

Baby Boomers

TO THE FUTURE TO THE PAST

Aging Sustainably

Aging sustainably means understanding the importance of balance between homes and environments, retirements and finances, and relationships and legacies.

A feeling that they are outside the mainstream is ingrained in the identity of some baby boomers. They have participated in simple living and back-to-the-land movements and are, in part, responsible for the attention the environmental movement receives today. These boomers have spent their lives resisting what they see as the pull of consumption. Now, as they confront aging, they focus on the importance of relationships with place, thoughtfulness about energy, financial situations, and reflections on their own physical and emotional health. Classically caught between the increasing independence of their children—for those who have them—and the mortality of their elders, they carefully consider their legacies to future generations. Interpersonal and financial concerns in these boomers’ hopes and plans collide with the larger environments of nature and the economy. They don’t just manage different areas of life, but whole systems of resources, meaning, and satisfaction. Although they value their social networks deeply, they aim to be as self-sufficient as possible when making decisions. Their independence reflects the simplicity they see as the key to balance and sustainable aging.

The basic conflict:

Simplicity vs. consumption

Ever-expanding consumption has saturated the worlds of these boomers, as everyone around them races to “keep up with the Joneses.” Against strong external pressures, these boomers have struggled to define their lives by striving for simplicity. In a marketplace scrambling to capitalize on boomers’ next life stages, they are clarifying what it means to have stability, security, and satisfaction without paying a service premium for them. In searching to attain financial, social, and ecological stability, they struggle with the overwhelming assumptions and pressure of their peers and their milieu. They may participate in bringing more sustainable living arrangements into the world as both physical and social structures and will feed their experiences back into their niches in mainstream institutions.

Lifestage:

Putting together the pieces

These boomers have been honing their foresight for several decades; they think and act with the future in mind. They know uncertainty exists and have planned for it by gathering information and meticulously managing changes in the systems of their lives. They have banded together in efforts like the New Roadmap Foundation and worked within their vocational circles to propagate the values of sustainable lifestyles among their peers. They calmly face aging because they are well acquainted with the resources available to them.

They embrace the roles of being elders in their families, an experience often triggered by the passing of their parents. These are boomers to whom retirement is an important and relevant stage of life, and they are preparing meticulously to enter it and make it what they want it to be.

Expectations:

Living within limits

These boomers find themselves torn between a desire to make institutions more sustainable and a conviction that government should play a role in mitigating the personal and social consequences of others’ unsustainable lifestyles. Since they doubt that government will step in soon enough, some of them see increased civic engagement as a way to advance these values in mainstream institutions. The functional interrelationships between local communities and global communities matter a great deal to these boomers.

In terms of locale, they live in opposite extremes of the American landscape: in either dense urban areas or rural enclaves. There is a stark division between urban and rural expressions of sustainable aging. For the urbanites, their placement looks to a time when they will be less mobile, both physically and economically as energy prices rise. Their faith in urban infrastructure allows them to live an ideal of urban sustainability. For those in rural places, they give up the convenience of services and independence from cars in exchange for working closely with natural resources and getting off of the grid, hedging for the possibility of infrastructural collapse.



Action Ecology:

Aging Sustainably

The Action Ecology illustrates the complexity with which boomers anticipate, plan for, and deal with changes in their lives. The inner portion of the ecology highlights resources, sorted into four categories: people, information, institutions, and capitals. The outer ring, organized around our seven dimensions of decision making, describe practices and strategies through which boomers put their resources into action. Finally, there are the “decisions in suspension,” questions that these boomers don’t have answers to just yet.

DECISIONS IN SUSPENSION:

- What to set aside in the transition to retirement?
- Where to live: wanting to be closer to the land versus convenience and density of services offered by the city?
- How to live with an empty nest?
- How to build a legacy?

Global Transparency

Connecting the global and local

FOCUSING ON THE LOCAL

- Stewarding local landscapes
- Focusing on self-sufficiency
- Supporting community groups

ENGAGING WITH THE GLOBAL

- Cultivating networks overseas
- Supporting bottom-up development and fair trade groups
- Speaking out on national issues with global impacts

Wealth Generation

Ensuring security

MITIGATING RISK

- Financial planning
- Eating well for sustained health
- Reorganizing personal space for future access to services
- Minimizing dependence on unstable services

Extended Capacity

Connecting with the land

ADAPTING THE SELF

- Adjusting expectations of material need
- Maintaining the body

CHANGING SURROUNDINGS

- Rebuilding a home
- Moving towards support—civic or social
- Keeping a vegetable or medicinal garden
- Raising animals
- Getting off the grid
- Minimizing the need for a car

Resequencing Life Stages

Ready for retirement

ENACTING THE NARRATIVE

- Adjusting to an empty nest
- Retiring or scaling back work
- Deep investment in financial planning
- Pursuing more volunteer work in later life
- Pursuing artistic endeavors

AUTHORING ONE’S PATH

- Returning to communal living

Self-Help 2.0

Rejecting materialism

EVOLVING THE SMART CONSUMER

- Supporting local craftspeople
- Buying simple, organic foods
- Repairing rather than replacing goods

BECOMING A CONNECTED CITIZEN

- Joining neighborhood groups
- Supporting public institutions
- Engaging in activism

PEOPLE
Elders
Lifelong partners
Children
Organized groups of peers

INFORMATION
Sustainable aging literature
Internet resources
DIY publications
Community networks

Resources

CAPITALS
Natural resources
Spiritual capital
Familial support
Real-estate investments

INSTITUTIONS
Churches and spiritual groups
Alternative living non-profits
Cooperative-living groups
State-level institutions

Re-Institutioning

Finding opportunities

REPURPOSING THE OLD

- Using sustainable financial tools
- Supporting non-profit organizations
- Continuing to contribute to public educational institutions even after retirement

INVESTING IN THE NEW

- Organizing the community around a civic goal

New Sociability

Nurturing relationships

EX PRESSING RELATIONSHIPS

- Caring for elder friends and family
- Supporting spouses through transitions
- Nurturing children’s independence and stability
- Organizing men’s and women’s groups

The Dimensions of Decision Making

The boomers we talked to helped us discover the key dimensions of the seven big stories that emerge at the intersection of aging, cohort, and period effects. For each story, we found a pair of defining actions—two poles of behavior that turn the stories into scales. We then used these scales to define the action types, each of which represents a unique profile.

Extended Capacity



In the coming decades, these boomers will focus on the environment to navigate challenges. From an intense focus on their physical and social homes, to the integration of those homes into larger natural systems, boomers aging sustainably will create space, resource, and aesthetic niches for themselves. They have learned the lay of the land and will work to change and maintain it to their advantage.

Resequencing Life Stages



While many of these boomers do identify or have identified with counter-culture movements and practices, they nonetheless walk paths that have remarkable definition. They have been instrumental in bringing “alternative” narratives into the mainstream consciousness and have experienced many iterations of this mainstreaming process, which provides them the opportunity to leave better legacies to future generations.

Self-Help 2.0



Boomers aging sustainably have a strong sense of self-reliance and self-sufficiency. They will bring this confidence to their engagements with material goods, services, and civic activities. They are extremely thoughtful about the limits of their material needs, and value active efforts to limit what they need to the capacity of natural and economic systems.

New Sociability



While these boomers prefer to adjust their surroundings rather than themselves, their current and anticipated experiences have many ramifications for their identities. In order to resolve the new identities they’re developing, these boomers turn to their relationships—particularly their stable partnerships, their children, their parents, and close circles of friends—for clues.

Re-Institutioning



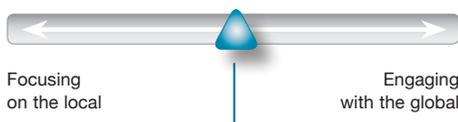
Mainstream institutions and rites of passage—be they retirement, finding the nest empty, or public schooling—have definite meaning to these boomers. Instead of abandoning these institutions and seeking new ones, however, they will strive to remake them in the light of their own values of simplicity, sustainability, and holism.

Wealth Generation



Boomers aging sustainably are sensitive to risk, whether the risks stand to affect their own physical or financial health, a community’s collective health, or natural and built environments that have shaped how they eat, invest, and make their homes. They have been sensitized to too many risks proliferating in their lives to avoid engaging with and managing risk.

Global Transparency



Partly because of their sensitivity to the land and the communities around them, these boomers have come to value sustainability in their lives. On the other hand some of these boomers will find that a life overseas is the most sustainable path for them, both due to financial resources and their ecological footprints.

Profiles & Quotations

Each of these profiles describes a person who embodies the Aging Sustainably action type. These three personal stories best illustrate the decision-making lens of the action type but are not the only interviewees who shaped the type. The profiles represent actual people and their words, although their names and some details about their lives have been changed to protect their identities.

Susan Petersen

Age: 56
Urban Northwest

Susan identifies more strongly as a “person who’s non-conformist” than as a baby boomer. She is alarmed by the spiraling debt and material excess of her peers, and strives to maintain simplicity in all aspects of her life. In the past three years, she and her husband have dealt with the deaths of four parents and the settling of their material and financial affairs. This left Susan with an increased sensitivity to her own needs and future; she began to reflect on the sustainability of her future years and her legacy. Her children have moved out, and her husband recently retired to focus on his artistic passions. At the same time, she has shifted her work as a librarian to a contract basis. She looks to sustain her relationship with a women’s Episcopal church group that is engaged with social efforts locally and globally. Susan and her husband are focused on making their retirement as “green” as possible, and believe in the principles of sustainability and simplicity put forward by Seattle’s New Roadmap Foundation. They find it more sustainable to live in an urban center, where they can be without a car and live close enough to the things they want and need to walk to them. Their friends, too, have dedicated themselves to living responsibly and simply, and the couple has joked with them about buying a “block of houses” and establishing a retirement community within their current community.



Source: flickr.com/beancounter

On sustaining connections:

“I’m interested in not being a burden on my children, and making sure that they anticipate financial security in the sense that they learn to be sustainable and independent themselves. Financial security and emotional and personal security.”

On material possessions:

“There are a lot of people in our age range who spend a lot of money on appearances and are pretty deeply in debt. That’s going to have consequences and I think we’re pretty determined not to live that way. That’s part of who we are. We’ve lost several parents in just the last few years. That reinforces that feeling that stuff is not important; it’s the people that are important.”

On retirement in the counterculture:

“I have read a pretty wide spectrum of information about planning for retirement from the kind of counterculture, you know, living with as low a footprint and impact as you possibly can to make sure that you’re financially secure. So I have pretty strong leanings in the more counterculture approach to where I am and the environment.”

On mortality:

“Your parents are some kind of a buffer between you and the end of life, and when they’re no longer there, it’s like: you’re next. So I think there are definitely some identity issues that come along with that, becoming aware of your own mortality ... When I leave this place, people will remember me for both who I am and what I accomplished.”

David Martelli

Age: 56
Rural East Coast

A successful psychotherapist with a global clientele, David Martelli has balanced a professional, urban identity with a back-to-the-earth lifestyle that continues to serve as his vision for the future. He divides his time between seeing clients and working on his homestead, clearing trees and milling his own lumber to build a barn where he plans to raise farm animals. He hopes to be completely off the grid within the next decade. He and his wife are relying on self-sufficiency, like growing their own food, rather than financial wealth to support them. He brings to this vision a set of carpenter’s skills from his first “career,” when he lived in a spiritual commune and trained as a therapist, and takes pride in his close proximity to the land. David anticipates a “balance shift” where he will work fewer hours with clients and spend more time tending to the gardens, fruit trees, animals, and visiting grandchildren. He sees this phase of his life as “attenuated”—a time when he is no longer striving to build a career, his children are grown, and his wife is rebuilding her life after a long illness.



Source: IFTF

Mike Diaz

Age: 57

Suburban West Coast

On the consequences of materialism:

"I don't think there's going to be a dramatic doomsday cataclysm, but I think that the dominant culture is going to be considerably less affluent by the standards we have today. And there'll be an enormous amount of people in need."

On sustaining the body:

"I've always been kind of athletic, but I had a very random approach. I have some structural weaknesses genetically that are addressable, but I've never addressed them until a few years ago, even though I intellectually knew a lot about the body. So that feels really good. I feel strong and centered and, in spite of twisting my ankle, less accident prone than I used to be."

On the changing nature of retirement:

"Nobody close to my age has anything resembling a perspective on retirement that my parents' generation had. It's not the same at all. There's no sense of leisure retirement or something. It's more like the freedom to do work you really want to do and not be bound to income."

On the rhythms of the land:

"The purpose of having it [solar and hydroelectric power] is not financial, and it's not even so much a social activist kind of issue. It's more like a sense of responsibility—the same with the food thing. It feels like if you're gonna have a piece of Earth, that to have a full and a comprehensive relationship with a piece of land is advisable. And that is how you create a cycle of life ... It's a lot about living with it, living with the process of moving toward something rather than goal achievement."

Mike is remarkably calm for all of the changes he has lived through and their effects on his plans for the future. He worked as a computer analyst and programmer, but was unable to work after suffering from a near-paralyzing nerve disorder in addition to heart problems. His illness and recovery prompted his wife, Gail, to retire early from a long career as a teacher. To be closer to elders whom they will care for as well as the children who will care for them, Mike and Gail are preparing to move to rural Arkansas, where Gail lived before coming to their small California town 20 years ago. They are designing a house in Arkansas that will allow Mike to regain some of his mobility, with room to sustain the relationships that they know will support them as they age. The couple tries to buy food responsibly and eat at home instead of spending money at restaurants.

On preparing for retirement:

"We had talked about a seven-year plan to get our finances to the point that we could sell the house, we could move with little debt. So you could say, seven years ago, we started planning to do this. It was the last three years that I started looking seriously at houses in Arkansas. So it's been about a seven-year process ... I was forced out of my job when I got sick; it really accelerated what we were going to do. It's not like all of a sudden this decision is we're going to move. We've been thinking about it for a number of years and how to approach it and how to prepare to get there."

On citizenship:

"The whole concept of democracy and patriotism is to question your government. That's the duty of the citizen: to question government."

On energy and travel:

"We practice what we need to do to live in retirement years. We don't have to travel as much anymore. So that has cut back on gasoline usage. We're learning if we can live on our retirement [income]. It's so new that now we're okay but we think when we move we'll still be okay. But we're young enough that we could work if we find that we can't pay the bills!"

Source: flickr.com/jimmywayne22



Decisions in Context

At a glance

Boomers who are aging sustainably, make decisions meticulously, weighing every detail against their long-term plans and the values they hold dear. Supportive partnerships play a prominent role in their decision making, and they are unlikely to trust professionals where they have the confidence to do things themselves.

Work:

Meaning and flexibility

These boomers are feeling out what “retirement” will mean for them, for although it does not mean ceasing all work, it is still a term that resonates. After diverse experiences in their youth, many have been engaged in careers for decades. Now they turn to a new phase looking for simplicity, flexibility, meaning, and joy. There are several possibilities on the table as these boomers weigh which paths will allow them the flexibility and resilience to meet their financial needs, and which will also give them the time and resources to live with the material restraint they value.

Housing:

Accommodating bodies and values

Housing is significant to these boomers. It must accommodate intricate but flexible intergenerational relationships, the needs of their aging bodies, and their desires to maintain a lighter impact on the grid and on the land. These boomers scrutinize the size, location, and layout of their current and future homes and consider the capacity of their land to furnish them with food and medicines. As they search for homes, they assess their capacity for energy savings and modifications to the energy infrastructure. They weigh the needs of their families against their curiosity about and memories of co-housing arrangements and communities. They carefully consider relationships with places and neighborhoods, choosing a place to settle down based on what locations and modes of transportation are most sustainable for them and the environment in the long run.

Food:

Simplicity for health

Whether they arrived at this conclusion from lifelong values or major medical events, these boomers love simple, wholesome food and see it as the prime vehicle to good health. As one woman pointed out, “We’ve always been focused on food. Always, always, always—since we were little hippies—so we were always focused on eating.” They choose their food systematically to improve their health and the health of the natural systems with which they strive to stay attuned. They have a keen awareness of their hereditary and environmental risks, and good food will be their first, and persistent, line of defense against those risks. They find great joy in producing and preparing their own food, be it a comprehensive self-sufficient operation or a simple backyard or community garden.

Finances:

Sustainability and independence

Boomers aging sustainably remain ever aware of their financial capacities and limits and actively manage the systems of their lives to live according to these limits. These efforts are grounded in personal experimentation, financial acumen, and interest in do-it-yourself planning literature. Conservation and simplicity are both values and strategies, and their planning has a much longer horizon than most of their peers, easily stretching decades into retirement. Leery of services that encourage people to spend in order to save, they doubt the efficacy and ethics of such arrangements. They are receptive to effective tools, but have no patience for tools that fail to acknowledge their competence.

Health:

Sustaining relationships and the body

These boomers are beginning to recognize the limits of their bodies and adjust their practices and surroundings accordingly. Whether this sensitivity came from slow losses of capability natural with aging or from dramatic health events, these boomers are quick to manage food, space, and movement routines to future-proof the years ahead of them. They focus on simple, light meals, easy to navigate spaces, and regular exercise. However, they recognize that food is not the same as medicine, and routine medical care is a key part of sustaining their bodies. At the same time, a large part of these boomers’ health is in sustaining their relationships; nurturing the ground of emotional security is a key part of healthfulness and aging.