

QUICKNOTES

TRANSFORMING THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT IN SUPPORT OF AGING

THE AGING CHALLENGE

Our society is aging. By 2030, the United States will have more than 72 million residents age 65 and older, one in seven of whom will be 85 and older. National attention has focused on the financial implications of this demographic change for Social Security, Medicare, and other services. Less consideration has been given to our community responsibilities to ensure that the built environment supports older people's continued health and independence.

It is at the local level that we carry out the activities of daily life, thus the extent to which we provide supportive environments has a huge bearing on the quality of the aging experience. Aging provides a lens through which we can examine our communities and make them more livable. In fact, what is done to improve livability for older people often benefits people of all ages. Three components of the built environment with the greatest impact on livability are housing design, land use, and transportation.

HOUSING DESIGN

Three-quarters of older people live in single-family detached homes with 1,700 square feet or more on one-third-acre lots. Nearly one-third live alone. Most own their home (80 percent), where they have lived a median of 25 years. As a result, they have strong connections to their dwellings, neighbors, and communities. As people age, daily life in these large homes can be challenging. Required maintenance is physically difficult and costly. Common design features such as steps and narrow doorways can create significant constraints, especially for those with physical limitations or advanced medical problems. Renovations and retrofits to make it easier and more comfortable to stay in these homes tend to be very expensive, a significant problem for those on fixed incomes.

One way to address some of these challenges is to encourage or require the incorporation of universal design elements in the design and construction stages of home construction. Universal design avoids barriers and allows for cost-effective, longer term adaptations such as the installation of grab bars on an already reinforced wall without the need for additional construction costs.

LAND USE

Today, half of all older people live in suburbs. This proportion is expected to increase to 80 percent by 2030. The suburbs are characterized by low-density development patterns, separated, auto-dependent land uses, and limited transportation alternatives. These characteristics make it difficult for older people who cannot drive to get around, creating the need for supportive services and raising the risk of social isolation.

An aging-friendly community will seek to diversify its housing stock and in so doing offer older people the option of moving to more appropriate housing as their needs change. Mixed use and transit-oriented developments are a step in the right direction as the housing units are typically smaller and the higher densities enable the provision of associated infrastructure such as sidewalks that encourage people to walk and maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Another way to diversify housing stock is to allow accessory dwelling units (ADUs) as a permitted use in residential zoning districts. ADUs enable the adaptation of single-family homes to changing needs. They



This accessory dwelling unit was built in Portland, Oregon using universal design features including adjustable heights for the kitchen sink and barrier-free entries. (Image credit: Bruce Nelson and Carolyn Matthews)



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can provide needed rental income or living space for a family member or caregiver. They can allow an older home owner to age in place or an adult child to provide care for an elder. ADUs are one of the most effective ways to diversify housing stock because they create dispersed, affordable housing without public subsidy.

Some older people move into age-restricted communities. Although these communities are set up to accommodate older individuals, they are often in remote locations that are far from services and necessitate continuing reliance on the automobile. Communities can address this challenge by ensuring that zoning supports more centralized locations and requires development plans for addressing transportation and service needs as residents age.

An aging-friendly community encourages flexibility and innovation in terms of use and design. For example, with design forethought, an elementary school building could be transformed into a senior center and then back into a school in response to overall demographic changes.

TRANSPORTATION

Older adults will continue to drive out of both necessity and habit. Aging-related changes such as problems with focus and glare, slower reaction times, disorientation, and difficulty looking over one's shoulder can affect the ability to drive safely. While programs need to be in place to assess driving capabilities, corresponding efforts need to be undertaken to ensure that the environment supports safer driving. The federal government is developing aging-focused roadway design standards including signage, intersections, road curvatures, passing zones, turn lanes, construction/work zones, and maintenance requirements. An aging-friendly community considers and incorporates these standards at the local level wherever possible.

Walking is an important aspect of mobility and recreation for older people. Unfortunately, older adults are far more likely to be injured or killed as pedestrians than as drivers. They face serious risks of injuries due to poor maintenance or absence of sidewalks, illegally parked cars, and crowds. Planning for older pedestrians involves installing sidewalks and completing gaps in walkway systems along with education about and enforcement of sidewalk maintenance requirements such as trimming vegetation, removing snow and ice, and repairing cracks. Consideration also needs to be given to providing lighting systems that avoid casting deep shadows that can be problematic for older people and to the appropriate design and locations for handrails, benches, and street furniture.

Public transit is not a dominant transportation option for older adults, reflecting their concentration in low-density suburbs. That said, the use of existing transit by older people can be strengthened through comfortable and secure shelters, a schedule and routing that is efficient with appropriate destinations, and bus drivers trained in helping older people.

THE AGING PERSPECTIVE

Aging is a deeply personal experience. As individuals we do not know specifically what will happen as we age and there is often a considerable amount of unrealistic expectations and denial. Older people and their caregivers often find themselves in "survival mode" with little opportunity to step back and reflect on their experiences and the extent to which their options are constrained by the built environment.

Planners should seek out and listen to stories of what it is like to grow old in any given locale. They need to hear from people who have the financial resources and social networks to age comfortably as well as those less well-off. This type of engagement will underscore the imperative of planning for people of all ages and at the same time yield insights as to the specific changes that are needed.

We are at a moment in time when the need for change is profound. We have an opportunity to use our understanding of the aging experience to transform our communities so they support life as it is lived by real people. Communities that enable our elders to maintain their dignity and independence would be a powerful legacy for future generations.

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