WHAT IS A “LIFETIME COMMUNITY?”

It carries many labels: an elder-friendly community, an inclusive community, a livable community for older adults, a lifelong community, a community for all ages and abilities, community for a lifetime.

They come down to one common goal – creating a good place to grow up and grow old – in short, a community for all ages and abilities.

This little booklet offers a set of “design principles” to help achieve that goal, with a focus on older adults and people with disabilities – their strengths as well as their needs. The principles are not meant to exhaust all the possibilities. A creative community of people will likely think of many more.

This list is built upon findings from the participatory research project called “Evergreen”, conducted in Bloomington, Indiana from 1995-98. (See back page.)

These principles apply across the range of experiences in which people find themselves – from the micro-environment of the patient in a nursing home bed to the macro-environment of the neighborhood, the town, the city.

We encourage their use by anyone who may be in a position to influence the character of the environment–city officials, planners, designers, developers, public health practitioners, merchants, housing activists and, of course, older adults, and disability activists themselves, who can use these as a standard by which proposed environments can be evaluated.

Principle One: Neighborliness

The neighborhood is a critically important concept for understanding the quality of citizens’ environments.

While neighborhoods often have fairly specific identified boundaries, it seems that people are the most important feature of a healthy neighborhood. Neighborly relations exist mid-way between intimacy and strangeness – at the fulcrum of the public and private life. Friendly, but not intrusive, neighbors are often the object of one’s giving, and one may be the subject of others’ concern. Neighbors share pride in the neighborhood and belong to an identified commons. Some, but not all values are shared. One basic, shared value, however, is that neighbors help “keep the neighborhood up” so that it is an attractive place to live.

Neighbors are not family, nor even necessarily close friends. Friendships may, however, emerge from the field of neighborly relations. Neighbors are there when you need them, but one doesn’t want to lean on them continuously. Neighbors do not substitute for family or intimate friends but, nevertheless, are extremely important to one’s sense of security and belongingness in a community.
Design Responses: Neighborliness

Promote opportunities for social interaction.

Social interaction is abetted by the creation of foils for conversation—elements in the environment that bring people together around a common interest or focus. Adults often meet and interact around the activity of watching children or pets. Unusual architectural or landscape elements can also become common grist for conversation—fountains, gargoyles, topiary, flowers, signs, kiosks, pigeons. The home itself can be a launching pad for interaction with others if properly distanced from public spaces. Put porches and balconies within comfortable talking distance of others. Provide adequate interior space for entertaining one or two neighbors. Place certain “out of house” activities within talking distance of neighbors, yet away from “outsiders”, e.g. garbage cans, laundry lines, flower boxes, postal boxes.

The built environment can facilitate neighborly interaction in simple and relatively passive, inexpensive ways. Orient housing to the street or a small number of front doors to each other. Place benches face to face or at right angles to facilitate interaction. Always provide benches in front of interesting neighborhood gathering places such as pocket parks, bus stops, small stores, churches, schools, library, post office, restaurants, newsstands. Place permanent chess tables/seats in places frequented by children, teens and older adults.

The “Known environment” promotes engagement rather than withdrawal. Seeing your neighbors come and go daily promotes a sense of security. Transience of residents can retard the development of neighborly relations. Provide windows which allow for passive surveillance of the nearby environment. Provide mechanisms for enabling new residents of the neighborhood to be introduced—welcoming committees, block parties, newsletters, work parties, pot lucks, memorial collections, tour guides.

Develop policies to promote the vitality of neighborhood associations. Create a neighborhood scrapbook to keep in a public place for newcomers to gain a sense of history.

Support neighborhood use of common and public facilities. Encourage neighborhood groups to use churches, synagogues, parks, libraries, community centers, municipal facilities, restaurants, etc. for meeting space. Create events which bring people together in public spaces: pet parades, Halloween parties, card parties, picnics, garden parties.

Provide sufficient privacy to enable people NOT to interact when this is also desirable.

Provide adequate shielding from public spaces to enable a degree of personal and familial privacy. Include sufficient soundproofing insulation in common walls. Build foyer space with lobbies and in apartments to enable a controlled transition into private spaces. Install peep-holes in front doors.

Include small informal lounges for semi-private gatherings in addition to larger lobbies and common rooms. Install landings on stairways to enable early scanning of public spaces prior to entry (after Victor Regnier).

― Scott Russell Sanders, from the preface to the Evergreen Writing Project Journal, Experiencing Place, 1996.
Principle Two: An environment for growth, learning and autonomy

Most older people and younger persons with disabilities are prepared to deal with diminished capacity as long as they can personally manage that process independently and with dignity. These challenges call for new learning and certain elements of acceptance. People want to manage as best they can. Old age and physical or intellectual impairment can actually lead to psychological, spiritual and social growth and strength. The environment should challenge people to stay as healthy and as strong as possible, while making available adequate supports in areas of limitation. Supports should not become stigmata, however. The best form of “managing” implies an ability to meet one’s needs through direct bodily access to services, or when such is not possible, being the recipient of services brought into the home.

The environment should provide natural inducements to physical and mental exercise.

Draw people outdoors to work and play. The environment should be both beautiful and interesting. It should have changing elements so that each new day, week, or season brings about something new to explore. Public works of art and recreation are essential. Quality of air and sound are critical elements of the external environment and should be enhanced. The environment should be stimulating in its use of color and texture.

Design Responses: Environment for growth, learning and autonomy

The environment should encourage daily walking excursions. Small refrigerators and neighborhood markets induce regular trips to the grocery for fresh foods. Friendly clerks who expect your return create social obligations to visit. Use of “general delivery” and post office boxes encourage daily trips to the post office. Cheaper newstand prices encourage non-delivery of newspapers and magazines.

The environment should be totally accessible while still being challenging. Sidewalks to critical destinations especially should be smooth and barrier-free. Lighting should be keyed to critical corners and low to the sidewalk. Stores should be small and friendly. Entryways should be barrier-free with doors which are not too heavy. Traffic must be calmed on critical pedestrian pathways (to grocery, church, library, retail). There must be well-planned perches to rest; ideally every block should have an elderfriendly/toddler-friendly bench (with back and side-supports). Pedestrians must dominate over cars and bicycles along critical pathways used by older adults and young children.

Basic services should be within walking distance (ideally, within three blocks at most). Top priorities are grocery, pharmacy, church/synagogue, bank, general merchandise, restaurants, doctor, post office, cleaners, movies, and public restrooms. More seniors would use bicycles and tricycles if paths were made available.

The environment should provide clear but non-stigmatizing choices between independent and prosthetic elements. Put stairs within sight of elevators. Develop pre-adaptive environments—design for later ease of transition to access modifications (ramps, handrails, etc.). Promote universal design, which aids those with disabilities as well as those without, in non-stigmatizing fashion.

Access to services should vary with changing health status. Design services to promote ease of use during episodes of illness. Make services client directed rather than “casemanaged” by experts. Pre-design environments to enable adaptations during periods of illness (emergency response systems, “Plug-in” medical services such as telemedicine, accessible doorways, tv-telephone cable access, etc.)

“I can just walk across the street (to the community center) . . . I have a choice. When I get to the steps, if I feel I am too tired, I may walk around and . . . take the elevator.”

— Evergreen Ethnography Participant
Principle Three: A positive image of the environment

My home?...
It’s “my wife, my kitchen with big bay window, history with children at home, the smell of cut grass.”
— Harmony School Interviewing Project

Old people and young are able to articulate a clear image of neighborhood through verbal and visual expression. These images may have both positive and negative elements—an environment can be described from both directions. In a healthy community, that image should be largely positive, as it indeed is for most people whom we have met through the research. “Image” is used in the broadest sense, to refer not only to one’s picture of the natural and built environment, but also to one’s personal place within that scheme. The clarity of that picture is important, and depends significantly on the degree to which a person can explore and know his/her environment. The known environment is much more comfortable and secure.

Design Responses: A positive image of the environment

The natural environment should be beautiful enough to instill pride, joy, and peace among residents. It should include water, birds, butterflies, bugs, pets, and other natural elements in a flourishing circle which brings together persons of all ages and abilities.

Flora can evoke memories of a valued past (peonies, lilies, lilacs, etc.). Trees should have character and be climbable. Pocket parks are preferable to wide green expanses. Avoid visual uniformity and promote diversity in the environment. Evoke wildness as well as stewardship of a tamed environment. Create an environment which uses sound to promote well being.

Facilitate way-finding in the interior and exterior environment. Provide simple sensory cues leading to significant destinations—sound patterns, pennants, visual access to steeples, public symbols, kiosks, signage, linear parks, green walkways, corner features such as sculpture and benches.

Orient newcomers to the environment with maps, tours, historical markers. Train children and elders and residents with disabilities as tourguides, historians, community advocates and interpreters.

Create an environment in which every individual is part of the circle. Link people through reciprocal patterns of giving and receiving of services, food and kindnesses.

Promote the development of cooperatives. Identify and celebrate talents and contributions of all ages and abilities. Appreciate the “characters” in the community. Develop expectations for members of the commons. Facilitate voluntarism and mentoring.

Make food a central and preeminent feature of the environment. Develop policies that encourage and support gardening. Support small, distinctive and affordable restaurants. Support food events of all kinds. Encourage food stands in parks and on corners.


Celebrate ethnic cooking. Support the continued development of farmers’ markets and regional food culture.
Principle Four: Diverse housing options

The older adult population of many towns and cities includes many persons who have lived over thirty years in one location as well as recent retirees moving in from elsewhere. Adults with disabilities are desperately searching for accessible housing in “regular” neighborhoods.

While the large majority of older adults want to “age in place”, the specific housing type preferences are diverse. Some see yard work as necessary to their well being; others see it as a burden. Some see lots of space as essential; others seek to “downsize”.

While public policy should support the development of a diversity of housing types and options, the character and quality of those options should follow some general themes.

Promote affordable, accessible housing in downtown areas. There is a significant level of interest, a potential market, for downtown housing options. This housing should be within walking distance of basic retail services, church/synagogue, library and community centers for art, learning and recreation.

Residents of such housing anticipate being full-fledged members of the ongoing life of the community and do not want to be “stuck off” in a segregated senior or so-called “handicapped” housing complex on the edge of town, away from the vital center of the community.

Provide housing which has some essential supportive elements to enable people to stay put. Service package might include easy access to meals or a meals program on site; access to public transportation or an escort service on site; optional housekeeping and access to affordable personal care services; all amenities on one level, especially laundry-living areas. Elevator for any facility above one story. Pre-adapted for accessibility—wired for emergency response and wide doorways.

Design Responses: Diverse housing options

Provide housing options which are affordable to persons with low and moderate incomes. Affordability is improved through access to public services such as transit, Title III meals, public arts and performances, municipal services, etc.

Promote affordability through provision of common spaces which allow for smaller square footage per apartment in congregate housing.

Coordinate planning with municipalities to enable access to public funds for housing, including Low Income Housing Tax Credits, tax abatement, HOME, CDBG, Federal Home Loan Banking programs, etc.

Promote adaptive use of historic properties to enable access to historic preservation tax credits. Utilize energysaving tactics to reduce individual energy bills.

Provide third party counseling for seniors considering reverse equity mortgages. Make sure your community CDBG and HOME funds include support for home repair and home modification.

Promote mixed-use, mixed income congregate housing. Mixed income housing permits development of options for moderate/low income due to potential for greater development returns at high end. Mixed-use, commercial and retail on first level and housing above, enables inclusion of supportive services and work opportunities for residents.

Explore intergenerational housing options. Consider design forms in which older adults and those with mobility limitations occupy ground level apartments and new families occupy second level. Explore support for college student intern apartments in supportive housing.

Promote development of nontraditional housing options for seniors and people with disabilities. Establish policies and programs to support development of group homes, shared housing, co-housing, housemate matchmaking, and accessory apartment. Flexible zoning can incentivize new forms of housing and in fill development options.

“There are all kinds of ways of being diminished but ... life can teach us how to approach the end of our lives. And how can I do that unless you take elder people and shuffle them in like a deck of cards, with people of all ages. Not put them off in a corner and call it the elder place...”

— Milton Figen, Evergreen Project Collaborator
We have been struck time and again by the desire of older adults to remain in touch with people of all ages. While many common interests cement relations among the community of older adults, and places such as senior centers are valued as centers of such interest, there is a clear expression of desire to remain involved with the total community. This desire is just as strong among adults with disabilities.

Watching and hearing small children play, interacting with college students, even enjoying the sometimes wild styles of teens, are all indicators of a healthy community.

We also acknowledge the real concerns some have about losing their special opportunities to interact with peers and some fears expressed about dangers to the body in walking near roller skaters or boisterous young toddlers.

Hence, the community’s approach to the promotion of intergenerational relationships must not be based on some facile philosophy that forces generations together, but, rather, upon a cautious and realistic appraisal of the true common interests which can join people of all ages in a common bond. College towns have the potential to develop a truly unique form of a livable community—one which is intergenerational and in which people of all ages and abilities interact in an egalitarian and mutually beneficial way.

**Design responses: **A community for all ages

**Sustain retirees and people with disabilities in downtown neighborhoods and make the downtown attractive to further development of supportive housing options.**

Do not encourage the standard development of seniors or “handicapped” only communities outside of the city’s core neighborhoods. Rather, seek opportunities to develop housing in close proximity to public transit, retail services, health services, and traditional age-integrated neighborhoods.

**Remove obstacles to the spontaneous interaction of older and younger persons in the community.**

While specific programming for intergenerational interactions is worthwhile, the simple non-structured opportunities for interaction are preferable. Create age-integrated spaces such as parks which offer amenities for all ages, from lawn bowls, to basketball, to tot lots.

Place senior and disability-friendly housing options in close proximity to playgrounds, schools and day care centers. Build shared-site day care options for both frail elders and young children.

**Promote development of intergenerational activities and programs throughout the community.**

Promote volunteer activities that enrich the lives of children and vice versa. Seek to fulfill the common recreational and cultural interests of young, old, and those with disabilities such as traditional musics, food, arts, and hobbies. Seek to join young and old together around common political interests such as environment, age discrimination, peace, and cross-cultural understanding.

Create a serious analysis of segregation by age and ability.

If seniors are willing to expand the population served by their senior centers, are school systems and other public institutions prepared for the trade-off… prepared to become more elder-friendly and disability-friendly places that bring together people across the lifespan?
THE ADVANTAGE INITIATIVE

In 1999, several philanthropic foundations came together to fund a project to be titled: Benchmarks for an Elder-Friendly Community, to be developed by the Center for Home Care Policy and Research at the Visiting Nurse Service of New York.

In the early days of the project, ten pilot communities around the US developed leadership to engage a range of stakeholders, conduct a standardized, randomized scientific survey developed especially for the project, and set action goals to create more elderfriendly communities.

The Benchmarks survey has subsequently been conducted in more than 50 communities nationwide and, in 2004, in a national sample, providing communities with invaluable guideposts they can utilize to understand how older adults are faring, set community priorities for action and put aging issues on the public agenda. The survey has also been adapted for younger adults with disabilities.

Research and innovations emerging from the AdvantAge Initiative and other “lifetime community” initiatives have helped spur national conversations about the quality of environments for older adults, people with disabilities and children.

This research has demonstrated the value of collaborative leadership, the usefulness of a datadriven approach to community planning, and the importance of gathering and engaging the broadest range of stakeholders, far beyond the typical aging and human services network: public officials, educators, young people, planners, public safety officers, foundation funders, United Ways, and many others.

In 2008 the entire state of Indiana conducted the AdvantAge survey. In 2012 several statewide organizations collaborated to expand the conversation beyond aging issues. Now, towns and cities throughout the state are utilizing the data and other engagement methods to plan for a future in which cities and towns work for all ages and abilities.

Promotes Social and Civic Engagement
- Meaningful relationships
- Active engagement in community life
- Meaningful paid and voluntary work
- Community priority for aging issues

Maximizes Independence for Frail and Disabled
- Resources for “living at home”
- Accessible transportation
- Support for caregivers

Addresses Basic Needs
- Appropriate and affordable housing
- Safety in the home and neighborhood
- No one goes hungry
- Useful information on available services

Optimizes Physical and Mental Health and Well Being
- Healthy behaviors
- Community activities to enhance well being
- Access to preventative health services
- Access to medical, social, palliative services

The Four Domains of an Lifetime Community
adapted from Center for Home Care Policy and Research, Visiting Nurse Service of New York

“Every human community, if it is to last, must exert a kind of centripetal force, holding local soil and local memory in place.”

—Wendell Berry

For more information about Indiana and other initiatives around the world, visit www.lifetimecommunities.org.
“Participation provides a collaborative process by which community inhabitants reach common goals, engage in collective decisions, and create places, and these places, in turn, serve as material expressions of their collective efforts.”


Background on the Design Guidelines

These design guidelines emerged from the Evergreen Project (1995-1998), a participatory research program funded by the Retirement Research Foundation, with additional financial support of Bloomington Hospital and numerous collaborating organizations providing members to the Research Team. Participatory research is based upon an appreciation for the “inside” knowledge held by those typically on the receiving end of so-called good works by experts. Participation methods included a range of approaches, from a comprehensive, randomized household survey to multiple focus groups, ethnographic fieldwork, creative writing groups, other arts projects and neighborhood charrettes.

Suggested readings on sense of place and participatory research:

By Wendell Berry
- The Memory of Old Jack
- Another Turn of the Crank
- What are People For?

By Tony Hiss
- The Experience of Place

By Gary Snyder
- The Practice of the Wild

By Yi-Fu Tuan
- Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience

By David Seamon and R. Mugerauer
- Dwelling, Place and Environment

By Gaston Bachelard
- The Poetics of Space

By Michael Jackson
- At Home in the World

By Scott Russell Sanders
- Staying Put

By William Least Heat-Moon
- PrairyErth

By Philip B. Stafford
- Gray Areas
- Elderburbia

By M. Scott Ball
- Livable Communities for Aging Populations

By Cesneros, Dyer-Chamberlain, Hickie, eds.
- Independent for Life