

Musselwhite, C. (2014). Designing public space for older people. *Generations Review*, 24(3), 25-27.

## Designing public space for older people

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Much has been written about creating positive urban public space over the years. Some excellent work was carried out in the 1950s and 60s by William Whyte (his excellent film, *Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, highly recommended, can be seen at <https://archive.org/details/SmallUrbanSpaces> ). The seminal work of Jan Gehl (1987) and of Donald Appleyard (see Appleyard et al., 1981) highlighted the need to keep public spaces human and the importance of recognising the negative impact of the growing number of private vehicles including cars and vans on local roads. There is a need to move away from viewing urban areas as places for movement but to see them as spaces for dwelling, for being, for creating place and home. This has integrated its way into guidance now used in street design in the UK in *Manual for Streets* (for local residential areas) and *Manual for Streets 2* (for use of busier High Streets and streets of mixed use).

More recently CABI (2011) and urban designers like Shaftoe (2008) in his excellent book, *Convivial Urban Spaces*, highlight the need to make public spaces attractive to the user, so that people want to come and spend time within them. They all highlight the need to address spaces not just in terms of their utilitarian and practical assets but also in terms of their aesthetic and psychosocial qualities. In particular urban spaces should be:-

Character – streets should have character and reflect local identity, history and culture. Utilising local art and architecture can help enhance distinct and unique character and identity.



Continuity and enclosure - where public and private spaces are easily distinguished.

Quality public realm – good quality materials, easily maintained and replaced.

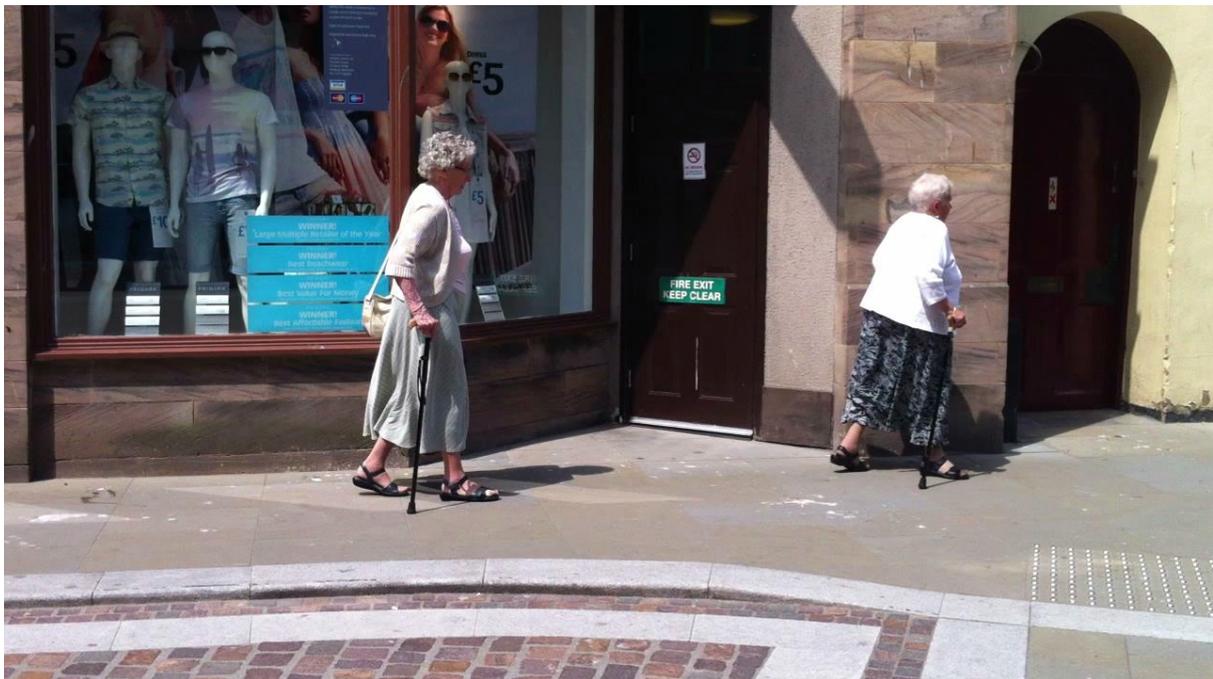
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Ease of movement - should be enhanced for all users, along with permission to stop and dwell through benches and places to lean and creating focal points to commune at including fountains, works of art, sculptures, memorials or trees, gardens and other greenery.

Legibility – area should be designed in a way that is easy to understand and interpret, not just with signage but with other visual and tactile cues as well to help determine legitimacy in activity and determine use.

Adaptability –The place should be built to adapt to changes in the needs of users, policy and legislation over time.

Diversity and choice – Allowing area to be used by a large variety of individuals and uses, with minimum exclusion.



How do we create public spaces that are attractive to older people? Can we take the CAGE guidelines and apply them? In terms of character and art, research by IDGO suggests art works are popular with older people, especially statues and water features (Newton and Ormerod, 2007b). Creating a sense of distinctiveness about an area can help those with cognitive decline and dementia by create a more legible space (Burton and Mitchell, 2006). Excellent work by IDGO project looks at the utilitarian and practical improvements that can be made in the environment improving the ease of movement and quality of public realm. IDGO research has found how important ease of movement is especially, with cracked or poorly maintained pavements hampering walking, how to improve tactile pavements (Ormerod, 2012), what materials to use (Newton and Ormerod, 2007a) and the importance of seating among other things (Newton, 2007). My own work has warned we don't allow enough time for older people to cross roads, that we design for young middle-class fit males (Musselwhite, in press). I even found older people from higher socio-economic status walk faster and don't give-way to other walkers as often (Musselwhite, in press). Legibility does not always have to be constant; people can adapt as with new designs. My work with Victoria Hammond found older people are able to adapt to changes in the urban environment that allow

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vehicles and pedestrians to use the same space; they were fine using shared space (Hammond & Musselwhite, 2013). However, we studied Widemarsh Street, Hereford, an area of low traffic volume, maybe more of an issue in the high traffic volume areas a hinted at by Melia and Moody (2013). But, spaces that are too open and wide can also be viewed negatively, even if they are totally pedestrianised, difficulty in finding orientation for those with cognitive impairments or visual difficulties or by creating a lack of space for refuge or sitting (Atkin, 2012). So a balance needs to be struck.



There is far less known about how urban design effects place attachment, an important concept in later life with its relationship to health, wellbeing as a result of ageing in place and independency agendas. In a study on High Streets, legibility and comfort are seen to be associated with place attachment for those of all ages, the street must be seen to be providing for needs and afford spaces to dwell, sit and perform the activities (Ujang, 2012). What is the relationship between psychosocial and environmental aspects of the built environment? How do they relate together? Could the absence of one be balanced by good provision of the other (for example poor urban design but high social cohesion)?

But more work is needed on linking the excellent work of urban designers and older people, can we adapt the messages of one to older people themselves. There is often an urban myth that design for older people is a design for all? But is it? Aren't older people more likely to be qualitatively different from younger people, not just different in physical capability or need but in terms of desirability and wishes when considering their wider social context? Do they have more time to dwell? Different work and life patterns means they are likely to use the spaces at the same time as others?

Whatever the issue, we need to start creating spaces for people, for people and we need to do it with people not sat at a desk with software, models and guidelines. There is a real need to get down and get dirty as an designer or architect, to talk to people, to watch, to observe, to audit yes, but to challenge too.

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