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‘Living with my granddaughter is stimulating – old people just want to talk about their meds’

The benefits of multigenerational housing extend well beyond financial draws

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Student digs don't get more decadent than Ayrton House in London's Mill Hill, a chic newbuild with a bar, restaurant, gym and 60 large lateral apartments that don't cost much more than a grotty single room in halls.

There are communal gardens backing on to a river and housekeeping and security included in the rent, along with a programme of community activities. The catch? Ayrton House is a retirement community, which means the neighbours will be elderly.

“Sure, the students might not want to be involved in all the activities but they’ll be part of a vibrant community and paying half what the seniors are paying,” explains Honor Barratt, chief executive of Birchgrove Life, the company which runs Ayrton House and six other retirement communities.

Barratt decided to throw students and recent graduates into the mix at Ayrton House after meeting Hannah Chappatte, the 27-year-old founder of Hybr, a platform for first-time renters.

When Chappatte told her that thousands of [students have nowhere to live](#), with a shortfall of more than 600,000 rooms and a record 9.4pc dropping out last year, she saw a way forward that could inspire a healthy and beneficial co-dependency between young and old.



Ayrton House retirement community will take in its first student tenants this autumn

“Old people don’t actually want to live with other old people,” she explains. “When I meet a 96-year-old potential tenant, the first thing they’ll tell me is that [they want to live around younger people](#). They believe it’ll keep them young – and studies suggest that they’re right.”

Indeed, research by Iriss, a charity that promotes positive outcomes for those using Scotland's social services, links seniors who socialise with young people with having improved cognitive function and memory, as well as increased wellbeing, activity, motivation and empowerment.

The comedian Miriam Margoyles, 80, who admitted feeling lonely, anxious and depressed during lockdown, is very vocal about the fact her life is sweeter thanks to [living with two younger lodgers](#).

Severe loneliness is a health risk, according to a study by Queen's University, Canada, triggering depression and suicidal thoughts as well as poor cardiovascular health and premature death. In the UK there are up to two million older adults [who regularly feel lonely](#), according to Age UK.

Gilda Hamilton, 91, risked falling into this category when her husband died two years ago, leaving her to live alone in their flat in London during the pandemic. "I have friends but the problem with being with a bunch of old people is they talk about their medication, which isn't very stimulating," Hamilton says.



Gilda and her granddaughter Eliza have both found the time spent together beneficial | CREDIT: Jeff Gilbert

Knowing how she thrived around young people, her family encouraged her to turn her study into a bedroom to ensure her children and grandchildren could stay over. She now has her 26-year-old granddaughter, Eliza Brunero, lodging with her on Wednesdays each week.

“It’s such a bonus – sometimes I cook for her, sometimes she cooks for me, we play cards, we watch TV and we chat,” Hamilton says. “I can’t say I add anything to her life but she certainly brightens up mine.”

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Brunero begs to differ. Wednesdays are a highlight for her, too, she says: the two of them have fallen into an easy rhythm; she arrives from her job at a start-up and spends the evening cooking and chatting with her grandmother – a complete change of scene from her usual evenings with her boyfriend and friends.

Sometimes she’ll decide to work from home at Hamilton’s the following day, too. “I spend 90pc of time around people of a similar age because I work for a company where everyone is under 35,” Brunero says.

“Talking to my grandmother engages my brain in a different way, whether it’s about politics, her life, my life – we end up having very deep conversations. It’s made me realise how much we take older people for granted.”

Both Brunero and Hamilton can see how mutually beneficial a multigenerational community such as Ayrton House could be. As Chappatte says, it solves two modern issues: a lonely senior population and a lack of housing for the young, [many of whom are also lonely](#).

“Suicide rates are increasing at universities; it’s not easy to be thrust into life after education, particularly given the challenge of securing accommodation and a job,” she says.

While young people might think they want to live amongst people their own age, it's not necessarily the best thing for them, Chappatte continues. Research by Hybr suggests that many students feel out of their comfort zone due to the lack of structure in their lives and can get carried away with partying and drinking.

In Switzerland, where she grew up, there are already multigenerational schemes like Ayrton House, while a trial in Spain has proved incredibly positive, with 80pc of inhabitants claiming to be invigorated by the experience.



Hybr founder Hannah Chappatte says multigenerational housing offers numerous benefits for young and old residents

Intergenerational care has been pioneered in the UK since 1917 with combined nursery and care homes (there are now 40 across the country) but Ayrton House will be the first multigenerational community of its type – on a practical level, one might hope that students have more to offer than toddlers.

“You can feel so invisible when you're old – our seniors will get so much out of sharing their lives with youngsters, who will respect them and hopefully help them with shopping or IT if they need it,” Barratt says. “It'll inspire them to look after themselves and make more of their lives.”

But surely not if their student neighbour is partying all night and sleeping it off during the day? There will be a vetting process, Chappatte assures, as the scheme will only work if the young people understand what they're moving into.

Hybr matchmakes tenants with properties by prioritising the landlord's requirements; some student properties are geared towards freshers, with ping pong tables and a bar, while others suit third year students or postgraduates, who tend to be quieter and more studious. It's this second group that Barratt is targeting for Ayrton House – final year medical students and graduate trainees from the surrounding universities, which include Westminster, Middlesex and UCL.

“If they're looking for a crazy party scene, we'll show them another building; and if they move into Ayrton House and then break the rules, there'll be eviction clauses in place and a tenant replacement service,” Chappatte confirms.

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Applications opened last month and the first student tenants will move in this autumn. Apartments cost from £392 per week to rent, which makes it more expensive than an average room in first-year halls (a single room without bathroom typically costs £250 per week) but more affordable than a lot of the postgraduate accommodation on offer.

A studio with a single bed at Urbanest, a post-grad halls in Kings Cross, for example, costs £443.38 per week, while larger units cost up to £700 per week.

So far it's been a self-selecting process, Barratt says: the students who have put themselves forward are soon-to-be professionals who she believes will fit right into Ayrton House. “They're people who appreciate the onsite facilities such as the restaurant and gym and see living around older people as a lifestyle benefit rather than a hindrance,” she explains.

These responsible young residents should not count on a slower pace of life. Seniors love a late night debate and will prop up the bar until the early hours, Barratt warns – they don't have to get up and go to lectures in the morning.

Brunero agrees that you have to expect the unexpected: her grandmother might be in her nineties but she's in better shape than younger family members and has a way of getting her to open up about her life. “I end up telling her all the gossip – the problem is that by the next day the rest of the family knows it, too,” she says.

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