Directing Change in the Age of Aquarius

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TRENDS ASSOCIATED WITH our ageing population are not the harbingers of the bad and trying times we have been led to believe are coming. Embedded in the trends are the resources and opportunities on which to build strong communities. In the growing ranks of our older population are millions of healthy, active people over the age of 65. Employed in support of successful and productive ageing guidelines (Morrow-Howell *et al*, 2001; Rowe and Kahn, 1999), our older population's diverse experiences and personal energies hold the keys to urban and rural revitalisation and growth. As our only growing natural resource (Freedman, 1999, p 16), many people who are older want to contribute to the building of healthy communities that are characterised by the multigenerational, living, working, learning and playing.

While a phenomenon of global proportions, the cresting of the age wave in 2030 will find the United States with 24 percent of its population, or 71 million people, 65 years of age and older. Their desire to continue to grow personally, to interact intellectually with others, and to remain actively engaged will call on the expertise of landscape architects and other design and planning professionals. As educators, we have a ten- to twelve-year window of opportunity in which to prepare design and planning students for the spatial thinking needed to support productive and successful ageing. The necessary kinds of spatial thinking include cognisance of a mixture of active-living, mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented, live, work, and play environments. The newly formed cadre of spatial thinkers will bring a deeper dimension of understanding to and gain expertise from the work of gerontologists and community psychologists.

EXPANDING THE WAY WE CONSIDER AGEING

In the 1980s, gerontologists shifted their attention from a focus on disability and disease in ageing to the positive aspects of ageing. That shift led to two decades of nationwide surveys, analyses, and dialogue illuminating the productive social and economic roles that older Americans can play in society (Bass, 1995; Rowe and Kahn, 1999; Freedman, 1999). Missing in the research and discussions is an understanding of the spatial implications of productive and successful ageing. Absent are questions dealing with proximity to food and services, residential density and diversity, time spent in travel fulfilling daily needs, and outdoor active-living environments as related to places of paid employment, volunteer activities and various forms of social capital building. One practice that hides the gap is the use of

such words as 'availability' and 'access' by gerontologists and health care professionals to refer to whether or not a service exists in a given locale and not its distance from home, how one gets there, or how long it takes. In the literature, 'environment' relates to social, economic and political situations, not physical environments.

As the researchers recognised, illuminating and developing their "interdisciplinary research agenda" (Morrow-Howell, 2001, p 7) calls for the generation of more theoretical and conceptual work through interdisciplinary inquiry and practical application. The call for interdisciplinary inquiry and practical applications announces an opportunity for architects, urban designers and landscape architects to join the discussions. By working with spatial designers, the new gerontologists would bolster their theoretical and conceptual thinking, greatly expand the practical nature of proposed solutions, and enhance the interdisciplinary exploration into supporting and enriching opportunities for older people. In turn, designers and planners would ply their skills to the benefit of defined cohort groups with identifiable needs.

CHANGING SPATIAL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN GENERATIONS

The opportunity for environmental educators and designers to contribute productively to the building of a more positive outlook on ageing is illustrated in Rowe and Kahn's three-part definition of successful ageing: people's ability to maintain: a low risk of disease and disease-related disability; a high mental and physical function; and a continued active engagement with life (1999, p 38). A joining of the professions, as evidenced in two workshops conducted by the author, generates in-service learning and applied research, which deepens designers' understanding of how they can enhance the changing health, safety and welfare of the public in support of active living as integral to people's daily routines.

The fundamental behaviour of successful ageing, that of continued active engagement with life, is the category in which most designers would find their niche. Understanding the kind of environments that enable one's active engagement in, and aesthetic appreciation of, everyday life, what makes a space a place, and how the character of places contributes to community building is the forte of the spatial professions (Lynch, 1960; Buttimer and Seaman, 1980; Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993; Schneekloth and Shibley, 1995; Benzel, 1998). Work that joins the new gerontologists and designers gains increased focus from the research of community psychologistsinto what constitutes a sense of community. While not focused on ageing, the community psychologists' work does offer further clarity to the findings and analyses of the new gerontologists of successful and productive ageing.

SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Studies between 1955 and 1985 show people's sense of community is built upon feelings and behaviours (Riger, LeBailly and Gordon, 1981; McMillian and Chavis, 1986). Behaviours include informal interaction with neighbours (the number of

adults and children known by name), degree of social interaction, length of residency and use of local facilities (Glynn, 1981; Riger and Lavrakas, 1981). Feelings that foster a sense of community include: feeling a part of the community, expected length of residency, feeling useful, important, and in control or able to make a difference, realisation of shared values, and sense of personal safety (Peterson and Martens, 1972; McMillian, 1976; Glynn, 1981).

Sustaining these characteristic behaviours and feelings rests in two kinds of spaces. First, are the spaces in which people of all ages cross paths and meet informally as they carry out their daily routines. Such spaces provide for the sundries of everyday life. Second, are the indoor and outdoor spaces that support extended discussions and debate. These are the spaces in which people collaborate on matters important to the community, identify goals and the means to achieve them, and oversee the execution of the required actions. People whose paths cross in chance and then planned encounters on a regular basis come to realise resources in each other that may be applied to continued personal growth and community building (Wright, 1995; Kemmis, 1995; Durning, 1996).

Latent in McMillian and Chavis's review of sense of community research is that the communities are compact, rather than dispersed, they "offer members positive ways to interact, important events to share and ways to resolve them positively" (1986, p 14). The authors' findings identify the social qualities sought by the new urbanists. In these qualities we arrive at the blend of people and spatial knowledge that would meet the new gerontologists' call for collaborative, interdisciplinary-based inquiry, in the joining of health care-generated theories with designers' and planners' interpretations of the theories into built environments. A definitive approach to new urbanism begins with the identified changing needs of three populations: older people; public and private employers; and the workforce.

SPATIAL SOLUTIONS TO CHANGING NEEDS

Blending the basic spatial qualities of new urbanism with the social parameters of successful ageing sets the foundation for a multigenerational environment in which people of all ages share resources through their active engagement in life. The current convergence of trends associated with an ageing society, the struggle of public and private employers to replace retirees, and the overload of responsibilities on the greater workforce is setting the stage for dramatic institutional, social, and economic changes with regard to retirement, work and daily life. Within these trends, older Americans want to remain active within their communities (Freedman, 1999, pp 20–21). Because of the increasing rate at which retirees are vacating jobs employers are beginning to use innovative ways to attract new workers. At the same time that middle-age workers are in need of more hours to carry out their daily responsibilities, older Americans are looking for ways to contribute their backgrounds and expertise.

The gerontological and sense-of-community survey data provide new urbanists with a definable population whose desire it is to live in socially vibrant

communities characterised by personalised, compact neighbourhood design. By bringing the three definable populations, 'Boomers', employers, and workforce, into design studio projects the arguments of the new urbanists for high quality-of-life environments become informed by the successful ageing data. In turn, the data-defined concepts of the gerontologists and community psychologists of successful ageing and sense of community are made stronger by being able to *see* the kind of residential, work and recreational environments that would support them. Examples of how various populations' changing needs are being met are found throughout the country (Freedman, 1999; Dychtwald, 1999). With the examples brought into design studio projects, the students' learning quickly becomes less hypothetical and more timely. Students' understanding of the interdependence of spatial environments and social well-being gains substance. University students who introduce existing multigenerational programmes into their studio projects are made to consider a defined user population. As a result, the students' design programs and products become clearer and their learning more timely.

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