers of them already are. I will now turn to subjectivities and expert discourses to elicit experiences and dominant views of aging, neoliberal and ableist realities of Riga's housing, and future imaginations.

## 5. Methodological Considerations

The data for this article emanate from my ethnographic research conducted in Latvia from 2021 to 2023, during which I immersed myself in the lives, conversations, and experiences of the people of Riga. The lived experience of aging in the city is valuable. A person who is aging and has experienced the city's changes for many years demonstrates subjectivities that make them an expert in lived experience and needs. As explained above, Riga as a city does not have a fully-fledged policy or vision for rapid aging, which is already underway in the city and across the whole country. In the contexts of aging and emigration, the dominant discourses are clearly neoliberal: People themselves must care for their future and should not rely much on state support.

The data presented in this article come from my ongoing research, titled "Returning Home? Making and Imagining Aging Futures," funded by the University of Eastern Finland. I began the research by immersing myself in Riga's atmosphere, conducting numerous conversations with aging residents, analyzing media discourses, and carrying out expert interviews with planners, developers, and experts on the built environment. I set the atmosphere through the narration and considerations of Anita. She can represent an ideal figure in neoliberal dominant discourses as she and her spouse are owners of a flat, and with their average pensions can support themselves. However, with increasing utility costs, they sometimes rely on extra support from their adult children abroad. Using a central figure in telling the story of a particular phenomenon is not a new approach in social sciences. However, it is novel in more traditionally oriented urban planning research. Methodological literature maintains that it is the judgment and choice of the researcher as to how the data are presented when pursuing the research question and setting the scene for qualitative research. A key narrative through one person is a valid academic and intellectual approach (Berger, 2013; Tracy, 2020; Young & Casey, 2019).

Employing a narrative approach (Levy & Hollan, 1998), I relay the visions and frustrations of Anita to paint a larger, yet intimately felt and challenging, tableau of aging in a post-socialist city. I align the narrative with the ethos in aging studies, which says that mature subjectivity matters to understanding lived experience and illuminating planning and policy from the challenges bottom-up (Moulaert & Biggs, 2012). Anita's reflections on housing options while aging are embedded in broader research by collecting evidence of

discourses and housing realities through media analysis and observations in the city. I analyzed media digitally, using the Lursoft database, and selected articles on various print and digital platforms (Belz & Baumbach, 2010). The key search words were “aging” and “housing.” I finally selected 48 articles, published over the past seven years, and analyzed the dominant narratives. These related to imaginations of housing dynamics and futures, rarely considering the reality of demographic aging, although they did reveal the prevailing atmosphere, for example in ideas of dilapidated (materially aging) housing and of price differences, showing the challenges people without neoliberal able bodies face in Riga face with housing (cf. Imrie 2021).

I paid attention to individuals’ lived experiences, engaged in interviews with planners, developers, and consultants addressing planning and social issues, and scrutinized prevailing discourses and documents. Nine expert interviews took place after I gathered evidence from lived experience and media discourses. I approached these interviews as problem-centered, asking interviewees to reflect on housing and aging futures in the broad contexts of current planning challenges (Döringer, 2021). To safeguard privacy, all names, including those of development companies or planners, have been anonymized. The perspectives of planners, consultants, and developers hold significant weight, and I aim to decipher whether, and to what extent, demographic aging and depopulation are factored in as pivotal processes that will shape Riga’s future.

In the remainder of the article, I will analyze Anita’s subjectivities in relation to housing in the center and in Soviet-style block houses. Along with these, I will analyze broader discourses related to the aging of Soviet-style houses. Further, the discussion will continue about widespread discourses and practices of incremental renovation and how it relates to aging. Next, subjectivities and discourses around newly built apartments will be considered. I will conclude with key findings of these and other relevant options for aging well, including the looming challenge of social housing in Riga.

## 6. Subjectivities: Imagining Aging Well in Riga’s Housing

This section discusses three options the main participants of this study mentioned in relation to aging and housing: staying in the center, living in a Soviet block house, or moving to a suburb. It is within the area of Art Nouveau and other early 20th-century buildings that Anita has resided for over 30 years. She desires to remain in the center, where she is most familiar with the surroundings, and where she regularly attends cultural events. However, the center exhibits various challenges. “It is becoming a dead zone,” one of the developers said in the interview. What he meant was that stringent regulations on who and how can build and renovate in the city center, make it very difficult to build modern and affordable housing. “The regulations stipulate that large 20th-century apartments are protected and cannot be divided,” the developer continued, echoing persistent bureaucratic challenges noted in urban planning literature (Borén & Gentile, 2007). Therefore, the center’s renovated buildings are usually not affordable for aging people. With “dead zone” the developer meant several buildings in very central locations, that remain empty due to unsolved issues of ownership. Furthermore, the last financial crisis and depopulation trends have negatively affected retail businesses in the center. Anita regularly encounters these challenges in her life in Riga. She feels these changes along with her age, saying that she feels increasingly isolated in the center due to the diminishing availability of diverse services and shops. She misses her children and grandchildren, who reside abroad and assist in paying her high utility bills, which nearly doubled in 2022 due to energy price hikes.

Moving to a more distant Soviet-style *mikrorajon* is not a viable option for Anita. She lived in one during the Soviet era, and they evoke memories of that time that were not the happiest. “I recently visited a flat where we lived during the Soviet times. The ceiling was so low, I had already forgotten how it feels,” she emphasized the difference between such housing and her current flat in the center. A friend of Anita sold her flat in the center years ago and moved into a *khrushchevka* in a suburb. Her friend was initially satisfied because she saved a lot of money from the deal, but, most importantly, she valued the better quality of life. The center was too loud, dusty, and lacked green space. Anita acknowledged these qualities in several conversations but still could not imagine herself moving into a *khrushchevka*. “There are way too many problems with leaking pipes, and non-paying neighbours, which increases your bills,” Anita said, emphasizing the negative side of such housing.

When it comes to Soviet-style housing, it is, of course, more affordable. Among the Soviet-style blocks, the most expensive housing was in the 119th (typically five to nine floors) and 104th (12 floors) series of concrete buildings, where around 45 m<sup>2</sup> flats in satisfactory condition cost around €55,000–€60,000 in 2022. The cheapest flats were in the so-called *khrushchevka*, budget-type functional housing built during the era of the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev in the early 1960s. Slightly smaller floor space flats to be renovated there cost around €30,000–€45,000. Flats are still being sold even in houses which are 70% or more depreciated; a typical price for a square meter is €520 in such properties (Riekstiņa, 2023). This is relatively cheap compared to average prices across the various types of property in Riga, where housing prices can vary widely depending on factors such as location, size, condition, and amenities. In central districts like the Old Town and City Center, prices tend to be higher compared to outlying areas. As of 2021, the price per square meter in suburban areas could be around €1,500 to €2,500 per square meter. Anita would see living in such a building as a failure of all she achieved in independent Latvia. There is also an element of pride, as everywhere in the capitalist world, with your address in the prime spot in the center having symbolic value, even if the actual living conditions and heating disruptions make everyday life unpleasant.

Suburbanisation trends are strong in Riga and other post-socialist cities (Krišjāne & Bērziņš, 2012; Kubeš, 2013). However, aging subjectivities and needs are rarely considered in motivations to move to these areas. Anita does not consider moving to a suburban area a viable option. She does not drive and does not have a community there. In terms of an aging population, the challenges of the suburbanization have received scant consideration thus far and are seldom regarded as a significant planning concern for the impending demographic shift. While the prevailing discourse in literature (e.g., Krišjāne & Bērziņš, 2012) and my expert interviews often portrayed suburban dwellers as young, middle-class families, their connections to aging parents and their preferences (or lack thereof) for a multigenerational living are pertinent on spatial, social, and personal levels. Similarly, the provision of accessible healthcare and diverse social activities for the aging population has been largely overlooked in the imagination of urban planners and needs to be illuminated in future research.

## 7. Housing Ages Too: Focus on (Post-)Soviet Housing

Riga has to contend with more than just demographic aging; its housing stock is also rapidly aging. Therefore, this section makes a link between wider neoliberal ideas of self-sufficiency and the individualized choices and realities of the post-Soviet housing. According to some controversial viewpoints, put forth by the

developers of new housing I interviewed, approximately 30% of houses in Riga requires demolition. I encountered these ideas from investors during my research in Riga through interviews, media and document analysis. For instance, as part of a recent study, the Ministry of Economics (2022) commissioned an assessment of the stability of so-called series 467 houses (nine stories high, constructed in the 1970s and 1980s) primarily located in the suburbs of Ķengarags and Purvciems, both of which have relatively high proportions of aging people (Apkaimēs, 2023). These houses typically feature vertical terraces, originally intended for drying laundry, which enhanced both everyday comfort and the architectural style of the houses. However, due to a lack of maintenance since their construction, these features have either collapsed or been removed (Gabre, 2020).

The assessment of this series of Soviet blockhouses, along with others, led to the conclusion that approximately 30% of housing is either at or past its expiration date (Ministry of Economics, 2022). “This is a significant emotional strain for inhabitants,” an expert I interviewed said. It can be an additional negative factor for many who are also aging. Poor insulation can increase mold, pipelines are aging, and cracks in the walls can instill ontological insecurity. The expert linked such conditions to a form of “slow violence” (Nixon, 2011) with residents aware they are living in substandard buildings but lacking the capacity and resources to change the situation (Davies, 2022). A more brutal approach, suggested by investors, would be akin to what Moscow has already undertaken. In Moscow, hundreds of five-story residential buildings from a specific series of Soviet time houses were demolished in the 2010s. These houses were built between 1959 and 1962 and were deemed too unstable for renovation (Gunko et al., 2018). Whilst these practices and the discourses around potential expiration dates of Soviet housing are not directly linked to aging, they can give rise to effects that some less-able bodies and their livelihoods are not fit for the current neoliberal ethos of city life. Furthermore, these practices about built environment resemble divisive discourses about “Homo Sovieticus,” unreflectively applied to the older generation (cf. Tyszka, 2009). Anita too linked block house suburbs to memories of Soviet times’ sociality.

One expert I interviewed said that a better approach would be to improve the environment as much as possible. However, some challenges would still remain, especially in relation to the lack of accessibility for people with reduced mobility (cf. Imrie, 2021). These kinder ideas echo the beliefs of Gunārs Asaris, the charismatic chief city architect of Riga during the Soviet period. He attempted to implement some elements of European capitalism, negotiating with construction companies to strategically plan developments to benefit city planning rather than haphazardly constructing concrete houses around factories (Adamaite, 2023). Most importantly, he believed that Riga’s planners today “must be cautious and wise, avoiding the destruction of houses” (Lūsiņa, 2020, p. 3). He was adamant that “Riga does not have buildings that should be fully eliminated” (Lūsiņa, 2020, p. 3). Asaris was convinced that we “should not tear the pages out of [Riga’s architectural] history” (Lūsiņa, 2020, p. 3). The more optimistic vision of careful renovation may be slow and potentially costly, but it could be more suitable for an aging Riga. “These flats are considerably more affordable, and certain series provide functionalities that aging individuals require, particularly those on the ground floor,” an expert on housing development told me in the interview. He maintained that the move toward destruction is largely political and dictated by the desires of investors. While they provide efficient new housing and (almost) universally accessible design, their clientele consists of those who can afford to take out loans—a luxury that most aging people cannot afford.



The somewhat pitiful view of the Soviet-style suburbs is deeply ingrained in Riga today. In a media interview, Pēteris Ratas, the newly appointed chief architect of Riga in 2023, stated that *mikrorajoni* is a painful question. According to him, the environment in these suburbs, where half of the city dwellers live, is poor, unsupported, and noattractive (Jance, 2023). He linked these problems to the Soviet past, saying that the Soviet “mentality” created helpless indifference and irresponsibility for the common property. However, the reality is more complex; it is equally detrimental that current management systems from the city council and utility and central heating systems oppress human agency, as in Anita’s case. Placing the responsibility on individuals’ shoulders is the most typical neoliberal blame, which decreases the quality of everyday life in Riga. Coupled with bureaucracy, the strain on aging people should not be underestimated. However, the chief architect did express the vision that the city council needs to “humanize” the environment in these suburbs, improving accessibility, cultural life, and green spaces. “It is a complex question and will not be solved in a year or two,” Ratas realistically warned. One of the neoliberal hurdles, compared to, for instance, East Germany, which has significantly increased the quality of life in such suburbs, is that the city owns very small land plots in these territories; hence, its leverage is severely limited. Therefore, the city aims to empower neighborhood communities (*apkaimes* in Latvian), hoping that activists in neighborhoods will take on the task of improvement “bottom-up”—a discourse I repeatedly heard from several planners and decision-makers I interviewed during the research. Ratas was equally concerned about Riga city center, which is losing inhabitants, services, and liveliness. The solution, in his vision, is the regeneration of the center—not new buildings but new energy, created by human creativity.

As noted, most sales happen in Soviet-style block houses due to affordability. But even if aging people buy a flat there (or their relatives buy one for them), these houses are usually energy inefficient and maintenance costs are significantly higher than in newly built apartments. Apart from this, several types of Soviet-era houses will soon reach their expiration dates, which can increase anxiety for residents. The result is that poorer people, who can afford these flats, pay a higher price in the long run due to utility bills and the uncertain futures of these buildings. Let us now explore where the thinking (or lack thereof) about aging happens in the newly built projects.

## 8. Incremental Renovation and New Apartments

The more hopeful and environmentally friendly approach would be to find ways to renovate and improve the existing buildings in Riga. Incremental renovation is a widespread practice in Riga, but it comes with many challenges for aging people. While renovating existing and deteriorating housing is crucial to improve the quality of life for urban residents, the lack of an overall philosophy and foresight can make it expensive and inefficient as life circumstances change. People usually undertake renovations when they are still strong and able-bodied (Imrie, 2003). As I observed in the suburb of Pārdaugava, where I conversed with families and aging people, renovations rarely consider the needs of soon-to-be-old bodies. Hence, vernacular architectures, especially in private housing and flats, often tend to overlook the fact that thresholds and staircases can soon become burdens as the body ages. However, the most important improvements must be made in common areas with common staircases, door sizes, and elevators in blockhouses. Studies have shown the significance of the residents’ social status and the availability of state support, as exemplified in a recent analysis of housing renovation in Budapest and Vilnius (Szabó & Burneika, 2020). The reality in Riga is that renovated flats become affordable only for the economically wealthy minority. In 2023, the sales price can go up to €5,000 in renovated houses in the center, those which were built in the early 20th century.

Inflation reached 20.3% in 2022, while the price increase for construction jumped by 17.6%, compared to a year earlier (CSB, 2024). All these considerations make housing improvements or changing flats for better aging hardly possible for most of Riga's seniors.

Anita was considering a move to the suburb of Āgenskalns, which is relatively close to the city center, offers a green environment, and has some relatively affordable newly built apartments. If she sold her flat in the center, she could afford one with a relatively large floor space and still save money. Besides, her children would be willing to help. According to civil law (Republic of Latvia, 2023, Clause 188), in Latvia, children are obligated to take care of their parents, and this is culturally expected. This aligns with neoliberal thinking, where the responsibility is placed on the shoulders of the residents. While Anita is rather well-off with her property and her children's support, she is still in the minority compared to most aging people and their relatives, for whom a flat in a new house is out of reach. In 2022, new flats in Riga were sold for €1,600 per square meter in the economy class, with the more exclusive class selling for €3,200 and more. According to regulations, all new flats must meet energy efficiency standards; ever-increasing strict regulations stipulate AA+ energy standards for new houses. These standards lead to significant differences in energy bills. In the coldest months of 2022, Anita paid close to €900 per month for all utilities and heating her flat in the center of the city. A three-bedroom, approximately 55-m<sup>2</sup> new apartment would have heating costs three times cheaper per month. However, this is only the case if she or her children do not take a loan. With Euribor at a high, bank payments for such a flat reached €900 per month in 2023.

The investors and developers I interviewed did not have any specific vision related to aging people. Their sales pitch targeted "young families with children and professionals aged 25–40 years, who are the most active in taking loans," as a developer of a large company said. Some developers did express concerns that, in 10 years, the situation would change rapidly demographically. It was only after I repeated a question expressing interest in how aging and depopulation processes are factored into city planning that one investor said that the new apartments are suitable for all. They have a small but efficient floor space, and Scandinavian investors aim for universal design with easy access, small spaces for storage, and outdoor access via balconies and inner yards. Typically, the economy-class flats built by Nordic and Scandinavian developers are smaller but more functional. To some extent, they are better and more modern versions of the Khrushchev-era functional flats. However, they contrast with post-Soviet era flats, built in the 1990s–2000s, where a three-room apartment was typically 75–80 m<sup>2</sup>. Currently, new apartments with three rooms are 50–55 m<sup>2</sup>, with a bedroom of approximately 10–12 m<sup>2</sup>, fulfilling the main function without wasting any floor space. In contrast to Soviet-era small bedrooms, which did not have ventilation other than a window, the new flats have obligatory recuperation systems, stipulated by the law for new houses. Elevators are obligatory according to current legislation if buildings are higher than five floors. Developers are now adding elevators to houses with four floors as an additional bonus to demonstrate their commitment to accessibility. This is promising, as universal design tends to consider equitable access spatially (Imrie, 2012; Imrie & Hall, 2003). However, due to an ageist bias, conscious or not, and the reality that most seniors are not economically well-off, the commercial discourse excludes older people as a desirable demographic group for these apartments. In addition, while the commercial discourse emphasizes the efficiency of small spaces and friendliness to the climate, it ignores and even dismisses the quest for aesthetic appeal.

Aesthetic appeal is crucial to Anita. She lived most of her life in unitary Soviet-style housing. Independence, in her vision, gave her the power of individuality. Her vision aligns with many existing clients whom new housing

development investors meet. People want bigger balconies and fancier architecture, but developers insist that they need to balance this question according to purchasing power and the “profitability test” (Swedbank, 2023). More balconies and beauty add to the costs of standard production. People expect beautiful entry staircases and individual touches to their kitchens, but economy flats come with standardized kitchens with little room for individuality. Another important issue is acoustics. Buyers often request better sound isolation to block out noises from neighbors’ flats and staircases. Extra sound isolation is costly and may not seem justified from the point of view of a builder, who wants to provide economical flats for the typical customer.

There is another crucial issue that makes Anita’s choice of moving difficult. Rīgas Siltums—the central provider of heating in Riga—has a privileged right to provide services in Riga. If there is Rīgas Siltums infrastructure in the land plot on which a new apartment house is built, the developer has no choice but to connect to the main provider for individual heating. While it can be the best choice in terms of environmentally friendly energy—Rīgas Siltums uses wood pellets and other renewable resources—an individual person, in reality, is not motivated to have climate-friendly solutions if they suffer from cold because Rīgas Siltums refuses to heat the whole house due to debts of one or several tenants.

In sum, new commercial flats in Riga are seldom affordable to aging individuals. In terms of social responsibility, lonely and poor seniors and people with severe disabilities, whose incomes are very low, can have a discount on their utility payments from 50 to 90%.

## 9. Conclusion: Towards an Age-Friendlier Riga?

In this article, I propose a novel way to address an inevitable reality: Riga’s population is rapidly aging and the city is depopulating. I argue that post-socialist cities like Riga must be analyzed with a focus on both demographic aging and the aging of available housing. Furthermore, I suggest examining these challenges through the ethnographic and narrative approaches in order to understand what it means to age well in Riga’s built environment today. I do so by sharing the story and considerations of one research participant, a woman who can be considered middle-class and who owns a large apartment in the historical center of Riga. Like many people (although not everyone) this woman, Anita, can rely on support from her children, who live abroad.

The center of Riga, where Anita resides, is becoming an unattractive zone. It lacks green spaces, has high carbon emissions, and flats are very challenging to renovate according to today’s ideals of comfortable living. For developers, developing housing in the suburbs is easier, as the center is restricted by numerous regulations. These factors, combined with the neoliberal ethos that emphasizes individual responsibility rather than the role of municipalities or the state, present real challenges for creating an age-friendly environment. Drawing on the scholarship of Imrie (2003, 2012; see also Imrie & Hall, 2003), I demonstrated that all segments of housing in Riga represent a complex history showing how Soviet, post-Soviet, and contemporary architecture envision able, mobile, and essentially young bodies. The only design that comes closer to inclusivity for an aging society in Riga is the universal design, currently provided by Nordic investors. However, this design overlooks aging individuals and does not acknowledge the historically nuanced quest for aesthetic qualities and the ability to express one’s individualism.

In neoliberal states like Latvia, individuals rely heavily on vernacular renovation and their own decisions to satisfy the desire for a better life and a more aesthetically pleasing living environment. This can be achieved

incrementally even with a limited budget, as it is the very common practice across all segments of the apartment market in Riga and in private houses. However, while these efforts have good intentions, without comprehensive discussion and education within society on what constitutes good housing throughout the entire lifespan, an unwise renovation can lead to an uninhabitable space in older age.

Regarding tactical solutions in Riga, one potential approach would be to incentivize flat swaps, although here persistent bureaucratic challenges need to be taken into account (Borén & Gentile, 2007). People could be encouraged to offer options for aging individuals who want or need to live on the ground floor for accessibility reasons. Other initiatives could focus on downsizing to improve quality of life and increase savings from selling a larger apartment or house. However, the challenge should not be underestimated, as Latvia already has one of the smallest allocations of floor area per person in Europe.

Finally, and importantly, in 2023, Riga formulated its new housing policy guidelines (Riga City Council, 2022). It remains to be seen how the reality of rapid aging will be addressed in these policies. However, one enormous challenge arising from neoliberal practices is that Riga City Council owns only 3% of the land in Riga. Finding ways to increase land ownership is one of the most pressing and challenging issues in the consultation processes on these guidelines. Current social housing in Riga is in poor condition, with some houses so dilapidated that it is not viable to invest in their renovation (Tsenkova, 2007). The looming concern is that Riga could soon face a large crisis of inaccessibility to social housing, a potential “policy collapse” due to neoliberal practices (Pichler-Milanovich, 2001). Even if there were an idealistic and far-sighted vision that a highly unequal aging society, which aspires to democracy and the inclusion of all citizens, will inevitably need this infrastructure, it may not be possible to build enough new social housing quickly enough for those in dire need.

Anita is still relatively well-off and will not require social housing. Hence, her socio-economic positionality embodies an ideal figure for neoliberal city management. She more frequently fantasizes about moving abroad to spend her old age close to her children in Western Europe. She does not want to contemplate the potential need to move into a care home, as she is apprehensive about such a prospect. Meanwhile, Riga is not prepared to serve those who may have this need, even if they have the means to pay for it with the assistance of caring relatives. The waiting lists for care homes are full, and getting a place in a care home becomes increasingly difficult (LETA, 2020; Ministry of Welfare, 2024). This issue, ultimately, invites future research on aging, the built environment, and social policies in post-socialist cities.

### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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