

Age-Friendly Seating & Sense of Place



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About the Author

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Current research areas are Age-Friendly Cities, inclusive urban design, sense of place & non-representational theories and participatory methods.

Summary

The Age-friendly Manchester programme aims to improve the quality of life for older people in Manchester and make the city a better place to grow old. In 2010, Manchester became the first UK city to join the World Health Organisation's (WHO) Global Network of age-friendly cities. This membership recognised the work that had been happening in the city since 2002 as part of the Valuing Older People (VOP) programme. Since 2005, work in Manchester has included an urban design element and in 2012, the Age-friendly Manchester team established an Age-friendly Design Group. This goes alongside partnerships with the Manchester School of Architecture and Manchester School of Art.

This study recruited older people to explore how they understand and experience a variety of seating in five different city-centre areas. It focuses on both the design of seating and the more complex aspects of place, from an age-friendly perspective. The design/people/place relationship is explored through a bench audit and semi-structured walking interviews. It was found that seating is of primary importance for older people. The interrelationship between tangible factors - design - and intangible elements - experiential - strongly influence the experience of place and seating. Design and the place in which the seat is situated are important. Based on this study, seating should always be situated and understood within the broader frame of place. Full recommendations are listed at the end of this report, however key points include:

1. Age-friendly seating should not be a one size fits all model. There are a range of existing models that can be built upon.
2. A variety of seating should be installed, based on work with older people, using recommendations from 'Design for Access 2' as a benchmark of good practice.
3. Utilised as a place where older people can engage in activities, try new things and meet new people; the city centre must be given more attention.
4. The council's sense of place work must be refreshed and utilised as a tool for community engagement and development.
5. The city should be understood as complex. Individual journeys are made up of a mix of past and present emotions, memories and affects. The aspects and qualities of places that are more fluid and less tangible are a significant part of the choice of which seat to utilise.
6. Utilise a participatory approach. Conducting age-friendly research with older people will help create a holistic picture of reality while challenging the notion that 'ageing' is a policy problem to be solved with largely disconnected design solutions.

Introduction

The 21st century witnessed a momentous transition in modern urbanism with 2008 marking the year when more than 50% of the world's population became urban. Simultaneously, globally improving health, nutrition and medicine have resulted in population ageing significantly affecting contemporary conurbations.

The Age-friendly Manchester programme aims to improve the quality of life for older people in Manchester and make the city a better place to grow old. In 2010, Manchester became the first UK city to join the World Health Organisation's (WHO) Global Network of age-friendly cities. This membership recognised the work that had been happening in the city since 2002 as part of the Valuing Older People (VOP) programme. Since 2005, work in Manchester has included an urban design element and in 2012, the Age-Friendly Manchester team established an Age-friendly Design Group. This goes alongside partnerships with the Manchester School of Architecture and Manchester School of Art.

The WHO produced an Age-friendly City Guide, which has a focus on urban design, based on the model of an ideal city for older people. It has a universal checklist of features that should produce an age-friendly environment. This guide highlighted public seating as a necessary age-friendly feature. Various academic and policy publications have since reinforced this observation, often with a focus on 'design'. Although crucial, this type of practical guidance carries an inherent risk in that a preoccupation with generating actionable results excludes the equally important, less obvious and more complex, relational dimensions amidst design, people and place (Handler, 2014).

Context

As described, Manchester has a long standing programme of work with a citizenship approach to ageing. Ultimately, the city aims to have age-friendly policies, facilities and services as the 'norm', rather than the exception. Following the identification of seating as a significant age-friendly urban feature by the WHO, there have been several other publications which reinforce this argument and give varying emphasis to the significance of 'place'. This section outlines a selection of such literature.

A Research and Evaluation Framework for Age-Friendly Cities (Handler, 2014)

This framework provides a comprehensive guide to the latest research in each of the eight domains outlined by the WHO and a summary of toolkits and resources to aid policy-makers and practitioners in developing age-friendly work.

In addition to introducing a number of useful concepts (Table 1), the framework suggests that bench design recommendations must move beyond the 'bare minimum' of functionality and utility - how 'sittable' a seat is - and begin to consider how desirable and comfortable it is to use. Appreciating the interrelations between design, people and place; it draws attention to how 'less tangible' dimensions affect place experience and suggests policy-makers must begin to account for the social and emotional fabric of an environment too. For example, situated within the context of rapid urban transformation, the meanings that people ascribe to place are particularly important to consider.

Concept	Description
Disabling Environments	The degree to which outdoor spaces and buildings can be classified as age-friendly depends on the physical fabric of the built environment and how it supports/obstructs one's ability to get out in older age. In the context of seating, this may include space to put a wheelchair, mobility scooter or walking aid.
Environmental Deficits	Highlights how ageing is accompanied by an elevated sensitivity to the smallest of physical features of the built environment - it is not only the absence of seating that negatively affects place experience. Rather, it is a culmination of poor public services and environmental quality.

Table 1: Useful concepts (Handler, 2014)

Design for Access 2 (MCC, 2003)

Co-produced with disabled peoples organisations in Manchester and Manchester City Council, 'Design for Access 2' is the Councils best practice guidance of inclusive design standards. The publication includes a

detailed section on how to create 'accessible' public seating and documents a selection of specific design recommendations:

- Seating should be provided at regular intervals (not more than 50m apart) in pedestrian areas and at transport interchanges
- Seating should be different heights to accommodate for various needs
- Seats should be located in safe, clearly visible and well lit areas
- Seats should be positioned off the footway, and should allow an area of 400mm in front of the seat
- A firm wheelchair parking area 900mm wide should be provided on both sides of the seating
- The seat level should be around 475-500mm from the ground
- Seat width should be 500mm and should include a back support and arm rests on both sides of the sitting position

Years Ahead: A Report on Older Person Friendly Seating 2014 (Ions, 2014)

'Years Ahead' operates through a series of representative groups in the North East. The most significant study in relation to this research is that conducted by the 'Elders Council of Newcastle City' within the city centre on seating. Although there are a variety of seats, much of it is uncoordinated and often unsuitable for the needs of older people. In response, a research project was launched which attempted to devise the design of a seat which would meet the needs of older people. Similar to Manchester City Councils 'Design for Access 2', the research suggested that the seating requirements for older people are:

- | | |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1) A properly angled back | <u>Bonus Items</u> |
| 2) Correct seat height | 1) Space for walking stick |
| 3) Assistive armrests throughout | 2) Space for shopping bag |
| 4) Warm feel material | 3) Cup holder |

This project also suggests age-friendly seating research must move beyond the basic and suggests several creative additions to public seating such as 'play / exercise equipment' that is specifically adapted to older people's needs. These alternative facilities offer something beyond support: a space for leisure-based activity out in the open. It must be noted that this broader sense of what 'supportive' might mean involves cultivating a particular kind of design sensibility that only comes through the process of actively engaging end-users in the design of the product.

The Alternative Age-Friendly Handbook (Handler, 2015)

This handbook aspires to encourage the creativity of urban practitioners. Similarly to the 'Years Ahead' report, it suggests that inclusive design can only ever be classified as 'inclusive' when design elements are created with and by those at the heart of the work.

It suggests that seating is more than something that is simply 'sittable'. Rather, offering 'support beyond function', a genuinely inclusive seat is defined as much through its desirability, convenience and comfort of use as much as its basic function as a rest stop. It pays greater attention to the importance of 'place' in affecting the perceived age-friendliness of the seat and suggests that the quality of the seating and the environment in which it is situated becomes a visible marker of 'care', significantly affecting place attachment and satisfaction.

Bristol Legible City (BLC, 2003)

Bristol Legible City is a project/concept designed to improve people's understandings and experiences of the city through the implementation of identity, information and transportation projects. Linking directly with sense of place, these projects are designed to communicate the cities identity, history and its unique sense of place consistently and effectively, often through the use of street furniture.

Amongst other things, the project highlights the importance of appreciating precisely how an item of street furniture is positioned within the landscape can significantly affect people's experience and enjoyment of a place. Although aspiring to create a 'legible' environment, this project highlighted the importance of maintaining a certain level of distinctiveness in each place. Interpretations from this work could be embedded into age-friendly seating research and policy.

Key Points:

- Choose street furniture to relate to location and local distinctiveness, and reinforce a sense of place
- Too much uniformity can induce placelessness
- Different items of street furniture should relate to each other in terms of design, style and colour
- Views must be considered. For example, is there an interesting/ attractive outlook? Sunny positions are generally preferable, avoid sitting near sources of pollution where possible, provide a space near a seat where wheelchairs can be positioned
- Take time to think about how street furniture could be incorporated into a broader city narrative

Street Furniture & Amenities: Designing the User-oriented Urban Landscape (Firdevs, 2013)

Similarly to the Bristol Legible City project, this paper paid significant attention to context and place. It is suggested that the type of seating selected should be based upon an analysis of the sites current and desired patterns of use, so it can serve its purpose effectively. Appreciating that street furniture creates the setting for the social uses that unfold around them; this report recognises that being able to sit within a city landscape provides an opportunity to pause, and also a tactile and more intimate contact with a place than one has when standing or walking. The report demonstrates how street furniture affects the use and

feel of space and hence, the degree of age-friendliness. As such the study suggests that street furniture should be utilised in combination - different elements should be linked together to stimulate social encounters.

Designing Public Space for Older People (Musselwhite, 2014)

Advocating that more work is needed on linking the work of urban designers and older people, this paper suggested that there is a need to move away from viewing urban areas as places for movement but to see them as spaces for dwelling, for being, for creating place and home. There is a need to address spaces not just in terms of their practical assets but also in terms of their aesthetic and psychological qualities. In this sense, creating a sense of distinctiveness about an area can help those with cognitive decline and dementia by creating a more legible, connected space.

Quality	Description
Character	Streets should have character and reflect local identity, history and culture. Utilising local art and architecture can help enhance distinct and unique character and identity.
Ease of Movement	Should be enhanced for all users, along with permission to stop and dwell through benches and places to learn and creating focal points to commune (fountains, statues & greenery).
Legibility	The city should be designed in a way that is easy to understand and interpret, not just with signage but with other visual and tactile cues as well as to help determine legitimacy in activity and determine use.

Table 2: Important aspects of street design

The Age-Friendly City: Manchester (Manchester School of Art, Design Lab, 2011)

October 2011 saw the launch of a two year partnership between the Masters Design programme, based at the Manchester School of Art and the Valuing Older People Team at Manchester City Council. It aims to develop design ideas and approaches which contribute to the Age-friendly Manchester programme. The project focused on students working hands-on in the local community. Seeking to observe the landscape through the eyes of older people, the researchers took a journey across Chorlton and mapped existing benches as well as places that benches were lacking. They then devised creative solutions to tackle and draw attention to these issues such as yarn bombing benches, sticking notices on pavement cracks and creating a pop-up 'living room' to encourage socialisation.

Key findings

- People and place are both components of identity
- Benches can be used as a vehicle for messages and memories
- Older people should be approached as individuals allowing for different levels of engagement
- A range of communication methods must be used
- Age-friendly work should fit into a wider neighbourhood context and not be an add on

Manchester: A Sense of Place (Hanfling, 2010)

From October 2005 to January 2007, Manchester City Council completed a programme of community engagement work to explore Sense of Place. Inspired by work carried out by the Community Planning Group of Auckland City Council, New Zealand; the programme was designed to:

- Inspire community engagement
- Offer council officers, professionals and partners a challenge - to look at the city in a different way through the concept and tools of sense of place
- To examine new (and old) ways of working
- To work in a reflective way

The project concluded that by encouraging people to think about their place and space, what they want and what is important to them in different ways, the Council and partners can engage more with people and people can engage more with them. This will help create better services and a better city.

Age-Friendly Old Moat (Phillipson *et al.*, 2013)

Using a participatory approach, this research set out to test the model of an age-friendly city developed by the WHO in the Old Moat neighbourhood, Manchester. Within this, an age-friendly seating model was explored and age-friendly seats were installed in areas such as Copson Street. Although viewed as a model of good seating, an issue has been raised with the seat having greater than 30mm gaps between the slats. This prohibits it being installed in play areas as it contravened regulation and several health and safety incidents relating to children breaking fingers were exposed. This in turn highlights an issue for the seat being used on the street by children, possible when parents or grandparents use it with young children. This raised design implications for the age-friendly programme and reinforced the significance of context. However, the participatory approach adopted could be used as a model of best practice for future age-friendly seating research.

This Study

Within this context, this study led a small participatory research project on age-friendly seating and builds on relevant existing policy and previous/current work in the Age-friendly Manchester programme and beyond. There are two main areas of focus:

1. The physical design of age-friendly seats: height, dimensions, arms and existing examples
2. The placement and design of seats that could facilitate a sense of place for older people

The study also develops greater knowledge of older people's experience of different types of seating and the relationship this has to place; contributes towards developing a model of best practice for working with older people in developing age-friendly seating and provides recommendations and analysis to build into the Age-friendly Manchester design programme.

Method

This research utilised a combination of methods - auditing, semi-structured walking interviews and secondary research.

The Bench Audit and Areas Visited

Guided by the authors undergraduate dissertation; three areas of the city centre were initially identified as focus areas; Piccadilly Gardens, Market Street and St Ann's Square. Following the completion of a bench audit, several types of bench were identified and Cathedral Gardens and Albert Square were added to the list in order to gain a representative interpretation of bench design and places. The bench audit involved walking around the city centre, plotting bench locations on a map, noting the type of bench and the 'atmosphere' of their place (Map 1 and Table 3).

Walking Interview

The second stage consisted of three walking interviews with four voluntary participants from Chorlton Good Neighbours. By figuratively 'standing in the shoes' of participants, the intention of the walking interview was to illuminate the fluid subtleties of the everyday as well as the design elements of the bench to add a deeper, contextually situated understanding to the urban experience.

The placing of events, stories and experiences in their spatial context worked particularly well with older participants by helping them to articulate their thoughts. This open-ended method also meant that participants are less likely to try and give the 'right' answer thus generating genuinely authentic data.

Bench Snap Shots – bench types & locations in Manchester City Centre



Key

- St Ann's Square
- Piccadilly Gardens
- Market Street
- Cathedral Gardens
- Albert Square



Figure 1: Bench audit for key areas

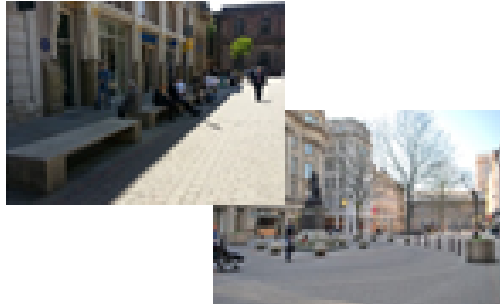

Place	Description	Seating	Image
Piccadilly Gardens	Situated between Market Street and the Northern Quarter, Piccadilly Gardens functions as the central hub of the city. Once a sunken park garden, the area was reconfigured in 2002 into a modernistic 'European style' plaza. It is a multipurpose area functioning simultaneously as a public transport hub, a cut through to other central areas as well as a public leisure space.	<p>A variety of seating:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open aspect, modern design • Metal base with flat wide wooden seated area • Interspersed low arched metal arm rests • No back rest • Large structures seating up to 18 + 	
Market Street	Experiencing considerable alteration since the 1996 IRA bombings, Market Street is the bustling main pedestrianised retail street in the city. It is characterised by street music, crowds and mobile street vendors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curved back rest, modern design • Metal slats with stone arms • Two metal armrests sectioning bench into 3 spaces • Facing up and down street, positioned near trees • Moderate structures seating up to 3 to 4 	
Cathedral Gardens	Cathedral Gardens is an open space bounded by Victoria railway station, Chetham's School of Music, the perimeter of Manchester Cathedral, the Triangle on Fennel Street and Urbis. This space is punctuated with planters and a water feature surrounding a defined grassed area and a children's play space.	<p>A variety of seating:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sunken wall-style seating in grassed area • Stand-alone stone blocks • Metal slatted open aspect benches with low arms rest/dividers • Low wall (used to perch) 	
St Ann's Square	St Ann's Square is traditional in architecture surrounded by three distinctive buildings – the Royal Exchange, Barton Arcade and St Ann's Church. The area has remained largely unchanged and is renowned for being an 'upmarket' part of the city. This area is intimate and quaint compared to neighbouring areas and is punctuated with a water feature, greenery and several statues.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open aspect low stone backless benches • No arm rests • Positioned in regimental symmetrical lines framing the square • Stone spheres surrounding statues used as occasional seating 	
Albert Square	Albert Square is a public square in the centre of Manchester. The space is dominated by the Town Hall with several historic statues, memorials and monuments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional design plastic wood-look slats • Traditional design legs • Angled back rests • Back to back • No arm rests • Clusters of seating framing the square 	

Table 3: Areas visited

Results of Walking Interviews

From the walking interviews, a number of key themes emerged; these are outlined in the tables below.

Key Themes	Description
Change	<p>The degree to which the landscape of the city had changed within the participant's lifetime and the rapidity of this affected the degree of place attachment and satisfaction.</p> <p>'This city is always changing, sometimes I think, is it ever going to end?'</p>
The Built Environment	<p>Linked to change; older buildings, statues and monuments were revered. Functioning as a 'memory box', older structures instigated memories whereas modern structures were described as alienating disrupting the continuity of the landscape.</p> <p>'It takes me back to boyfriend times, we used to say, I'll meet you at the Victoria statue'</p>
Soundscape	<p>The sounds within places had stabilizing and destabilizing effects. The level of traffic noise and the style of street music was often commented on. In particular the Hoochie Coochie man (a key board touting busker playing tunes resonant of their era) was revered compared to modern music which created a threatening / unfamiliar atmosphere.</p> <p>'I like the Hoochie Coochie man, he puts a spring in my step'</p>
Social Environment	<p>The people within place affected place attachment and satisfaction. For example, the people in Piccadilly Gardens were perceived to be threatening in comparison to the often older people in St Ann's square.</p> <p>'I don't like the people in Piccadilly, they make the whole area feel unpleasant and unsafe'</p>
Greenery	<p>Abundant greenery was popular and was thought to create a therapeutic, tranquil atmosphere providing a slower, natural pace in comparison to the metropolitan rhythms of the city.</p> <p>'Greenery improves any place, I would most certainly add more'</p>

Table 4: Key themes affecting participants experience of place

Although opinions of each place inevitably varied, several observations were made. Opinions of place were determined by how the themes outlined in table four collated. These are summarised below.

Areas	Opinion
Piccadilly Gardens	<p>This area was generally disliked. The area has experienced significant transformation throughout the participant's life course making the area alienating and unfamiliar thus affecting place recognition, attachment and identity. The open aspect design of the seating combined with 'change' and the 'social environment' was unappealing.</p> <p>'I don't like this area anymore, it makes me sad to think what it used to be like'</p>
Market Street	<p>This area was generally disliked. Although the seating was 'age-friendly'; the combination of the built landscape the overbearing soundscape and the social environment induced a sense of disorientation and confusion. The area was described as a 'motorway'; chaotic and unpleasant, and not an area for dwelling. Participants were fond of the greenery.</p> <p>'I can hardly hear myself think!'</p>
St Ann's Square	<p>This area was revered. The combination of the largely unchanged built environment, the older clientele occupying the social environment and classical opera music complemented the traditional 'tranquil' atmosphere. Although the seating wasn't particularly age-friendly, this was overridden by the enjoyment of the less tangible dimensions of place provided.</p> <p>'I love this space, it is much more familiar and intimate - my favourite part of the city'</p>
Cathedral Gardens	<p>This area was liked. The abundance of greenery, the slower 'pace of life', the water features and the surrounding heritage buildings provided a sense of familiarity and comfort.</p> <p>'I think the water features and the greenery are a nice touch - its rather pleasant'</p>
Albert Square	<p>This area was liked. Instigated by the built landscape, participants felt a sense of pride in this area. Participants liked the traditional design and placing of the seating and felt it complemented the area.</p> <p>'I like this area, it makes me proud to be from Manchester'</p>

Table 5: Opinions of key areas visited

Bench Design	
Like	Dislike
Warm, welcoming materials such as wood & plastic	‘Intimidating’, unaccommodating materials such as stone & metal
Arm rests	Isolated blocks
Natural colours	Broken / vandalised
Correctly angled back rest/ slightly sloping	Open aspect
Ergonomically shaped seats	Too low
Modular seating - evenly spaced arm rests to provide personal space and facilitate conversation	No back rest
Space around the seat to provide a bodily and mental break and to put personal belongings	No arm rests

Table 6: Bench design preference

Thoughts and Ideas
To encourage communication and to enhance legibility of the city; ‘question plaques’ or intelligent text about the history of a place could be added on and around public seating to instigate conversation i.e. ‘what are your memories of this place?’ ‘What is showing at the theatre this week?’ (utilising appropriate colour/font).
Seat design should complement location and add to the ‘feel’ of that place. For example, traditional park style benches would complement St Ann’s square but might not complement Market Street.
To add to the legibility of the city, the iconic Manchester ‘Industry Heritage Bees’ could be added to benches similar to city bollards to create a city story, increase sense of pride and enhance place attachment.
Seating must be designed beyond functionality to communicate a broader message of care. For example, the way a seat is positioned within a place, the quality of the immediate environment and the maintenance of the bench collate to affect age-friendliness.
Seating is utilised by older people for a mental break as much as a bodily break. The design of the bench and the surrounding environment must therefore facilitate this. For example, seating could be positioned around a focal point such as planters or a water feature. This would facilitate relaxation though tranquillity as well as instigating conversation.

Table 7: Thoughts and ideas

Recommendations

1. Age-friendly seating should not be a one size fits all model. There are a range of existing models that can be built upon.
2. A variety of seating should be installed, based on work with older people, using recommendations from 'Design for Access 2' as a benchmark of good practice.
3. Although important, policy makers must be wary of checklists. Focusing on what seems basic, essential and or actionable can mean omitting the less obvious and more complex.
4. Utilised as a place where older people can engage in activities, try new things and meet people; the city centre must be given more attention.
5. Providing an alternative and insightful account of the city; the potential of 'Sense of Place' to be utilised as a tool for community engagement and development must be recognised.
6. The interrelations between the permanent tangible - design - and the fleeting intangible - place - dimensions that form either a more or less pleasant place experience must not be overlooked.
7. The city should be understood as a complex terrain. Individual journeys are made up of a mix of past and present emotions, memories and affects. The aspects and qualities of places that are more fluid and less tangible are a significant part of the choice of which seat to utilise.

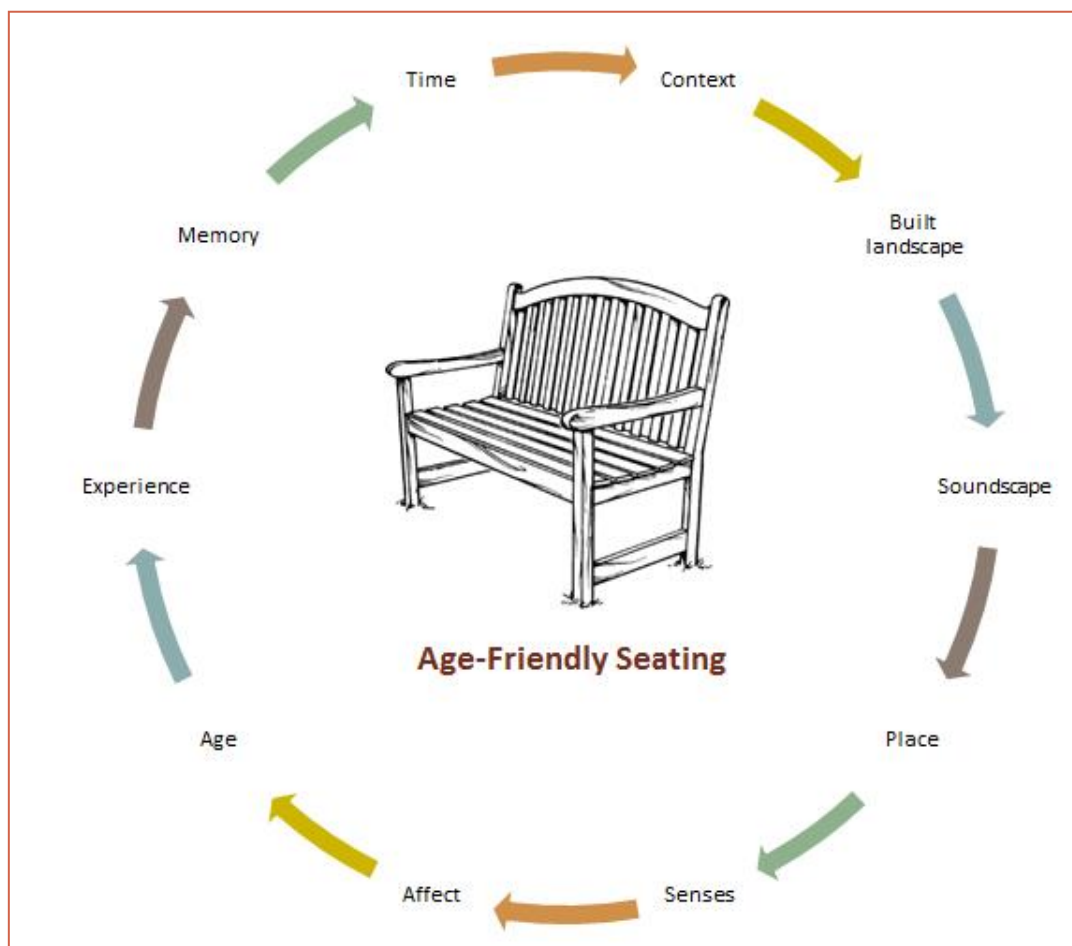


Figure 2: Figure to show intangible dimensions

8. Policy makers must take a sense of place approach as well as an age-friendly and design.
9. The object of any study must always be understood as encompassing an array of intangible - yet equally as pivotal - elements which will help to better understand and ultimately create a sense of place (Figure 3).
10. The significance of 'time' in place theory, research and practice must not be overlooked. The time of day and time in the form of memory which is inscribed within the landscape affects the degree of attachment to place.
11. Utilise a participatory approach. Conducting age-friendly research with older people will help create a holistic picture of reality while challenging the notion that 'ageing' is a policy problem to be solved with largely disconnected design solutions. This approach makes the overlooked aspects of experience visible (Table 8).

The 'Participatory Approach'	
Community Audit	This is a community-based process utilised to profile and map local areas or issues. By cataloguing the common experiences encountered in older age, this method is sensitive to the scale and illuminates the often overlooked aspects of place experience.
Focus group	This method is ideally situated to ignite discussion into the particularities and complexities of perceptions/opinions behind people-place relationships and could be enhanced by utilising a variety of communication methods - oral, written and visual.
The 'Go-Along'	Illuminating often hidden spatial practices and habitual relations with place, the 'go-along' involves walking with participants, asking spontaneous questions along the way and could be utilised to cultivate empathetic relationships with individual experiences.

Table 8: Creative methods that could be adopted when conducting age-friendly research (Handler, 2014)

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