

REFLECTIONS ON LEAVING THE BEEHIVE

Two months ago, after nearly four years living in a retirement village, I was able to sell my unit and move back out into the community.

Other residents of my retirement village made many and varied comments when they learned of my plan to move:

- *You will be isolated*
- *You will be insecure*
- *You will have to take out the rubbish bins again*
- *Congratulations – I wish I could do the same*
- *I think you are very brave*

It does feel different.

I am aware of being responsible for myself again. Not that I wasn't so in the retirement village but on reflection, I knew that:

- I could just ask and a specific tradesman would be called.
- If I didn't want to cook a meal I could go to a dining room or have it delivered to my unit.
- If I wanted to have some human company I needed only to go to the rubbish room, ride in the lift, walk down the corridor, sit in the lounge or go down to the garage where there was always someone else coming in or out.
- Most times I didn't lock my unit. I was confident no one would break in.
- I gardened only when I wanted to.
- I no longer had to worry about the maintenance of my home.
- I knew that should a trauma occur someone was always there to help. I may have needed to pay for that help eventually but still it was always there.

Again, now, I need to arrange all the above myself. I believe I was exhibiting the first signs of being institutionalised – not that that is necessarily a bad thing – as you begin to feel less confident and less able as you age, to live in a retirement village can supply all the security you need.

I now realise that my sense of being smothered whilst living in my retirement village was actually my reaction to being cocooned too early in my life.

Surveys show about 50% of residents of retirement villages are very satisfied with the lifestyle they offer and I was reasonably happy until the style of my retirement village changed.

I often used to wonder what the difference was between living in a high-rise retirement village and living in a unit in a high-rise commercial complex of units. My conclusion was that the expectations of those about to buy into a commercial complex are accurate but the expectations of those about to buy into a retirement village can be confused.

I believe the operators of retirement villages are also confused about what retirement villages are. The strongest themes in advertising material for retirement villages are “you are independent” and “we will care for you”. However once you have moved into your retirement village you realise that although you might be “independent” there is subtle but powerful pressure to “join in” and although care is offered it is at a price.

With hindsight, I believe I bought into a retirement village far too early in my life. I was 69 years old at the time. I had a solicitor read the contract and I had my brother (a banker) check it out for me as well. Both expressed their concern that the contract was draconian. I thought about this a lot however; in the end I felt I understood about monthly fees, deferred management payments, the role of a village manager etc. and I loved the unit I was purchasing. I also believed that communication, co-operation and good will would overcome any future difficulties. I was naïve.

Interestingly the average age of residents buying into retirement villages these days is around 82 years and the primary demographic is single, ageing women.

In my retirement village there was a variety of age groups though many more were over 80 than around 70 years of age. The older cohort gave me some wonderful models of dignified, courageous ageing. I grew to value this as I have always had difficulty facing my own ageing.

The mix of age groups also made it incredibly difficult to bring about any resident-initiated change as more often than not older residents were reluctant to complain even when their lives were negatively impacted by what was happening within their village. I saw instances of bullying that only exacerbated the inclination not to “rock the boat”.

Change however can be very swift when the operators of individual retirement villages require that change. Beware the voting rights allocations in Retirement Village contracts. Usually these are decided when the developer first builds the retirement village and inevitably favour the operators.

Ironically, it was this scenario that allowed me to leave my retirement village.

The operator decided that my retirement village would offer “Ageing in Place” whereas when I signed the contract the style was “Independent Living” with the proviso that once you were unable to care for yourself you were expected to transfer to a residential aged care facility. “Ageing in Place” although an excellent government initiative meant older, frailer, sicker people would be encouraged to buy into this retirement village.

The majority of the current residents of my retirement village were incandescent with rage. We knew this change would eventually impact on our environment. We were not ready to be living in what would be an aged care facility for rich people. Great for them but not for us.

Nothing was put to a vote as it was known the operator held more voting rights than all the residents combined.

In an attempt to assuage the fury of current residents the operator made an offer that allowed some of us to move out if we wished. An offer I accepted.

What would I have done differently now I have left my retirement village and have a different perspective and am armed with hindsight?

Not a lot.

I would:

- put more effort into gathering information; not only about the contract but even more importantly about the human dynamics within the retirement village.
- give more thought to the questions I could ask of staff and residents to lessen the culture shock of moving from the community into what is basically a ghetto. I was shocked to realise that the outside community regarded all retirement villages as “aged care homes”.
- be aware that inevitably there was information you could not know until you were actually living in your chosen retirement village.

I'm often asked:

- *Did you make a mistake moving into a retirement village?*
My response is – No. It was the right decision at the time but circumstances changed.
- *Would you recommend to anyone that they move into a retirement village?*
My response has to be qualified. If you are reasonably fit and under 80 years of age I would say delay that decision. If otherwise, life in a retirement village can offer a very positive alternative to current residential aged care facilities.

The world of retirement living is very complicated. It is big business. It is almost unregulated as relative legislation hasn't kept up with the speed of the growth of the retirement living sector. It isn't clear about its role in the community. It does offer companionship and security. It is an environment where all human traits are intensified. It is changing. Once it was a method by

which older people who were not rich could find accessible accommodation in retirement. Now it is becoming a haven for the rich.

It is too soon for me to say emphatically that I am happy in my new environment. I am not unhappy. I am delighted with my new unit, delighted with knowing I own it outright, delighted with my sense of independence, delighted with learning what it is like to live in a tiny town and delighted to be living only half an hour from my daughter. BUT I do miss the buzz of a big city, I do miss being heavily involved in the politics of retirement living and it will take time for me to feel a part of my new community. As anyone who has moved knows, it takes time to settle in and I am just beginning. So far so good.