The Inclusive City: what active ageing might mean for urban design.

Professor Julienne Hanson,

Faculty of the Built Environment

1-19 Torrington Place Site

University College London

Gower Street,

London, WC1E 6BT

020 7679 1740

j.hanson@ucl.ac.uk

Abstract

For the first time in the history of the planet, urbanisation has become the fundamental human condition. Urban populations are growing three times faster than overall populations and soon, three-quarters of the world's people will be city dwellers. (Girardet, 1996) Cities are the engine of economic development, employment and opportunity. They can be diverse, vibrant and exciting places, especially for the young, but many are also polluted, congested, overcrowded and crime-ridden. In particular, the urban environments that we have created are not sympathetic to the needs of older people. Older populations have

therefore ‘voted with their feet’ by retiring to the seaside, the suburban fringes of traditional small market towns or to the countryside. Drawing on the proposition that emerging ‘cultures of ageing’ (Gilleard and Higgs, 2000) are redefining people’s aspirations in later life, it will be suggested that strategies for ‘active ageing’ will be accompanied by a more positive attitude towards urban living. Older people have much to gain from living in cities, and cities will undoubtedly gain immeasurably from balanced communities that include older people. This presentation therefore considers how our urban centres can be redesigned so as to recruit and retain a greater proportion of older people. (200 words)

Architectural disability

‘Architectural disability’ is a term used (Goldsmith, 1997) to describe how the design of buildings and places can confront people with hazards and barriers that make the built environment inconvenient, uncomfortable or unsafe. Buildings can disable or handicap children, adults with babies in pushchairs, larger, taller or smaller people and those carrying heavy loads. However, one group is particularly prone to being a victim of architectural disability, and that is older people.

Lawton (1974) has concentrated on how the built environment can restrict options for older people. He warns that either a drop in competence or an increase in environmental pressure could account for the apparent negative effects of ageing. More positively, he asserts that small improvements to the older person's physical environment may produce a substantial reduction in environmental pressure, so that "the payoff for effective environmental intervention is very high for older people in poor mental or physical health", (Lawton, 1974 :259). This passing observation is highly pertinent to active ageing, for every reduction in environmental pressure that is achieved through good design enhances people's opportunities to age more actively. In this sense, the environment has the potential to be therapeutic rather than disabling.

Environment issues

There are many strategic and detailed environmental issues that have a direct impact on older people's lives. These include:

- Household growth
- Household location
- Local centres and services
- Transport
- Technology

- Living independently, and
- Universal design.

How society responds will have a major impact on the potential for 'active ageing', and the proportion of elders who are able to translate this vision into a reality. Of course these disparate issues come together as a seamless whole in the environment we use, experience and move around in. In arriving at clear policies and goals for the future, we need to ensure that decisions that are taken ostensibly to help older people to age more actively neither insult people's aspirations nor conflict with the aspirations and values of others.

Rural idyll?

Historically, older people were one of the main residential groups within or close to town centres. Urban living was perceived to be beneficial to older people because they were within easy walking distance of large concentrations of attractions, amenities and facilities. However, today’s generation of older people tends to move out of towns and cities on retirement, partly as a result of the cycle of neglect and decline which has occurred in many urban centres. Today, a common pattern on retirement is to move from the family home to the countryside or coast. Yet this may present problems for the older resident as rural services decline. The vast majority of older people who

live in suburban neighbourhoods also tend to suffer from a cocktail of problems such as expensive housing, inadequate public transport, poor levels of services, inaccessibility and social

For those who remain in the inner city, anecdotal evidence (Elderly Accommodation Council, in conversation) suggests that there is a shortage of suitable accommodation, both mainstream and specialised, close to the centre of many towns and cities. Specialist providers (McCarthy and Stone, in conversation) report a shortage of suitable, affordable urban sites for private retirement housing. The booming housing market in the south-east of England may provide windfall profits for older owner occupiers but it is presenting a serious barrier to in-migration among people of all ages from poorer areas, whilst key workers increasingly will be unable to afford a home close to the inner urban populations who are dependent on their support.

The location and social mix of housing are intimately bound up with access to amenities, social networks and information. Currently, much of the special provision for older people – both sheltered housing and residential / nursing care - is inappropriately located. Occupying an isolated location on the periphery of the town is known to be closely coupled to difficulties in letting sheltered housing (Tinker et. al., 1995). Some residential / nursing homes are located in secluded, semi-rural

settings, effectively confining less mobile residents to the home. Many older people who are living in their own homes choose, whilst they are still able to drive, to retire to a suburban location only to discover that the area has few local amenities and is poorly served by public transport. It has long been assumed that older people wish to ‘disengage’ from society in their twilight years, but this is increasing being recognised as an imposed and ageist stereotype. Recent research suggests that most older people wish to remain actively engaged and in touch with mainstream society (EQUAL, 2001).

It is not clear what the migration patterns of future generations of older people will be. However Doorling (1995) has established that older people are no longer flocking to the coasts upon retirement. Instead, older people today are seeking out the suburbs of the smaller market towns. Older people who can do so continue to leave the city centres but there is a residue of poor elders who cannot afford to 'escape' and others who positively wish to remain in a familiar urban setting. However, in the longer term, town centre living may also become more popular among the wealthy, particularly as the current generation of urban loft dwellers reaches retirement. In order for this to happen, town centres will have to develop attractive levels of amenity and service.

Design challenges

So far as transport and street space are concerned, the DTLR's report on older people and their transport requirements (DTLR, 2001) has suggested that mobility is the key to reducing social isolation. Giving up driving is a difficult issue, signalling loss of adult status. A high proportion of older people is dependent on public transport, whilst others use community buses or taxis. Poor design features that currently deter older people from using town centres include:

- difficult access and changes of level
- poorly maintained pavements
- busy roads with few crossing points
- isolated unlit stops
- lack of adequate seating
- no public toilets and
- high, steep steps.

Older people are also vulnerable and at risk outdoors. Nearly half of pedestrians killed on the roads are over 60. An injury is six times as likely to be fatal to someone over 80 as for someone of 40. Other deterrents are safety, affordability, lack of information, unhelpful drivers and unreliability of public services. (DTLR, 2001). From a design point of view, the 'holy grail' is 'seamless travel' where one can move effortlessly from one mode of transport to another and between pick-up points and origin and destination of trips.

Once one has arrived at the town centre, the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act has made a start in widening access to public buildings. There is a growing awareness that all building users should be able to carry out their work and leisure activities efficiently, safely and pleasurably according to their abilities. However, a compliance culture often means that the measures taken to widen access are little more than a token gesture. Key social trends identified by the government (DTI, 2000) suggest that this attitude will become increasingly untenable in the years to come. Forecasters confidently predict that tomorrow's older people will be more independent, diverse, active, consumer-conscious and vocal. The power of the ‘grey pound’ will give older people a powerful voice in the design of buildings, products and services and more people will use technology to support their chosen way of life.

So far as the design of neighbourhoods and communities is concerned, research suggests that most people in the UK want to live in 'balanced communities', defined as a combination of:

- High quality housing
- Safe, attractive environment
- Mix of house types
- Mix of tenures

- Variety of amenities.

This definition includes living within an inter-generational, all-age community. Older people have a great deal to offer to younger families, teenagers and children. Towns can tolerate great social diversity, including ethnic diversity, provided that this is not spatialised within an urban ghetto. However, there is growing tendency for older people to live in 'out of town' retirement communities. This could also mean that a greater proportion of older people will elect to live in an urban 'gated community'. These visions may either support or run counter to our current conceptions of active ageing.

Cultures of Ageing

Radical social theorists like Gilleard and Higgs (2000) propose that in future people of all ages increasingly will define themselves by their chosen lifestyle and will be less circumscribed by externally ascribed attributes. Two emerging lifestyles - the 'third ager' and the 'age resistor' - that are both radical approaches to active ageing may soon begin to embrace a more positive attitude towards urban living that could contribute to the renaissance of our inner cities.

Third ages see later life as a unique time of independence from work, family ties and an opportunity to enjoy leisure. Cities provide

unparalleled opportunities for going out and about, education, entertainment and self-fulfilment, as living in the city centre places the main ‘theatres of life’ on the doorstep. Age resistors choose to stay young rather than to grow old, asserting that functional ageing can be delayed by keeping fit, working-out, fashion and cosmetics, food supplements and body reshaping. Cities are dominated by youth culture. They have the concentrations of the health clubs, trainers and therapists that are necessary to support these goals. For practical reasons that result from their lifestyle requirements, both these sub-cultures may begin to recast the city as a desirable place to inhabit in later life.

A third group who may actively engage with the benefits of inner city living is the 'Generation M' of post-retirement workers. People in mid-life today can look forward to about 30 years of active life and the country needs this pool of skills, talents and experiences. It is therefore likely that more people will continue to work longer as attitudes to retirement become flexible. Older workers who do not want to commute will choose to live in cities, close to the job market. Lifelong learning may also have a part to play. If people are to remain economically active for longer, they will need to keep updating their skills and expertise. Some older 'returners' to FE and HE will want to add to their skills bank but others will choose to study for pleasure.

Older students are not ‘escaping from the nest’ and so many will want to live close to their place of study; that is, in cities.

Many more people will benefit from an occupational or personal pension in future. Already, post-retirement incomes are increasing faster than average earnings. A greater proportion of older people will choose to spend their disposable income on cultural and leisure in cities, though it must never be forgotten that cities are also likely to contain concentrations of older people who are very poor. Finally, older people will be needed in many walks of life, to fill the gaps that are left in the social fabric as the number of younger people declines. Older people have the maturity, life skills, time and citizenship that are needed by charities and by voluntary and community based organisations. Social disadvantage is greatest in cities, so it is imperative that older volunteers choose this active, committed and engaged urban lifestyle in future.

Urban design comes of age

People need to feel that the urban environment is attractive, friendly and safe, in order to live there. The re-vitalisation of the city is an important option for change that should facilitate active ageing. Older people are already one of the main user groups of traditional town centres. City

centre living is an important option for tomorrow's older citizens, but if we fail to take this into account when adding to the stock of new houses or when designing the public realm, this will significantly reduce the choices and opportunities for us all to age actively in the years to come. (1990 words)

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