Young-old

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"Old age is neither a catastrophe nor a pathology," asserted Thérèse Clerc twenty years ago. This feminist militant was the founder of the utopian French House of the Babayagas, referring to the witches of Russian fairy-tales, which proposes shared housing for elderly women who don't want to grow old gracefully. Although the project hasn't quite lived up to the high hopes of its founder, it nonetheless constitutes one solution among others in a country where current life expectancy is 79.5 years for men and 85.4 for women. Given that in France the age of retirement is set at under 65, there are a few years where ageing people are considered 'young-old'. The concept, invented by American psychologist Bernice Neugarten in 1974 and subsequently developed by British historian Peter Laslett, describes that phase of life that comes before ripe old age, before losing independence and autonomy. The 'young-olds' form a fairly new demographic group, but one that accounts for a large portion of today's population, in full possession of all their faculties and of certain means. Thus, again in France, the emergence in 2013 of a 'Silver Economy' addressing all the markets catering for these senior citizens blessed with income, free time and health. One must certainly rejoice that we can now talk about a fourth age as well as a third age, even if certain pundits fear a silver tsunami resulting from an imbalance between senior citizens and the working population. Whether optimist or collapsologist, one thing is certain: over the next few years, towns and cities are going to have to adapt to their ageing populations and no longer simply dedicate areas for special communities. How can we ensure that these young-old can grow old-old happily? How can we help them to grow old at home, where they have lived their life, without being uprooted? Whatever the plan, what really matters is access: access to healthcare, to activities, to other people, to a good home for what we hope will be a merrily ungraceful old age.