

Design Thinking for Urban Ageing

One thing that is common to the demographic profile of Sydney is that we are all heading towards the aged sector, albeit from different starting lines. But the 'baby boomer' generation is rapidly redefining how it wants to spend its twilight years, and this represents both challenges and opportunities across the spectrum of our aging population.

In recognition of Seniors Week, the March TVO featured an excellent editorial article on '*Growing old gracefully*' that highlighted the local care services available in Lane Cove, and how important it is to enable aging in place that can keep families and communities together, and help avoid the traditional institutional solutions.

Lane Cove Council is also to be commended on its recent Strategy for an Age-Friendly Lane Cove, and its Lane Cove Connection is an excellent conduit to what is both available and happening in the village.

'Aging in place isn't just a matter of building housing for retirees. It's about fostering supportive community structures that evolve with age.'

This quote from *The Atlantic* 'City Lab' (USA) article last month highlights the way in which a Naturally Occurring Retirement Community (NORC) model with a 'Supportive Service Program', can foster collaboration between neighbourhoods and local housing developments. The core idea is to help aging residents continue to live with support from social workers, nurses, and other support staff residents and caregivers as their needs change.

But there is also a wider spectrum of life for seniors living in the urban milieu, and how our public urban environment is actually suited to its more mature users is a cause for real concern.

In an enquiry of design for 'age-friendly' cities of the future, The Guardian (Australia) recently considered how cities are currently planned and designed for the 'mythical average person – super-mobile, without dependants but with a cast-iron bladder'!

By 2042 one in four Australians will be 65 years or older, but their access to city benefits will be increasingly compromised by design for an 'average' that, along with an accessible 'pit-stop', may fall well short of the desirable mark.

The public domain of the city can create many conflicts for seniors in dealing with a hostile outdoor environment that can be challenging. Barriers or obstacles that limit comfort, mobility or inclusion can increase isolation that will lead to further physical and mental deterioration, reinforcing undesirable quarantine effects.

In answer to what would need to change so the public domain can respond to changing needs of our aging population, a World Health Organisation 'Age Friendly Cities' project in 2006 was conceived to promote better physical and social attributes of the built environment that could help us all to age actively.

But what does such an environment look like?

From basic urban design such as wider footpaths and gentler gradients, more convenient and weather protected seating, to pedi-cab services for seniors (familiar to many in tourist destinations) -



Street furniture elements such as re-imagined lampposts, signage, fences or walls could perform secondary roles as seniors' work-out stations, giving aging limbs and muscles the chance to exercise by simple reworking of standard designs. Such concepts are given serious promotion in 'An Alternative Age-Friendly Handbook' by Sophie Handler, which features a range of initiatives and provocative ideas that might be considered for inclusion in more age-sensitive urban design.

There is also mention of the idea of '*third spaces*' and '*meanwhile spaces*', described as places where occasional casual meetings for social exchange can occur at the interface of public and private property, and many other strategies that can support a process of collaborative and participatory co-design...*involving, engaging with, being led by older people as social actors/agents in urban space. Often marginalised in processes of urban development and change there is arguably an 'underlying ageism' that characterises much of urban planning processes where older people are easily represented as passive victims of urban change.*

Chris Phillipson, Developing Age-Friendly Cities: Policy Challenges & Options, Viewpoint 37 (Housing Lin: October 2012), p. 6.

Innovative thinking at this level is the focus of InnovAGE, a workshop and conference being held in Canberra to stimulate a counter-narrative that can engage and empower seniors and stakeholders in their communities to develop new forms of age inclusive practice and entrepreneurial approaches to real-life issues. <http://www.innovage.org.au/>

I hope to report back on some exciting new thinking out of this gathering in a future TVO edition, but would also be interested in any feedback from readers.

Jon Johannsen
20 April 2015