Bettina van HOVEN*, Linden DOUMA**

'WE MAKE OURSELVES AT HOME WHEREVER WE ARE'[1]– OLDER PEOPLE'S PLACEMAKING IN NEWTON HALL

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to explore older in-migrants' experiences and perceptions of their spatial context at the neighbourhood level, the key aspects in their attachment to the neighbourhood, and the role of place in their experience of ageing. Our qualitative research was carried out in Newton Hall (United Kingdom). The findings show that older people can have a proactive role in terms of placemaking and their own wellbeing. However, the study also reveals that the condition of the spatial context can either support or hinder older people's sense of wellbeing.
Key words: ageing, older people, place attachment, Newton Hall.

1. INTRODUCTION

Becker (2003, p. 130) argues that 'studying the spatial context in which elders live and the meaning they attach to the places they call home is a critical component of studying the ageing process'. However, research on older people has so far failed to take into account the context in which they live. In particular the level of the neighbourhood, as a significant spatial and social context for older people, remains underrepresented (Peace *et al.*, 2005; Smith, 2009). Several authors have argued that positive bonds to the contextual environment, both physical and social, have a positive impact on the wellbeing of older people (Brown *et al.*, 2003; Molcar, 2008; Livingston *et al.*, 2008; Smith, 2009; Wiles *et al.*, 2009). Older people who have positive bonds to places are more confident, secure, and feel more in control than those who do not have such ties. They experience a higher degree of mental and social wellbeing. As a result of positive bonds to place, then, the need for public health and care services may decrease.

* Bettina van HOVEN, Department of Cultural Geography, Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen, PO Box 800, 9700AV Groningen, the Netherlands, e-mail: b.van.hoven@rug.nl
** Linden DOUMA, Department of Demography, Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen, PO Box 800, 9700AV Groningen, the Netherlands, e-mail: l.e.douma@rug.nl
[1] Eric, 75, respondent to the research in Newton Hall.

   In spite of the relevance of the person-place bond to the wellbeing of older people, Smith (2009) argues there has been a lack of providing an *insider* perspective in research on ageing (see also Watson, 1988; Diener and Fujita, 1995; McGillivray, 2007). In this article, we explore ways in which older in-migrants experience their local context, the housing estate Newton Hall (United Kingdom), key aspects in their attachment to its community, and the role of place in the experience of ageing as 'relational' (see Hopkins and Pain, 2007). Our research shows that Newton Hall offers important amenities within walking distance. At the same time, however, the environment poses challenges to the ageing bodies of the respondents. Nevertheless, and importantly, older residents experience a high degree of social connectedness which contributes to developing a positive bond to the local community as well as a positive experience of ageing. In the following section, we briefly discuss the concept of place attachment in general with a particular focus on ageing. We then introduce the geographic context of Newton Hall and the chosen research approach. The interviews reveal that respondents are capable of making use of and actively shaping positive spaces of ageing in both formal and informal settings. Nevertheless, they are confronted with barriers in the built environment which impede their activities and 'code' their bodies as 'old'.

2. BACKGROUND

In particular research within environmental psychology has shown that places are important for an individual's mental wellbeing (Fullilove, 1996). Twigger-Ross *et al.* (2003) found that people derive much of the sense of who they are and much of their self-esteem, in addition to their personal and unique aspects, from their group memberships or place belongings. Places can be seen as sources of strong emotions/feelings within people. Such feelings, or affective bonds, people experience (both positive and negative) in connection to specific places are what Altman and Low (1992) call *place attachment*. Place attachment usually develops over time via experiences and events in people's lives that are connected to particular locales (e.g. Rubenstein and Parmelee, 1992; Giuliani, 2003). The relationships between people and places are comprised of bonds with both, physical aspects of a place as well as experiencing close, local relationships with people i.e. social aspects of place (e.g. Altman and Low, 1992; Rowles, 1983; Sixsmith, 1986). One can, for example, become attached to a place because of the close vicinity of shops and other amenities required in everyday life. In this case, a place provides opportunities for desired activities and in that way becomes associated with positive emotions and experiences. That kind of an attachment is called place dependence or functional attachment (see Vaske and Krobin, 2001).

People also develop emotional bonds to places because of their relations to and meetings with other people (e.g. friends, family, local community). That kind of attachment develops in interaction with others, implies a deeper psychological and emotional investment within a setting, and can develop into place identity (Twigger-Ross *et al.*, 2003). Manzo (2005) argues that places can provide an anchor point and stability within the changing world (and changing neighbourhoods). 'Losing' a significant place then can have a great impact on people's mental wellbeing that can be compared to the feelings evoked by loss of a beloved one (Twigger-Ross *et al.*, 2003).

In her study on ageing and place attachment (in Vancouver and Manchester), Smith (2009) focuses on individual characteristics (length of residency; cultural influences; life history) and neighbourhood characteristics in relation to place attachment that emerged as significant from her interviews with older people. At the level of the neighbourhood, Smith enumerates the following: social support, contacts and integration; community participation; access to services and amenities; functional distance; public spaces; perceived control over the environment; neighbourhood satisfaction; perception of the area; perceived choice in the selection of residence; and location. The development of place attachment depends on the presence, absence and interaction of these characteristics. Since these may change over time or may take on different meanings over one's lifecourse (Parmelee and Rubinstein, 1992; Hopkins and Pain, 2007), place attachment is not fixed but dynamic. In the following, we elaborate on the role of some of the above characteristics in developing place attachment.

Familiarity with the neighbourhood might support the residents' sense of safety and perceived control of their environment (Livingston *et al.*, 2008; Smith, 2009). In addition, Shumaker and Taylor (1983) argue that place attachment tends to be stronger for residents who feel that their neighbourhood has strong social networks or contacts and for residents who actively participate in the neighbourhood community. Although Rivlin (1987) and Smith (2009) emphasise the importance of access to services and amenities as a factor that underlies the development of place attachment, Livingston *et al.* (2008) found that this merely serves as an entry-level of requirement for residents to be satisfied with their neighbourhood. The latter regard neighbourhood stability as an important condition for place attachment, as 'there are more likely to be well-developed local social relations, but also because the individual is more likely to feel safe and in control and thus to participate in such local interrelations' (Livingston *et al.*, 2008, p. 16). This perceived control and the level of satisfaction are determined by the relation between the contextual environment (aforementioned neighbourhood characteristics) and residents' preferences and personal competences. Neighbourhood stability may be negatively affected by several factors, for example rapid residential turnover in the area, the disappearance of neighbourhoods' shops and services, and crime (Livingston *et al.*, 2008).

Personal competences refer to 'something characteristic to the person' which determines personal capabilities (Smith, 2009, p. 11) such as a person's health status, financial situation or age, or their ability to deal with change. As a result of deteriorating bodily functions but also the societal context (e.g. perceptions of old age, pension systems etc.), older people's personal competences are likely to decrease (see Rubinstein and Parmelee, 1992). We would emphasise, following Laz (2003), that age (and ageing bodies) is 'something that is accomplished or performed':

> […] age is a phenomenon we (individually and collectively) work at making meaningful (in general and particular) through various interactions that are framed in the context of institutions and social structures. Certainly, age may not always be equally salient or meaningful in the same way in all situations […]. Age therefore, is constituted in interaction and gains its meaning via interaction in the context of larger social forces (Phoenix and Sparkes, 2009, p. 221).

As geographers, we would add that the spatial context in which the performance of age takes place is worth considering more explicitly as it gives a more nuanced, 'relational' perspective on ageing and wellbeing (Hopkins and Pain, 2007).

3. RESEARCH APPROACH

3.1. Location: Newton Hall

As part of a wider study, our research project was carried out in Newton Hall, located in County Durham (North-East England, United Kingdom). Newton Hall is located approximately three kilometres away from Durham City, in the main urban area of County Durham. According to the Office for National Statistics (2011) Newton Hall had an estimated total population of 7,624 residents in 2001, including 1,137 persons aged 65 years or older.[2] It is noted by the Durham County Council (2010) that Newton Hall, like the rest of Durham City, faces the effects of an ageing population. In Newton Hall, the largest part of the housing stock was built between the 1960s and 1980s and it once was famous for being the largest private housing estate in Europe.[3] Correspondingly, its housing stock is rather uniform and mainly characterised by detached and semi-detached houses. Except for a recently constructed, small, privatised care home for older people, there are no houses purpose-built for older people. Newton Hall has a supermarket, a small

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[2] A census is carried out by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in England and Wales every ten years. At the moment of this writing the results of the census 2011 are not available yet.
[3] A housing estate is a residential area containing a large number of buildings planned and constructed close together at the same time.

shopping centre with several shops, a community building, a sports centre and a public library. The larger shopping centre 'Arnison Centre' serves a large part of Durham City among which is Newton Hall. Figures 1 and 2 provide an impression of the houses and the local shops in Newton Hall.

Fig. 1. Visual impression of Newton Hall, the local shops
Source: Linden Douma

Fig. 2. Visual impression of Newton Hall, overview of Canterbury Road
Source: Linden Douma

3.2. Methods

This article draws on seven in-depth interviews that were conducted with older people in the housing estate Newton Hall. The main data source in this research is semi-structured in-depth interviews (e.g. Valentine, 2005; Dunn, 2010), supplemented by mental mapping (e.g. Saarinen, 1974; Kitchin, 1994; Katsiaficas *et al.*, 2011). The resulting maps from the mapping exercise triggered the discussion with respondents about their neighbourhood. In addition, the maps were used to get an overview of the wider context of the neighbourhood and the importance of places in the neighbourhood to the respondents. The mental mapping exercise was carried during the interview and each of the respondents participated in it. Except for the theme of the map (the neighbourhood), the respondents were free to choose the content, detail, elements and colours of their map.

Interviews were conducted with the aim of understanding people's perceptions of, and responses to, their physical and social environment at the level of the neighbourhood. The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to two hours in length. The questions were mainly based on the factors that help explain the nature of place attachment, as noted in section 2. Topics included are; respondent's personal characteristics; residential life course; neighbourhood characteristics; neighbourhood satisfaction; and the respondent's social life. The semi-structured nature of the interviews enabled some degree of flexibility to the course of the interview but the main topics of the interview were predetermined and covered in each interview. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

3.3. Respondents

The respondents to this study were recruited with the help of two key informants at Age UK County Durham.[4] Specifically, community centres in the Durham City Area were visited, the research was introduced to visitors of the centre and their voluntary participation was requested. The choice of respondents was based on self-selection. The inclusion or exclusion of respondents was determined by whether the older people themselves wished to participate in this research or not. In Newton Hall, all respondents knew each other and lived within walking distance from each other, and all respondents were house owners. Table 1 gives an overview of the respondents to this research.

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[4] Age UK is composed of several charitable organisations, specifically concerned with the needs and interests of all older people. Numerous Age UK organisations exist on national, county, and local scale-levels and together they form the largest charity for older people in the United Kingdom.

Table 1. Some characteristics of the respondents

Name	Age	Gender	Marital status	Length of residency	Previous residence
Peter Janice	81 78	Male Female	Married	5 years	Bournemouth
Maria	76	Female	Widow	11 years	Birmingham
Eric Mary	75 80	Male Female	Married	16 years	Moved several times, previous residence: Durham City
Beatrice	88	Female	Widow	20 years	Southmoor
Dave	95	Male	Widower	30 years	Gateshead

Note: 6 Any names used are pseudonyms.

4. OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS IN NEWTON HALL

According to Smith (2009, p. 24), area perception is 'found to undermine or aid in attachment'. As noted above, area perception is impacted by the physical presence of services, for example (place dependence, Vaske and Korbin, 2001) as well as intangible characteristics, i.e. emotions that develop in the interaction between place and person (place identity, Twigger-Ross *et al.*, 2003). This transpired from our study as well. In the discussion below, we draw attention to the varying role places can play in people self-identifying as 'old'.

4.1. Amenities

During the interviews, the general impression was given of Newton Hall as a convenient place. In terms of available services and amenities, for example, Peter (81) and Janice (78) stipulated the vicinity of amenities and public transportation as a characteristic of their new home. In fact, in the mental maps, these amenities were highlighted as important aspects of the respondents' places (see e.g. Eric's map in figure 3).

Specifically, the Arnison centre, the social club (community centre), the library and the CO-OP (supermarket) were drawn by the respondents, followed by the church, and the post office. Most of these locations were described in the interviews as significant locations for creating and maintaining social networks. During the interview, Eric (75) describes:

We go to the Arnison centre, it is a ten minute walk, we go to the CO-OP and the library and the post office, that's six or seven minutes walk. The doctor's is just up the road there. The hospital is not much further, right. We are in walking distance of anything and where the carwash is, is a bus stop to Chester-le-Street, Newcastle, and down to Durham. Don't need a car.
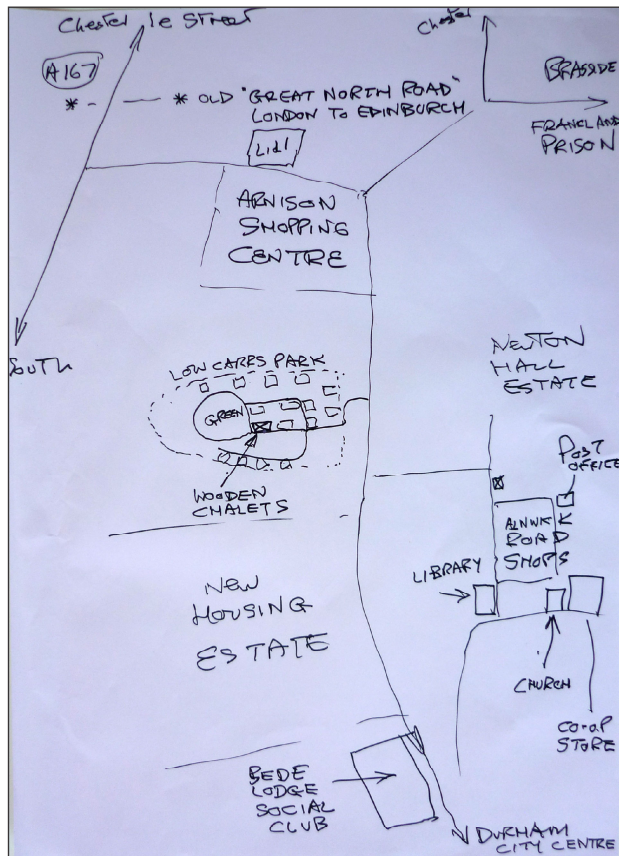
Fig. 3. Mental map of Eric (75)

Beatrice (88) confirms there are 'plenty shops, what you need. I mean at our street here we have got the post office, we have got a café, we have got the betting shop, we have got the chemist, the baker and the beauty farm you know'. At first sight, it appears that the 'environmental press'[5] (Smith, 2009) is relatively low. The respondents are able to do their own shopping and organise many everyday activities as well as (less) frequent visits to their general practitioner by themselves.

4.2. Mobility

All respondents to this research report some health problems, some of which affect the respondents' mobility (e.g. bad knees, arthritis, artificial hip). For that reason, a number of respondents used mobility aids in order to move from place to place,

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[5] Environmental press can be defined as the experienced and perceived demand that is imposed by the environment on its residents.

i.e. Mary (80) has a problem with her balance so she makes use of her walker or her wheelchair, and Dave (95) has an electric buggy. Although the distance to amenities does not pose a significant problem, the details of the route to such amenities do. Indeed, some respondents raise concerns about certain aspects of their neighbourhoods, for example the lack of bus services or the built environment. Rubinstein and Parmelee (1992, p. 146) note that 'normal environments become more constraining as one's capacity to act upon them wanes'.

It is important to note that 'normal environments' are normal only in the context of 'regular', healthy, young bodies (and likely; male, middle-class, heterosexual and white).[6] This distinction is relevant because 'normal environments' impose barriers to some people who use and move through these environments in different ways as do our respondents and therefore identify them as 'not normal'. In the case of our respondents, their physical impairments cause the respondents to read the environment in a different way than younger residents may and they perceive risks in locations others may not, such as the speed by which cars pass by, or the curb of a sidewalk. Peter (81) notes that he would like to see 'a road speed limit of 20 miles per hour. It is dangerous to cross the roads are our age, and the traffic drives pretty fast […]. Something has to be done'. And Dave (95) explains:

> I came to one pathway and the pathway was about this high [about 30 centimetres] and I cannot go off there, I was stuck so I thought 'what can I do'. So I thought 'I go off and lift it off'. And here I am lying on the road. So that I would like, away with the high curbs. All the curbs yes. They should get rid of all the big ones.

Eric (75) and Mary (76) confirm the problem of accessibility, and Eric (75) says, 'Durham is famous for bad pavements'. In the case of travelling from A to B on foot, it seems to be largely the outcome of urban planning that suggests to the respondents that they are 'old'.

In terms of mobility, we would note that a number of respondents also indicate locations several miles away on their mental maps, for example Durham City Centre and Newcastle. Beatrice (88), Peter (81) and Janice (78) still drive a car which allows them to combine trips or to travel a greater distance. The other respondents fall back on family or friends to go to places or they go by bus or on foot. Dave (95), for example, gets a ride from his younger friend Jack of 94 years old. As a result, some activities require coordination with other people or bus schedules which takes away some of their choices, freedom and level of control over their everyday lives. Having said so, Dave (95) reinterpreted his shared trip to the supermarket as comprising added, social value.

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[6] We add this note relating to a body of literature maintaining that architects, planners and local authorities have long prioritised the needs and demands of 'mobile bodies' in designing the city. This focus has resulted in 'design apartheid', whereby space is arranged in such a way that it imposes social and physical barriers in the everyday geographies of disabled people (and other Others). In the city, then, impaired bodies become 'abject', 'dissident' and locked out (see also Gleeson, 1997, 2001; Imrie, 2000, 2001; Kitchin, 1999; Sibley, 1995, 2001).

Overall, it emerged from the interviews that respondents did not ponder on their ageing as problematic. Instead, they named many occasions where they made social connections and had the time to take advantage of social encounters, even when unstructured and unplanned such as in shops and the way to these on the streets. The multitude and quality of social connections gave respondents a positive outlook on ageing as the following section shows.

5. THE SOCIAL FABRIC OF THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

A large part of residents' attachment to their neighbourhood in our study appears to be social in nature (see also Ahlbrandt, 1984; Rivlin, 1987; Rubinstein and Parmelee, 1992). Cattel and Evans (1999) confirm that, among other factors, friendliness and support of neighbours foster people's sense of attachment to their neighbourhoods. In particular these aspects are much and often mentioned in all of the interviews. Importantly, the social featured as an important factor in decision-making when moving to Newton Hall. For example, when looking for a smaller house when they got older, Eric's (75) choice of words reveals that their decision was an emotional one. He says, 'It is a little world on its own in here […] We fell in love with the site'. Maria (76) reveals a similar sentiment, 'I came here with my son in law and my daughter, […] we came up here, to visit her grandmother. And I thought "nice I like it". Went back home and I decided "I will move"'. And Dave (95) and Beatrice (88), who live there the longest, talk about their community as 'a happy neighbourhood' and a 'very friendly neighbourhood'.

The respondents also gave examples of chance meetings and talking to people during daily routines on the streets. Maria (76) describes:

> So I go out and I meet people when I go out. Just stand and talk to them. I went out the other day at 10 o'clock in the morning and I went to the CO-OP, the shop. I got back half past twelve because of the different people I was talking to.

However, social connections are not limited to chance encounters but are experienced in the respondents' immediate neighbourhood as well. In the following quotations, Dave (95), Beatrice (88) and Peter (81) highlight the care extended to individuals by their neighbours.

Dave (95):

> I wasn't very well over the New Year period and they [neighbours] kept coming across and go getting groceries for me and things like that. And the neighbours next door they are very kind to me. They give me all sorts of things and they are very good. They are very kind to me. They are very helpful.

Beatrice (88):

I have lovely neighbours. I mean we ring each other, are you all right, you know. And that's the main thing.

But Peter (81), who has 'only' lived in Newton Hall for five years shares similar experiences and he explains,

Everybody in this road sends everybody else a Christmas card. Our first Christmas here, we had a Christmas card from everybody, and we didn't know them you see. But in this part of the world, people are very friendly.

Both Dave (95) and Peter (81) attribute the friendliness of the people in their neighbourhood to being a remnant of the former mining industry in this area.[7] Peter (81) uses terms such as 'traditional' and 'camaraderie' to explain people's social consciousness, he concludes that "although it is gone now – there aren't any coal pits now – the camaraderie has remained". Dave (95) suggests that the coal mining history has become a part of the social fabric of the area. He states, 'They are kind people because they are an ex-mining family. The miners are always good kind people'.

5.1. The Community Centre

In addition to neighbourly care and 'chitchat' on the street, Newton Hall also provides designated space for older people to socialise and carry out a variety of activities. The community centre stood out as a location that was specifically meant for people of 65 years and older. This centre, mentioned as social club, luncheon club or senior citizens club, appears to hold a special place in the weekly routines of the respondents. It serves to get to know people, maintain contacts, delivers organised entertainment, provides opportunities to contribute to the organisation of activities or care for members attending and, overall, strengthens the social fabric of the 65+ community. In the following, Dave, Peter, Janice and Beatrice describe their experiences.

Dave (95):

I retired 16 years ago and we have been relating to the community since then by joining the senior citizens club. Over sixty-five of age which is now closed down as the members became older and fewer but the residue is the luncheon club, so we have about sixteen remaining members that we meet every week. And yesterday we were singing in the community centre.

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[7] County Durham has a history of coalmining. In contrast to most of Durham City's surrounding villages, Newton Hall itself is not a former mining settlement. However, several collieries were located quite close to Newton Hall.

Peter (81):

When we first came here, obviously we knew the family but we couldn't just know them. We had to know other people as well. And so we joined- it was called the over-sixties club wasn't it. And that was very pleasant […]. We got to know people there. It was a good thing for us. Otherwise it is very difficult to get to know people in a strange place.

Janice (78):

I am usually over here [community centre], quite often. On Monday, Tuesday and Thursday and Saturday I help […]. It is quite a busy week; I do not get much time for myself. […] If I haven't here to go to I don't know what I would do. You need something to go to. Some nights you come here and then you have a laugh and that's really what it is all about, enjoying yourself.

Beatrice (88):

I pick up a lady every Monday and I take her to the lunching club. And I take her home.

The in-depth interviews reveal that respondents proactively pursue their own social wellbeing by maintaining contacts with local (older) residents. As a part of this proactive behaviour, they also assist others in become a part of and maintaining social networks. Further, the respondents experience a high degree of social connectedness and support between neighbours. Overall, local social relations appear to be well-developed in Newton Hall and all respondents have a positive sense of attachment to its local community.

6. CONCLUSION

By analysing the experiences of older people's everyday use and interpretation of spaces in Newton Hall, the present study has revealed older people's agency in terms of placemaking by highlighting older people's own active role in actively pursuing and shaping spaces for wellbeing. In our study, we encountered a group of older residents that sometimes struggled with health and mobility problems but that was generally proactive in creating and maintaining opportunities for positive place experiences. They actively made use of designated spaces for older people, such as the community centre, but converted unstructured spaces such as shops or streets to positive spaces for communication as well. Their attitude and behaviour was not restricted to their own daily lives but they were active in giving shape to positive spaces by lending a hand in organising activities at the community centre, or helping others take part by providing a means of transportation. Having said this, the built environment and the regulation of street space by the city imposed real challenges. Respondents mentioned the curbs as a barrier to mobility as well as the lack of a speed limit on roads that were frequently used by the respondents

for their daily routines. In these spaces, they could exercise less control and were more often confronted with the limitations of their ageing bodies. It was in these spaces and on such occasions that the respondents felt 'old' which impeded their sense of wellbeing. Our study therefore shows that people's lived experiences and structural conditions are intertwined.

More broadly, our findings resonate with the work by Smith (2009) in Manchester and Vancouver. We noted earlier that the development of place attachment depends on the presence, absence and interaction of neighbourhood and individual characteristics. We stated that this interplay between characteristics may change over time or may take on different meanings over one's lifecourse (Parmelee and Rubinstein, 1992; Hopkins and Pain, 2007). Our analysis underscores the relevance of looking at place attachment in a more differentiated way since it suggested that people can feel active and 'young' as well as immobile and 'old' *within one day* in the same city. Finally, our findings also support earlier calls for more open cities (Gleeson 1997, 2001; Imrie 2000, 2001; Kitchin, 1999), for public spaces that are more inclusive. More attention to the condition and accessibility of urban space is therefore an important policy implication and one which might increase older people's experience of wellbeing.

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