



Designing for Wellbeing in Environments for Later Life

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As a response to its growing population of older people, in 2013, Sheffield City Council developed its 'City for All Ages' strategy. The University of Sheffield DWELL project (Designing for Wellbeing in Environments for Later Life) complements this work. Our design-led project aims to create exemplary proposals for housing, streets and open spaces that assist the well-being and mobility of older people.

Current UK government recommendations encourage older people to do some physical activity every week in order to keep healthy. Not only does keeping active in older age have physical benefits, such as managing high blood pressure, maintaining a healthy weight and reducing the risk of falls, it also boosts brain chemicals that lift mood and increase feelings of well-being. Physical activities such as walking, particularly at a neighbourhood level, are therefore important aspects for maintaining mobility and well-being in later life.

Maintaining mobility as we age is also important in terms of remaining independent, with poor mobility being linked to social isolation, health problems and difficulties in accessing shops and local services. Being able to access a variety of community services and facilities encourages social participation and walking amongst older people and this strong connection to the community and social environment enables healthy ageing.

A crucial aspect of the work we are doing is working collaboratively with older people. Participatory design research that involves older people can help address the shortcomings of a system in which people are treated as passive consumers or as residents to whom housing is given. Our research works with older residents to engage them in co-design projects aiming to tease out their preferences and concerns in order that they can be re-embedded at the heart of the design process. We then use this information to develop innovative design proposals and test them with our participants.

Research suggests that as people grow older, their immediate neighbourhood – as a place to walk, shop, socialise and access services – becomes increasingly important. The 'grey pound' supports thriving local centres which benefit everyone, no matter how old. Retirees also make up a significant proportion of volunteers, with their efforts helping to maintain local parks and green spaces, manage local sports teams or run lunch clubs for the 'oldest old'. We rely on their wisdom, skills and experience to support civic life.

Our work has identified four neighbourhoods within Sheffield that demonstrate a variety of different spatial, topographical, social and economic conditions. We have recruited groups of people within these territories and are carrying out a range of engagement projects with them.

The four neighbourhoods have been selected to reflect a typical range of issues found in many British cities, yet they are also typical of Sheffield. One area, Dore, is a former village now absorbed into the city fabric. Here we are working with a group that is interested in making public realm improvements to the village centre, redressing the dominance of cars in favour of a more pedestrian-friendly and age-embracing environment.

In the city centre we have a group of participants keen to consider the move back into the city centre. Here we are co-designing with the participant group, moving through a sequence of different scales in the design of dwellings, building typologies and finally out into the neighbourhood.

A spin-off from these exercises is the empowerment of older people to communicate their needs, and a better understanding of the language of design as it affects their daily lives. By demanding better quality places we hope they become more discerning consumers. As researchers we have privileged insights into older people's concerns and preferences that are essential to making housing and neighbourhoods fit for an increasingly large sector of the population.

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For further information please visit <http://dwell.group.shef.ac.uk>

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