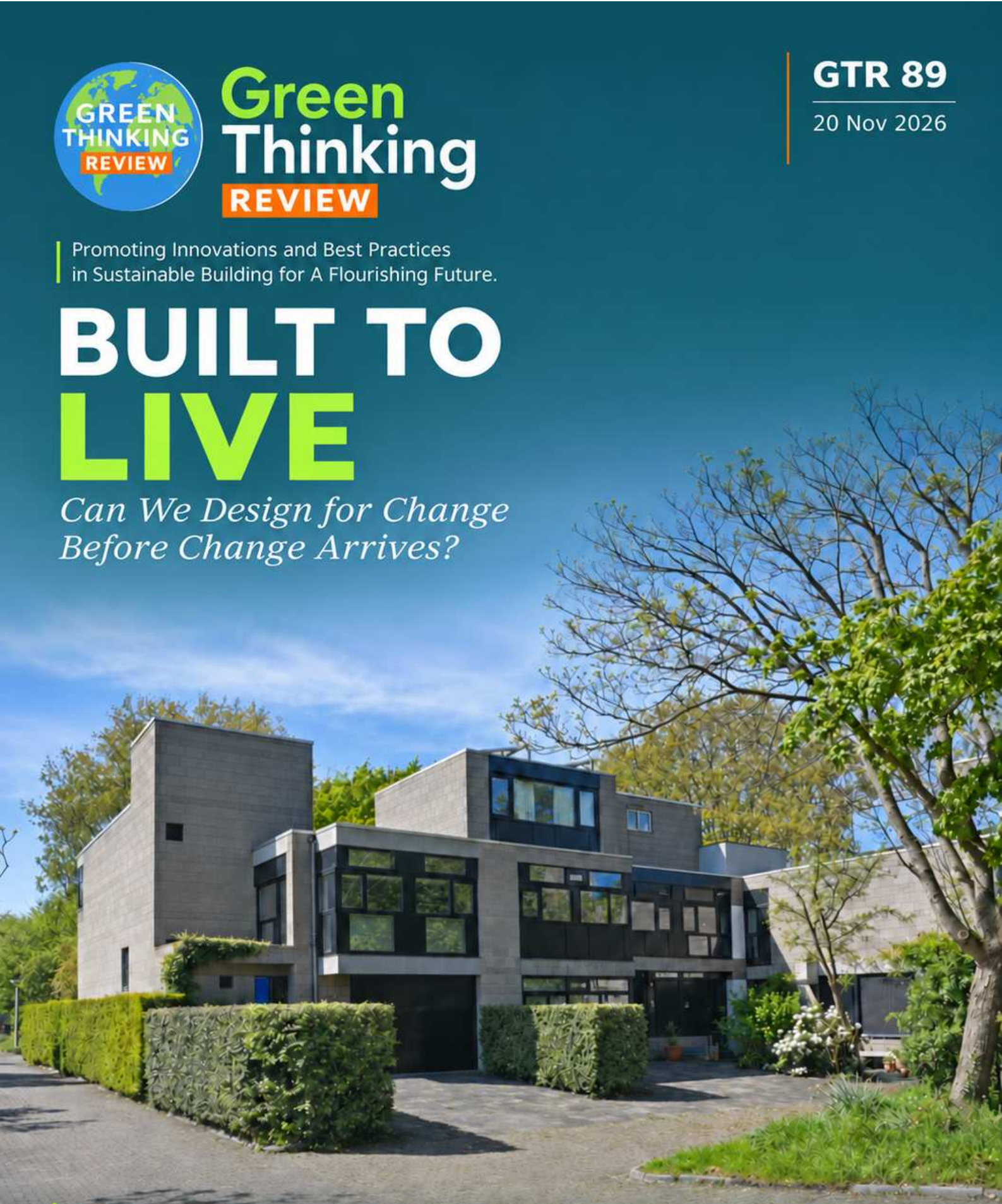
GTR 89
20 Nov 2026

Green Thinking REVIEW

Promoting Innovations and Best Practices
in Sustainable Building for A Flourishing Future.

BUILT TO LIVE

Can We Design for Change Before Change Arrives?



Inside: Diagoon Houses, Delft, Netherlands

Floreat Vita | Let Life Flourish.

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Delft Gebbenlaan 32–34, east view · Cropped; tonal adjustments and graphic overlays added.
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commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Delft_Gebbenlaan_32-34_seen_from_the_east.jpg



Life Changes. Can the Building?

A family moves into a house designed around its present needs.

Cover:

Years later, another child arrives. A parent needs a bedroom without stairs. Someone begins working from home. Eventually, the children leave, and rooms once considered essential become difficult to maintain.

Life has changed. What choices does the building offer?

The Future Belongs in the Brief

We cannot predict every future occupant or use. But we can ask which changes are plausible—and which decisions today would make them easier tomorrow.

Could a study become a bedroom? Could part of the house accommodate another household? Could services be replaced without breaking through finished rooms? Could an addition be built without sacrificing the daylight and ventilation of the original home?

These questions belong in the first drawing.

Capacity, Not Just Size

Designing for change does not always mean leaving space for more construction.

Sometimes it means giving a room useful proportions and more than one possible purpose. Sometimes it means positioning access so spaces can operate together or separately. Sometimes it means making components accessible for repair and replacement.

A building may remain the same size while supporting a very different life.

Nor does readiness oblige anyone to alter it. The value lies in having a workable choice when circumstances change.

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Editor's Note:

Make Change Part of the First Drawing

Dear Green Thinkers,

In my Keble Home Circle interview (October 2026), I spoke about a house designed from the beginning to grow with the family. The important decision happens before the first stage is built: where could the next room go, and what must we provide now to make that addition work? That proposition opens a wider question. A household may grow, but it may also become smaller. A resident's mobility may change. Rooms may need different purposes.

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Editor's Note - continued...

Good design should leave choices for these possibilities too.

In Symbiature, I understand the built environment as supporting life through relationships that endure, adapt and renew. For me, that means attending both to present comfort and to the capacity for future adjustment.

This edition explores that capacity. Diagoon invites us to examine the relationship between design intentions and residents' choices. Our Nigeria Focus brings the question home to the family house and its possible stages.

My invitation is simple: before we freeze the plan, let us consider the lives it may one day need to accommodate.

Leave Room.

Floreat Vita | Let Life Flourish

– Arc. Denis Uche Akabogu FNIA

Editor-in-Chief

Green Thinkers' Takeaway

A building designed for change need not become larger. It should offer useful choices as lives and needs evolve.

Cover Story - continued...

Make Every Stage Liveable

A house intended to grow should still be a complete, comfortable home at its first stage. Its future possibilities should not depend on years of inconvenience or unfinished essential spaces.

Equally, expansion should preserve what makes the home worth inhabiting: light, air, privacy, access and room outdoors.

The architectural task is to decide what needs stability and where flexibility will matter.

Built to Live

GTR 86 asked how we might get more life from buildings already standing. GTR 89 asks what we should decide before construction begins.

A good building should serve the life we know today while leaving room for lives we cannot fully foresee.

Leave Room.

Green Thinking Tip

Test one room in two roles—for example, as a study and a future bedroom. Can both arrangements retain daylight, privacy and clear access?

Green Thinking Insights
Room for Possibility

👉 *A good building should have more than one future.*

👉 *A room can gain a new purpose without gaining another square metre.*

👉 *The first drawing can make tomorrow's choices easier—or close them off.*

👉 *A house designed to grow should be liveable before it grows.*

👉 *Flexibility has little value if each adjustment demands extensive demolition.*

👉 *Leaving room for choice does not require people to exercise it.*

👉 *Design for the family arriving today—and the household it may become.*

Leave Room

Innovations & Best Practices:

Seven Design Moves That Leave Room For Change

A building cannot anticipate every future. These decisions can preserve useful options while making the first stage a complete, comfortable place to live.

1 | Give Rooms More Than One Possible Purpose

Use room proportions, door positions and window arrangements that accommodate different activities. Test whether a study could become a bedroom without obstructing circulation or compromising privacy.

2 | Plan Access for Different Arrangements

Consider how spaces might operate together or separately. A future workspace, caregiver's room or independent household may need its own entrance. Check that each arrangement retains safe access, escape routes and appropriate shared facilities.

3 | Separate Structure from Adaptable Partitions

Where suitable, distinguish the building's supporting structure from partitions that may later move. Record that distinction clearly. Future occupants should not have to guess which walls can be altered safely.

4 | Make Services Accessible

Position pipes, cables and service connections so they can be inspected, repaired and replaced with limited disruption. Consider plausible future kitchen or bathroom locations, while avoiding unnecessary complexity in the initial installation.

5 | Reserve Space for Plausible Additions

Identify where an extension or future stair could fit. Protect daylight, ventilation, drainage and usable outdoor space at every stage. Any provision for an additional floor requires structural design for the intended loads and relevant approvals.

6 | Design for Changing Mobility

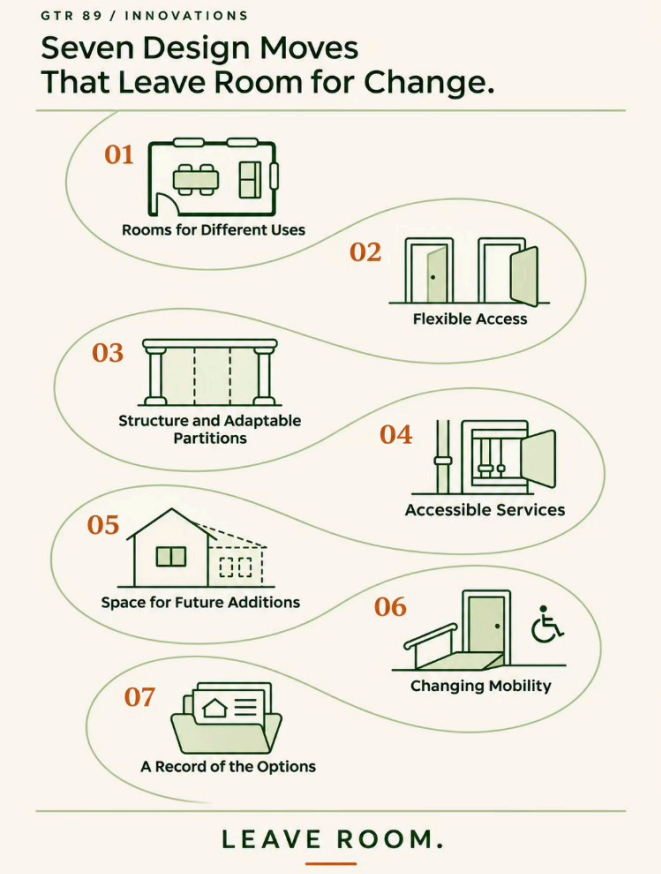
Consider a usable entrance, convenient circulation and a room at entrance level that could support sleeping. Explore how a bathroom might accommodate changing needs. Adaptability should include people's changing abilities as well as household size.

7 | Leave a Record of the Options

Provide drawings showing the structure, services and intended stages, with their limits and assumptions. Explain what would require professional review. A future option becomes more useful when the next owner or builder can understand it.

Leave Room.

The aim is to preserve worthwhile choices without burdening the present home with every imaginable future.



Leave Room

Top 5 Action Points

Five Questions Before We Freeze the Plan

Before approving a design, test the choices it leaves for later. These five questions can guide the conversation between client and design team.

1 | Which future needs are worth preparing for?

Consider plausible changes: another child, an older relative, working from home or a smaller household. Choose a few relevant scenarios rather than paying to accommodate every possibility.

2 | Can the building adapt without becoming larger?

Test a different furniture arrangement, room use or division of space. Could the plan meet a new need within its existing footprint? An extension should be one option among several.

3 | What must we decide now–and what can wait?

Structure, stairs and main service routes can be difficult to alter. Finishes and some partitions may offer more freedom. Identify the decisions that would close off useful options if left unresolved.

4 | Will every stage work as a complete place to live?

Check comfort, privacy, sanitation, safe access and outdoor space at the first stage and after any proposed addition. Future construction should not depend on making the present home inconvenient or unsafe.

5 | Is the future option affordable and practical?

Ask what preparation costs today and what alteration would involve later. Consider approvals, professional input, construction access and disruption to occupants. Record the assumptions so future owners understand what remains possible.

Before we freeze the plan, let us test its next chapter.

Resource Box

Understanding Buildings That Can Change

1 | Who controls what can change?

N. J. Habraken, Supports: An Alternative to Mass Housing (English edition, 1972; Dutch original, 1961). Distinguishes the shared building support from residents' infill, placing choice and design responsibility at the centre of adaptable housing. Author's overview. (habraken.com)

2 | What happens after construction?

Stewart Brand, How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They're Built (1994). Explores how buildings evolve through occupation, maintenance and successive alterations. Book overview. (stewartbrand.org, stewartbrand.org)

3 | Does readiness lead to alteration?

L. G. K. Spoormans, "Dynamics in the Late-Modern House" (2026), Docomomo Conference Proceedings, pp. 426–433. Examines Diagoon and Koepeltjesbuurt, distinguishing physical alterations from changing ways of living. Research and paper. (research.tudelft.nl)

4 | Can incremental housing widen access in Nigeria?

Lilian Nwachukwu, Lovelin Obi and Julius Akotia (2025), "Addressing housing affordability in Nigeria through incremental housing." Their Millard Fuller Foundation study examines design, financing and residents' experiences, while identifying continuing affordability barriers for the poorest households. Study. (research.leedstrinity.ac.uk)

Leave Room **Case Study Snippet**

Diagoon Houses, Delft, Netherlands

Designed for Change. How Did Life Respond?



Diagoon Houses, Gebbenlaan 32–34, Delft, Netherlands—view from the east, April 2025. Photo credit: © Ymblanter / Wikimedia Commons · CC BY-SA 4.0.

Herman Hertzberger's experimental Diagoon houses offered residents a framework rather than a prescribed way of living. Split-level spaces and fixed cores containing stairs and wet services allowed different arrangements of sleeping, working and communal activities. Residents could complete and interpret the interiors around their needs.

The proposition was significant: an architect could establish a durable order while leaving households meaningful choices within it.

Yet readiness for change did not produce continuous physical transformation. In a 2026 study published in the Docomomo conference proceedings, TU Delft researcher L. G. K. Spoormans reports limited physical alterations at Diagoon. Residents valued Hertzberger's architecture highly and tended to adapt their ways of living to it. The study identifies a tension between the houses' heritage significance and their original invitation to alteration.

This does not, by itself, establish that adaptability failed. A space can accommodate changing activities without walls moving. Equally, admiration for a design can make people reluctant to alter it.

For GTR, Diagoon raises a useful distinction: providing capacity for change and enabling people to exercise that choice are related, but different, responsibilities.

A building's future depends on its spatial possibilities, the people who inhabit it and the conditions under which alterations can happen.

GTR 89 | Nigeria Focus: ***Room to Grow:*** *A House for a Changing Family*

A family begins with the home it can afford. Later, another bedroom becomes necessary. A parent moves in. Eventually, the children leave, and part of the house might accommodate a smaller household.

The design question is whether these possibilities were considered before construction began.

For a Nigerian family building in stages, an agreed development plan can give each phase a clear purpose. It can reserve space for an addition, position a future stair and organise services for later connections. Any proposed upper floor requires foundations and structure professionally designed for its loads.

But growth should not consume everything. Each stage must retain daylight, ventilation, privacy, safe access and usable outdoor space. The first phase should be a complete home, with essential facilities working from the outset.

Affordability also needs scrutiny. A study of the Millard Fuller Foundation's incremental housing model in Nigeria found opportunities for homeownership, but continuing barriers for the poorest households. Building in stages does not automatically make housing affordable.

The ambition is a house that can respond as circumstances change—including when the family needs less space.

Leave Room—for the household the family may become.

Leave Room

Outside the Box



An imagined future.

When Ada and Chidi moved in, the house had two bedrooms and a small room beside the entrance.

They called it the spare room.

Their architect had asked a different question: "What else might it become?"

For a while, it held bicycles, boxes and a sewing machine. Then Ada began taking tailoring orders. Customers could reach her without passing through the family's living room.

When Chidi's mother came to stay, the sewing moved elsewhere. The room became hers, close to the bathroom and without stairs to climb.

Later, the family added two bedrooms in the space identified in the original plan. The work was disruptive, but the route for construction had been considered. They kept the courtyard tree, and the older rooms still received daylight and air.

By 2040, their children had left home.

The house felt different: more cleaning, unused rooms, quieter evenings.

This time, they did not add anything.

With professional advice and the necessary approvals, they divided the house into two homes, using an entrance and service connections anticipated in the first design. A young couple moved into the smaller dwelling.

Ada and Chidi kept their familiar rooms, veranda and garden. Rental income helped with upkeep. The neighbours sometimes shared an evening meal, then returned to their own front doors.

One afternoon, their daughter visited with her baby.

"You planned all this?" she asked.

"Not all of it," Ada said. "We had choices."

Leave Room.

GTR Closing Reflection

Leave the Next Chapter Open

We cannot know every life a building will hold. We can consider which decisions today might unnecessarily restrict tomorrow. A room with another possible purpose. Services accessible for replacement. Space for an addition that preserves light and air. A home that can become smaller when the household does. Such choices give future occupants room to respond in ways we may never have imagined. The next chapter belongs to those who will live there. Our responsibility is to leave them worthwhile possibilities.

Floreat Vita | Let Life Flourish.

A Question for Today

What might your building need to become?

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GREEN THINKING REVIEW
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