How can we design places that support mobility, health, wellbeing and participation as people age?

Key findings from the Mobility, Mood and Place research project

Being able to get outdoors is essential for maintaining health and wellbeing into later life, but many older people find it becomes less easy, enjoyable and meaningful as they age. Meanwhile, our society is growing older: across Europe, the number of people aged 60+ is expected to increase by around two million, annually, for the foreseeable future.

To help ensure that living longer is a positive experience for everyone, we need evidence-based solutions to known challenges. The Mobility, Mood and Place research project has been exploring how places can be designed collaboratively to support outdoor activity, health, wellbeing and community engagement as people age.

Drawing on the participation of over 900 people, most of whom were aged 60+, our research shows how innovative neuroscience methods and codesign techniques offer new opportunities to understand older people's response to place.

Particularly through our life course and archival work, our research also shows that healthy ageing begins much earlier in life than we currently plan for, meaning that we need to take very long term views on fostering resilience for healthy older age.

Plan well, design well, maintain well - so that going outdoors in younger years becomes a lifelong passion for getting out and about... and it's easy to do!

Key findings

- Four qualities of places really make a difference to quality of life: access for all, access to nature, access to others and access to light.
- The mundane matters and the commonplace counts! Everyday things, such as pavement quality, benches and street lighting, can make all the difference as we get older.
- Green spaces seem to be restorative, offering a respite from the tiring demands that busy urban places make on our directed attention. Older people walking between different types of urban environments show changes in their emotional response to place based on brain activity patterns.
- Even a short walk can lift the mood if the environment is sufficiently varied. Things like colour and wildlife, opportunities for social contact, and familiar places, especially those linked to key memories, are highly valued.

- The design and layout of the home can help older people to be more active day-to-day.
- Well-designed environments can support older adults who have experienced a stroke to engage in, and return to, the activities they value.
- Healthy ageing is influenced by local environments throughout our lives, beginning in childhood. Features of the environment such as nearby access to public parks can have lifelong positive associations with healthy ageing, and in particular with better cognitive health in later life.

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