UrbAging: When cities grow older

Marcello Martinoni MSc

Institute for the Contemporary Urban Project (i.CUP),
Accademia di architettura, Mendrisio, Switzerland
E: marcello.martinoni@arch.unisi.ch

Enrico Sassi Architect

Institute for the Contemporary Urban Project (i.CUP),
Accademia di architettura, Mendrisio, Switzerland

Alma Sartoris MSc

Institute for Spatial Development (IRAP),
Hochschule für Technik, Rapperswil, Switzerland

M. Martinoni, E. Sassi, A. Sartoris. UrbAging: When cities grow older. Geron-technology 2009; 8(3):125-128; doi: 10.4017/gt.2009.08.03.006.00 Our future is old and urban. In 2050, for the first time in human history, there will be on earth more people aged over 60 than children between 0 and 14. No continent is exempt from the urbanization process. 'Old' Europe is already particularly concerned by this phenomenon, but demographic and migratory predictions foretell an analogous evolution worldwide. A multidisciplinary attitude is necessary to implement sustainable urban policies. For almost two decades urban strategies have been addressing the well-being of citizens, along with the development of necessary infrastructures. Today, the older city dweller has become in focus. Quality of life is generally admitted to be the result of a fruitful interaction between citizens and their urban environment in its different forms, beyond a mere question of health conditions. A Swiss study is described directed at making this concrete.

Key words: demography, urban policies, older city dweller

A team of researchers, composed of geographers, architects, and urbanists conducted a study[1,2] that focused on the built environment and public space of two Swiss cities with respect to their adequacy to the needs of the older generations. Its aim was to develop strategies that would integrate these requirements in the urban planning and design processes. The research has also raised questions and dilemmas. Among others: how to define the older person? How could we improve their quality of life? Is it more a question of public space or of housing?

THE CITY AND THE OLDER ADULT

The congress 'Urbaging: The City and the Elderly'[3] has assembled researchers in history, geography, sociology, economics, urban planning, medicine and architecture. The contributions encouraged the analysis of the 'ageing' issue in a systemic approach in relationship with the built environment.

From a theoretical standpoint, urbanism is the result of cross-fertilization between disciplines: engineering, architecture, geography, sociology among others. The approach investigated during the congress was to work in an interdisciplinary context. In applying the gerontechnology approach[4] we noticed that 'urbaging' focuses on the one hand on 'technology disciplines' with the couplets Architecture-Building, Information-Communication and Ergonomics-Design, on the other hand on 'gerontology disciplines' with the couplets Psychology-Social Psychology and Sociology-Demography.

The aspects of 'Medicine-Rehabilitation' were left out of consideration. The general

frame of 'UrbAging' is the improvement of the urban environment, which can in turn be multifariously examined in the fields of public space, road safety, aggregational potential, residential adequacy, etc., considering the needs of the older adults with potential benefits to the entire society. Maintaining an urbanistic approach, and keeping in mind the development of accessibility, connectivity and security of the urban space, a more intense use of innovative technologies has to be foreseen in the transportation system. For instance, there is great potential in Personal Rapid Transit (PRT)[5] or in the hectometric transport systems. A hectometric transport or people-mover is a system of tram or light transport per entirely automated rail[6].

The older person

Basing a definition of the older adult on birth date appears useless for urbanization. Being an older person today does not imply any individual condition. In trying to define the relationship between the city and the older adult, we clash against the tendency to understand 'old' as synonymous with 'disabled'. In this classic perspective, actions are mainly oriented towards organizing compensation and care services for older people. When urbanists build or think of an urban space it is their duty to pay attention to architectural barriers and to avoid, as far as possible, physical inconvenience. Being an older person means nowadays to be over 60 or 65 years old, more or less recently retired, usually with some voluntary work or hobbies, hopefully with relatives and friends, and enjoying one's freely disposable time. 'Disability'[7] is a concept unable to cope with such a picture. The new perspective is then to concentrate the effort in understanding senior citizens and their needs, in order to ensure the enhancement of their quality of life. In the urban space as well, older adults can be seen as actively playing a part instead of representing a problem.

People in Europe[8] who reach 65 years of age still have a life expectancy of about 16 years; those who reach 80 years of age, can expect to live 8 years more. Those years have to be meaningful. That is the positive perspective. However, besides implying a change in one's relation with space and other people, growing old involves inevitably some progressive loss of functionality. A useful definition is then based on the notions of 'frailty' and 'autonomy': it doesn't matter how old one is, but how one is still able to act in one's environment. In fact, disabilities[7] can be understood as a physical or mental limitation of a person in a specific social context, or as a gap existing between the person's abilities and the environment's requests. The city manager or any other professional person involved in the complex process of building and managing a city, needs to particularly heed the environmental conditions, both built and semi-natural.

Age-friendly city

The ideas developed about the couple 'city and older citizen' need to be inserted into the general wish of older persons to remain an active part of society. So, urban space must be conceived for the improvement of intergenerational contacts, and housing solutions have to consider the growing needs of the older adults without building any ghettos.

This is not merely an attitude of respect for the elderly or an ethically acceptable behaviour, but rather a condition for the efficiency of urban systems and their long-term sustainability. An active involvement of the older people, by means of participatory processes, helps us collect valuable information and, at the same time, generates renewed social dynamics. The project 'age-friendly cities' promoted by the WHO[9] is based on participation and the necessity to develop an active ageing agenda, which are in turn connected to the question of environment adequacy. The importance of a direct involvement of the final beneficiary has been outlined in urban planning[10,11], gerontechnology[12,13], and many other fields, and also brought to worldwide attention through the concept of sustainable development (i.e., chapter 28 of the 'Agenda 21'[14]). Independent of the sector,

by means of participation users are able to point out their perspectives and needs. The developers of concepts as diverse as an ICT engine or a square have to re-think their attitude and move closer to the concrete social necessities. The cooperation between those who have technical competences (architects, engineers, etc.) and the final users, through what is called inclusive design[15], or the participatory project, is undoubtedly an exciting challenge.

Rethinking the space of living, including all the territorial dimensions of daily activities, involves integrating the private living space, the common areas of buildings, the grounds outside buildings, and the whole urban context. One good example of this approach is the project Welfare Housing Policies for Senior Citizens[16].

Age-friendly public space
The research team of the 'UrbAging: Urbanization and ageing' project, wishing to answer the recurring questions asked by partners operating in the field, drew up a manifesto for an age-friendly public space. The founding principles are organized in three scopes: (i) Process management: governance, participation, and mainstreaming, (ii) Urban context: accessibility, connectivity, intensity, and (iii) Quality of the single spaces: conviviality, security, flexibility, and comfort[17].

An interactive decision support tool has been developed[17] to make the manifesto's principles explicit. Its aim is to make the research results tangible, operational and useful to the professional people who manage and build the city every day. The age-friendly public space is certainly attainable with a fair dose of common sense, but there are countless aspects and needs to take into account. How should the city for the older citizen be built? The decision support tool tries to provide clues to answer this question. It is a matter of method and approach: the tool stimulates the designer, the manager in charge, or the consultant with specific ques-

tions, in order to make him ponder about the relevant criteria for creating a public space adequate to the needs of the older person. It is a tool that shows a possible way to address the huge complexity represented by the ageing of our society and the deep changes connected with it. The impact matrix of gerontechnology[4] shows how the urbanization & ageing research[17] considers every domain of life: Health / Self-esteem (i.e.: accessibility, connectivity, security, comfort), Housing / Daily living (i.e.: accessibility, intensity, conviviality, comfort), Mobility / Transport (i.e.: accessibility, connectivity, security), Communication/Governance (i.e.: governance, participation, mainstreaming), Work/Leisure (i.e: accessibility, connectivity, intensity, conviviality, flexibility); with the main focus always resting on 'enrichment / satisfaction' and 'prevention / engagement'.

FROM CHALLENGE TO OPPORTUNITY
To describe the ongoing demographic shift the catastrophic image of 'silver tsunami' has been used[18], which entails a linear progression of needs in a static society. In Coriolanus, William Shakespeare makes Sicinius ask "What is the city but the people?"[19], which means, at least, that cities evolve together with their citizens. Being old in the sixties was different from being old today; how can we imagine being old in 2050?

The urban context of the future will be the living environment of people who grow increasingly old. The social paradigm of the older people and their needs in the city should quickly change as a result of a multidisciplinary approach bringing together urbanists and specialists in geriatrics, health care systems, public space authorities, the municipal waste service, the public transport system, and so on.

A growing willingness to cooperate among various professional people is needed, in particular among those that are involved in actual fact in the construction of physical space. Architectural projects able to bring valuable solutions to technical or sociologi-

cal problems thus represent a key issue to reinforce the quality of public space, and, in the end, the quality of the whole city.

The senior-friendly city is a city for everyone, a universal city that results of the human diversity that lives it and constitutes it.

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