Public places come in many shapes and sizes, from the rolling open spaces of national parks to the intimate courtyards in which neighbours share daily life. They are sites of observation and interaction between unrelated strangers, and places where people can greet friends and acquaintances. Studies of the role of place in the lives of older people stretch from macro- to micro-level analyses, including geographies of demographic change (for example global patterns of population ageing); environmental psychology (for example the meaning of home; place attachment); and social policy (for example developments in age-specific housing-with-care). Broadly, public spaces include the electronic and institutional as well as the physical (Low and Smith, 2006), and access to them reflects the gradation within the domestic house from back (intimate) to front (presentational) areas: differing by time, the attitude of landowners, and the status of those present. Madanipour (1999) defined physical public space as those areas within towns, cities and the countryside that are physically accessible to everyone, where strangers and citizens can enter with few restrictions. In this chapter the focus is on physical public places, in particular green and built urban spaces and the 'spaces between buildings' in which everyday public life happens.

In urban planning, public space was historically conceptualized as ‘open space’—publicly owned and managed outdoor spaces, whether natural or built, as distinct from the private domains of, for example, individual homes or business premises (Tonnelat, 2010). However, this distinction, based primarily on legal ownership, obscures the complex relations between people and places where different levels of public-private use are often compounded by no clear public understanding of who owns what. Thus the ‘publicness’ of a space often comes down to how it is used and understood.

The terms ‘space’ and ‘place’ are often used interchangeably, but in this chapter they are generally differentiated to distinguish the idea of a defined physical/geographical area (space) from that of a ‘meaningful location’ (place). This distinction is inevitably somewhat artificial since meaning is associated with the ‘place-making’ that people do, and that is always situated in specific spaces (and times), but it is a useful distinction for keeping in view the complex and nuanced nature of individual and collective responses to places in later life.
Understanding public places and publics

One way to judge quality in a city is not to look at how many people are walking, but to observe whether they are spending time in the city, standing about, looking at something, or sitting just enjoying the city, the scenery and other people. (Gehl and Gemzoe, 2004)

According to Erving Goffman (1971), public spaces are the realm of unfocussed interactions between anonymous strangers, where the chief rule of behaviour is one of ‘civil inattention’ as people allow one another to be present and go about their own business without interferences. This does not however imply complete indifference, since it involves certain ‘rules’ such as avoiding collisions with other people as one moves around; or accommodating some small privacy by spacing along benches relative to those people already there. And indeed Goffman had earlier (1963) described ‘situational aspects of conduct’, such as when a person arrives upon a scene where someone else is already there: this event transforms the actions of both the new arrival and the previous one, as each of them regulates their co-presence in that space. Such behaviours, which could be described as normative throughout the UK and in many other places, have consequences for older people in terms of feeling and being safe in public places, and at the same time feeling and being ‘visible’ and included. Yet public places are not just about interactions between strangers, as important as that is. They are also places where people see and greet friends, relatives and acquaintances beyond their own individual households (Holland et al., 2007). For older people who are no longer going to workplaces, and who often live alone, the possibility of bumping into people while out and about is an essential part of staying socially connected. For many it is the motivation to leave the house each day. Whether by arrangement or serendipity, encounters in the street and other public places reinforce everyone’s sense of being part of a community.

The gendering of space has been described by many scholars (for example Massey, 1994; McDowell, 1999), often centring on issues of appropriateness and safety. In this context ‘dominantly male’ public spaces have been cast as those where people generally interact and conduct business, presenting a public persona—in contrast to ‘dominantly female’ private spaces where the emphasis is on privacy, comfort, intimacy, and avoidance of the public gaze. Gardner (1989) in a critical review of Goffman’s portrayal of public places described a ‘normalized distaste’ for public places by women based partly on fear of crime and difficulties with ‘street remarks’, arguing that in public and semi-public places communication is characteristically appearance dependent: with specific consequences for women young and old. Overt discrimination on grounds of gender is most commonly associated with religious/cultural understandings of gender and the role of women in society, for example the custom and practice in Saudi Arabia of women and men being separated at public events. Yet even where there is no such overt segregation, people tend to discern places and times where it is or is not ‘appropriate’ for particular people to be. These notions change as ideas and roles change within societies, but one problem that arises is that different sections of society, meeting together in a public place, may have different understandings of these roles and of what is appropriate given gender, sexuality or age, as well as their own right to make comments about the presence or behaviour of others.

These understandings of the rights to be in public places have consequences for behaviour, in terms of appearance, activities, timing, and the need to be accompanied. Movements such as the feminist-inspired international ‘Reclaim the Night’ have since the 1970s been protesting against sexual violence and aiming to reclaim public spaces for women. Gay Pride parades have played a similar role in giving voice to LGBT communities for whom public places (with a few
exceptions) have historically been less accessible and safe than for others. As yet, despite many activist organizations across the world, such as the Grey Panthers (USA) or Pensioners Forum (UK), there have been very few mass-movements to reclaim public spaces for older people, although older people have an equal need for reintegration into the community activity of public places.

Disability and ill-health can further impact individuals’ experience of places. Whether stemming from congenital or earlier acquired conditions, or from disabilities or illnesses acquired later in life, with increasing age most people experience conditions where aspects of the physical environment present problems. Regulations and design that take this into account are very important for older, as well as younger people with disabilities. Many countries have established the principle, often backed up by legislation, that people with disabilities have a right to access to places used by the general public. Regulations may cover the need to install ramps; toilets suitable for wheelchair access; marked parking spaces for disabled drivers; wider doorways to buildings; and lifts in multi-storey buildings. Braille signage, audio alerts and textured surfaces may be required for people with visual impairments. However, where regulations are not monitored or enforced, these amenities may easily be omitted by developers, particularly in areas where the general assumption is that people with disabilities and older people generally either cannot or do not want to take full part in society.

Being older in public places

Given the complexity of public places, and the necessarily diverse nature of the people who use them every day, how much does age matter? Even taking into account ‘non-age’ characteristics, age remains a significant factor in how people use public spaces. This applies to children and young people as much as to older people. It has been argued (McDowell, 1983; Greed, 1994) that in economically advanced countries, at least, most public spaces are designed for the needs of working populations of adults and especially adult males. For example, the impressive wide expanses of paved open plazas between high-rise offices and commercial buildings in modern city centres allow speed of movement by able-bodied and mobile people, but present problems for people with poor mobility or those who need to take rest breaks from the strains of walking.

The ageing body is one of the reasons why being older in public places can demand more effort in adapting, for example, to sensual or cognitive impairment. Much of the writing about older people and public space, therefore, concerns physical aspects of layout, design and services that make it more or less possible for older people comfortably to access and negotiate these spaces. Are there sufficient transport links to the key public spaces and thoroughfares of the municipality? Are there many steps or steep inclines leading to the public space and, if so, are there supporting handrails? Within spaces, there needs to be sufficient and well-spaced seating or perching places where a person can take a break, and at least some walking surfaces sufficiently even and without broken slabs or hidden potholes; these aspects can make walkable a space that otherwise might not be. Weather and seasonal changes in many parts of the world make it necessary to provide some kind of shelter against sudden rain or a beating sun. Lighting, especially along pathways, becomes necessary as the natural light fades. For many older men and women access to working toilets is a crucial determinant of whether or not a visit is possible, and as with everyone else, clear and visible signage is much appreciated by those unfamiliar with a particular place.

Such points are widely recognized and acknowledged in recommendations for public places that work (DCLG, 2008; Sassi and Molteni, 2008). Considerations for ageing have included ideas about proximity to main circulation routes; contact with nature; shelter; and intimate seating.
areas. For example, for older people seating must be comfortable, with backs and arms, and either moveable or arranged at right-angles to allow for conversations. A UK analysis (IDGO, 2007) discussed details in the provision of seating and its positioning, with specific recommendations on dimensions, materials, and colour. Many of these approaches are found in Universal (or Inclusive) Design, which aims to produce environments and products that are both aesthetically pleasing and useable by everyone, regardless of age or (dis)ability (e.g. Imrie, 2013)—the classic example being the dropped pavement curb, designed for people with disabilities but now a standard feature of use to everyone. However, because people are so varied in their needs it is in practice impossible to design out all problems for everyone, and hence some definitions of universal design include assistive devices for people with specific disabilities (e.g. United Nations, 2007). This recognizes that universalization of design must co-exist with the recognition of bodily and indeed cultural differences in users. Furthermore, design needs to go hand in hand with other aspects of the creation of public places to make them useable for older people. For example, according to the UK Alzheimer’s Association (Alzheimer’s Association, 2012), 60 per cent of people with Alzheimer’s will ‘wander’, not remembering their name or address or becoming disoriented, a problem exacerbated by changed or unfamiliar places. This can be extremely distressing both for people living with forms of dementia and for those who care for them. One of the purposes of dementia friendly communities (Mitchell et al., 2004; Crampton et al., 2012) is to increase awareness and enable people who do not have dementia to support those who do, by recognizing disoriented behaviours and compensating for the inevitable deficiencies of public places, no matter how well designed, by building in person-to-person action and compassion.

Beyond ageing bodies, older people bring to the public domain a lifelong experience of various kinds of places, including familiar places that may have changed over time. This knowledge of the backstory of places applies equally to private houses, workplaces, schools, churches, etc., but it is particularly resonant with regard to public places because of the joint endeavour of citizenship as public places are created and carried forward. Layers of memories of earlier layouts, buildings, and events can contribute to a deep sense of place. Tuan (2001) described how an individual’s sense of being ‘in’ or ‘out’ of place is a function of the transformation of spaces into places as they acquire definition and meaning. This has consequences both for the older individual and for society more generally. The familiarity that comes with time, including physical and social attachment, place knowledge, and relationship with personal memories, is particularly resonant for older individuals. Rowles (1983) has described as ‘insideness’ the sense of identification that comes with long habitation in the same place. Phillips (2013) has described in contrast some of the ways that older people experience unfamiliar places, either through visiting unfamiliar localities or becoming distanced from previously familiar places through area change, or changes in their own cognitive ability or social connectedness, and what this means for their sense of place. In communities where older people have an accepted public presence and are ‘in’ place they can contribute to the community’s understanding of its public places and its own sense of history through conversation and storytelling. The potential downside to this sense of ‘ghost’ public landscapes is regret, loss, or alienation, particularly where change has been experienced as forced or retrogressive. Where older people feel ‘out’ of place in public spaces, perhaps even to the extent of feeling disoriented by neighbourhood change, their knowledge and contribution is lost. In many urban environments there is evidence of the withdrawal from public spaces, particularly in hours of darkness, of the very young, the very old, and people who feel vulnerable (Beunderman, 2007; WHO, 2007; Action Aid International, 2013). Sometimes this is related to the activities around night-time economies of drinking and entertainment targeted at young adults with money to spend but with low tolerance of children and older people.
Public spaces and the civic life of older people

From her seminal study of the life of plazas in Latin America, the anthropologist Setha Low concluded that culturally and politically charged public spaces are essential to everyday civic life and the maintenance of participatory democracy (Low, 2000). At the level of national and international politics, it is no accident that even in an era of mass electronic communication public places are often the sites of important events of public oratory (presidential inaugural addresses; political statements of grave importance). They are the sites of public displays of power and unity (military and royal parades); and celebration (free concerts; fireworks). But at the level of communities they also provide actual and symbolic places for interaction between all sections of society, contributing to citizenship and democracy. Sassi and Molenti (2008) describe how people of all ages are attracted to the kinds of places that allow them to meet others, and especially if those places also feel safe. They suggest that public space should be intergenerational, with ‘play’ spaces for adults and children: “The design of streets and public spaces must pay attention to the concept of conviviality and meeting places by restructuring the physical space of pedestrian paths or designing new spaces with better quality’ (Sassi and Molenti, 2008, p. 7).

The importance of fostering these interactions between people and public places begins early in life. Engwicht (1999) described the differing experiences of children driven by their parents to organized events like sports, where the rules of contact are dictated by others and competition is the point of the activity, to the valuable citizenship and lessons when children are allowed to play freely in public spaces. Here they transform spaces to places, creating shared meaning, getting early lessons in democracy and the responsibility involved in shared social lives. These negotiation skills are essential because in all public places that are functioning well—that is, available to the whole community—there are multiple opportunities for conflicts over use. Typical examples are the needs of drivers versus pedestrians; or pedestrian versus cyclists; people using mobility scooters on pavements versus people using walking aids; people wanting to hold a demonstration versus people who just want to pass by. At the margins there are also issues about the general acceptability of certain behaviours and presences—such as the visible presence of homeless people or beggars, gangs of young people, public urination, or breast-feeding, where one person’s sense of decency conflicts with another person’s idea of liberty. Where the presence of older people is regarded as unimportant or indeed something of a nuisance, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to negotiate acceptable compromises. Hence the withdrawal of older people from public places is as much a civic as a social issue.

Over several decades there have been commentaries on the decline of traditional public spaces, especially parks and town centre spaces. This has been attributed to many factors, including changes within society in relation to how people perform work and leisure activities, and design and finance issues as new material, technologies, and design ideas are used in redevelopments, often with in-coming corporate finance that has little long-term relationship to the locale. Of particular concern has been the spread of private ownership and what this means for public places (Minton, 2006). Traditional market streets have been supplanted by privately-owned and enclosed shopping malls, resulting in public rights of access being constrained by opening hours and the regulation of activities permitted within. For many older people, enclosed shopping malls provide a welcome respite from the weather outside, with places to sit and the comfort of knowing that there are toilets and security personnel on hand (Means and Timms, 2005). Others may regret the loss of lower-cost options, and a more distinct local identity found in traditional markets and shopping streets. Yet arguably the greater cost of the security and restriction of activity endemic in privatized ‘public’ places rests on the spread of fear and suspicion of others that follows from an embedded assumption that people do not naturally behave well (Minton,
For older people with frailties in their bodies and in their social support, this fear can discourage exploration or lingering in public spaces, especially unfamiliar ones (Phillips, 2013). The ubiquity of CCTV in many public places, and indeed the approach known as ‘Secured by Design’, have been criticized as blunt instruments that, while often popular with residents, actually do little to increase people’s own sense of security in the absence of caretakers (Minton and Aked, 2012; Scottish Office, 2009).

Writing about the ‘production of space’ in the 1970s, Henri Lefebvre argued that all societies shape their social spaces to meet their social and economic needs. If we accept this view, when public places have the effect of deterring older people from being present for much of the time, there are consequences for them as individuals and for society as a whole. The older person may draw back from opportunities to take appropriate exercise such as walking or social and civic interactions, retreating to the perceived safety of home. Serendipitous opportunities—such as bumping into an old acquaintance or spotting an unexpected bargain—diminish. In parts of the world with long winter nights this withdrawal contributes to social isolation and mental ill-being generally. By being physically absent, the older person may begin also to withdraw mentally from the life of the wider community, and the community becomes used to seeing older people only in certain times and places and perhaps even only doing certain things. If the design and curation of public spaces is a means of communication of social, economic and political priorities, and if place-making represents how such communications are transmitted and received, then the message of many prestigious public places is that older people are not valued.

Guidance is clear, if not always followed, about how physically to improve public places so that older people can use them more easily. But a good physical environment, while necessary, is not sufficient: other people and activities are also essential. Gehl (2011), writing about the need for activities, suggested that these should be supplemented with other possibilities, such as taking out into public outdoor places small daily domestic activities: peeling the potatoes, sewing or repair jobs, hobbies and meals. This would no doubt reinstate some of the quotidian activity that is seen by first world visitors as local colour and vibrancy when observed in locations they see as ‘exotic’. The question is whether such moves by enterprising older individuals in developed and regulated public spaces would draw down prevention from landowners and authorities and disapproval from neighbours, or worse, suspicion of cognitive decline. Hence more holistic approaches to reintegrating older people into the public domain tend to draw together physical/design requirements along with community efforts to draw in people of all ages. This necessarily involves local people, beyond tokenism, in planning shared spaces. And it is much more difficult to achieve where these people have no direct financial stake or worse, are seen as an economic drain.

**Conclusion**

It is essential for social cohesion and democracy that older people are included in the public life of communities taking place in public spaces. In response to global ageing, various initiatives have begun to address ways of maximizing the opportunities for older people to both contribute to and benefit from public spaces. The Age Friendly Cities (WHO, 2007) initiative aims to engage cities around the world in becoming more age-friendly and to ‘tap the potential’ of older people. Significantly, the WHO checklist covers outdoor spaces and buildings alongside transportation; housing; social participation; respect and social inclusion; civic participation and employment; communication and information; and community and health services. Given the variety and complexity of later life, and the multiple forms, uses and meanings of public places, this big-picture approach is arguably what is needed to set the context of forming/reforming public places. For public places to meet the challenge of working for older people alongside...
younger adults and children, we need to recognize that since people experience the same space differently, even universal design will fail to suit everyone all the time. Variety in the detail of places allows opportunities for people to choose places or parts of places where they can navigate confidently and feel comfortable. Beyond the physical and legal attributes of actual places, how they are experienced is also influenced by general social attitudes including to gender, disability and age. Hence creating inclusive public spaces also requires attention to these more general contexts that impact on how individuals feel in public places. Finally, it is important not to underestimate the contribution that people themselves make to creating age-friendly public spaces in terms of both the design of the spaces and the activities that take place in them.

References


