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# Co-creating Environments: *Empowering Elders and Strengthening Communities through Design*

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Working with elders around the world has taught me that those living in grass huts in Africa with children at their feet are often happier than people in assisted-living homes with a chandelier over their heads. My work in design consultancy and in fifteen years of running a nonprofit, Ibasho, that aims to co-create socially integrated and sustainable communities that value their elders has allowed me to learn much about how architects and designers can contribute to helping people live a good life in late life.<sup>1</sup> People often need supportive services or other adaptations as they age, but do they really need—or want—the luxury environment few are accustomed to? The challenge for architects and designers is not to create a built environment whose carefully curated facades hide lives of quiet desperation. It is to help elders access the support they need without upending their lives or severing virtually all ties to their communities.

Older adults are being marginalized around the world at the same time that their numbers are growing rapidly.<sup>2</sup> Increasingly, aging is viewed simply as a process of decline, with the growth that accompanies aging invisible to societies that value only those adults who produce monetized goods or services. As a result, elders are effectively cut off from the flow of daily life, their wisdom and perspectives lost to the children and younger adults in their communities.

This applies to both industrialized and developing nations, but it plays out somewhat differently in the two. In the industrialized world, housing and community designs are often ill-suited to the needs of an aging population. This is particularly true in the United States, where urban sprawl and the reliance on the automobile effectively strand elders who can no longer drive. Striving to stay in their homes for as long as possible, elders who cannot drive often become progressively more isolated and disengaged from the rest of the community as their peers become frail or pass away.

No doubt they would be less reluctant to move if the institutionalized care settings these nations have designed for frail adults were to afford the lifestyle that they desire as they age. Traditional elder-care environments in the industrialized nations are based on the hospital model, which treats people as patients rather than residents and focuses on safety, cleanliness, and efficiency. Nursing homes and assisted-living facilities in these nations are typically safe and hygienic, but their rigid hierarchies and strict routines tend to stifle individual choice and make it difficult to find meaningful engagement or to accommodate individual preferences and needs.

The developing world has retained a stronger culture of honoring elders and including them in the daily life of society. However, those traditions usually depend on the unpaid caregiving work of daughters and daughters-in-law. That work is becoming harder to count on, as modernization and urbanization give women more opportunities to advance their social and economic status by working outside the home and away from the small villages where elders tend to live.<sup>3</sup> This is creating a need

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## *We should design environments that help us to maintain and develop our capacities, rather than simply facilitating ease of living.*

for a more formalized elder-care system, including long-term care facilities and trained caregivers.

Some developing nations, unable to finance that care, are leaving elders to fend for themselves. Others are building institutional care facilities based on the medical model created by developed countries. Either way, elders are poorly served. No matter their country of origin, older adults share the same fears: becoming socially isolated, being treated as useless and unworthy of respect, having no opportunities to contribute meaningfully to their community, and having their need for assistance with daily activities go unmet.

Several movements have sprung up in recent years to offer new ways of addressing elder care. Transformational nursing homes have begun to dismantle the institutional model in favor of a relationship-rich approach to care, giving residents far more control over the rhythms and routines of their lives. Small houses with small staffs that provide skilled care offer another alternative to institutionalized life for some frail adults.<sup>4</sup> Another model is emerging in neighborhoods that share resources to help older adults stay in their homes, such as village-to-village networks and cohousing.<sup>5</sup> Providing access to services such as transportation and property maintenance and recreational opportunities for socialization, these initiatives tend to enrich elders' social lives but often fail to accommodate their physical needs.

In spite of these hopeful trends, a dichotomy still exists in the culture at large: we strive to make institutions better and to keep elders living in their own homes longer, but we rarely ask what can be done between these two extremes. In order to create lasting solutions for our global future, we need to stop thinking in terms of total independence or near-total dependence. We need to find new ways to nurture the interdependence that enriches all communities by ensuring that it extends to the end of life.

It is time to explore ways of investing old age with greater meaning, enabling elders to provide more input into where and how they live, remain part of a community, and remain useful to others. While we must be realistic about aging and the physical and cognitive changes it often entails, we all want to live our lives to the fullest measure. Architects and designers can facilitate this change by creating environments in which aging is something not to fear but to enjoy.

Enabling elders to live in their homes while remaining engaged in their communities requires design professionals

to answer two critical questions. First, how can services and built environments be transformed to adjust to people's changing needs, rather than forcing people to adjust to different places as they age? And second, how can our society empower elders to participate in transforming their physical and social infrastructures so they can age in place and remain engaged?

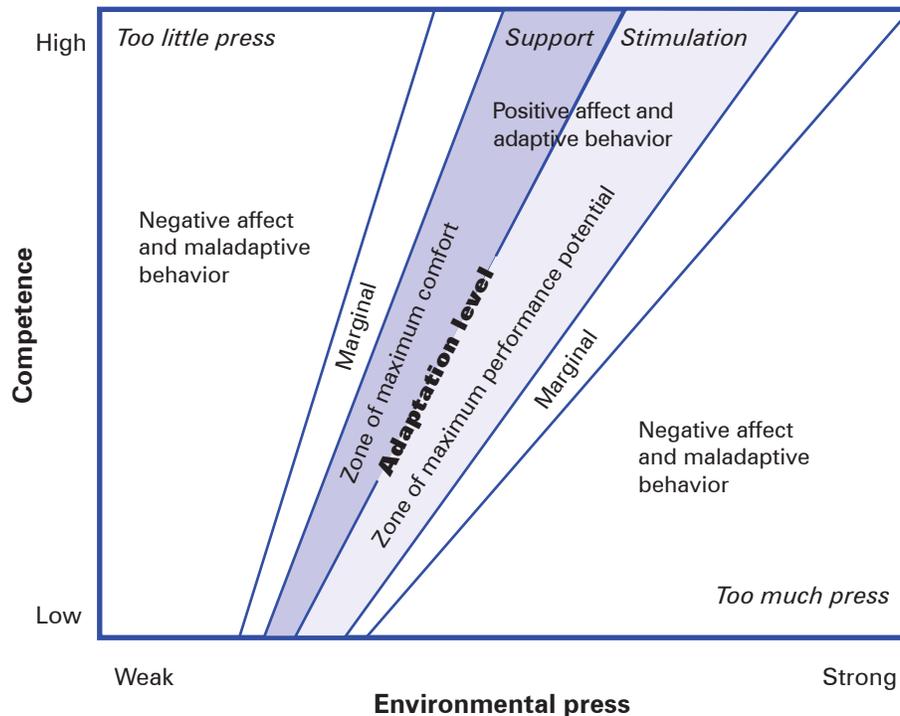
### **Transforming Services and Built Environments**

The current norm in elder-care design is that each type of place designed for older adults (independent living, assisted living, or a nursing home) provides a certain level of care to people with similar physical and cognitive capacities. This approach forces elders to make multiple moves as their conditions change, from one type of home to another and also from one unit to another within the same facility. These moves often happen in moments of crisis when people are at their frailest or most vulnerable and thus most in need of the comfort and emotional sustenance of a familiar environment. The stress of adjusting to an unfamiliar place often causes or exacerbates confusion, depression, and a sense of loss or diminishment. All that trauma could be avoided if we shifted our approach, designing environments that adapt and evolve as elders' needs change over time.

It is important not to try to create "perfect" places that anticipate and meet elders' every need. The *environmental-press* theory holds that places should be designed so as to maintain a dynamic, balanced interaction between a person's competencies (among which are physical and functional health, cognitive and affective functioning, and quality of life, including a sense of efficacy or mastery) and environmental press (which includes the person's home environment, social environment, and neighborhood).<sup>6</sup> As shown in the figure, the fit between competencies and environmental press determines how well people function in their surroundings. If environmental press is too high, it may intensify social isolation because the environment hinders elders from going out from their own homes. If, on the contrary, environmental press is too low, it may impair psychosocial and physical abilities, keeping people from being engaged in their life in a meaningful manner by failing to be challenging enough.

To maintain a built environment that provides a proper fit for people of all ages and abilities, societies must recognize that no one-size-fits-all approach can work. Even if a

## Ecology Model of Aging<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup>This figure is adapted from M. P. Lawton and L. Nahemow, "Ecology and the Aging Process," in *Psychology of Adult Development and Aging*, ed. C. Eisoderofer and M. P. Lawton (American Psychological Association, Washington, D.C.: 1973), 619-74.

space is carefully designed to meet a certain community's objectives, it may become obsolete when the needs of that community change. Moreover, if we design spaces to be entirely accessible and convenient, removing all stairs and other possible impediments, then the environment may not be challenging enough to allow residents to maintain their physical and mental health. Our environment should challenge us in various ways that help us to maintain and develop our capacities, rather than simply facilitating ease of living.

Spaces should be flexible and should include intentionally inconvenient places. When we strive to create a perfect place, we strip away the possibility of authentic community, in which people negotiate with one another to make their environment workable for all. Community is something we have to create with others, not something we can passively receive.

### Empowering Elders

Elders who live with caregivers often exhibit learned helplessness, depending on others even for things they

could still do for themselves. This destructive pattern is fed by society's growing tendency to see elders as a vulnerable population in need of care and support.

In recent years, academics and practitioners in architecture and gerontology have developed design principles that address the physical and psychosocial needs of elders by facilitating important fundamentals such as accessibility, mobility, and privacy. However, design for members of this population tends to contribute to their dependency, serving or caring for them rather than enlisting them as active participants or partners. Most elder design is not set up to allow people who have significant physical or cognitive impairment to remain engaged in everyday life.

Working side by side with elders in communities through the organization *Ibashi*, I have learned a few ways of designing with community members that foster meaningful relationships and a sense of agency:

- Include elders in planning the programs and designing the environments intended for them.

- Create a multifunctional, multigenerational place that elders can take ownership of, maintaining and modifying it as their needs change.
- Make the space flexible so that users can rearrange it to fit their needs.
- Create a noninstitutional environment that elders can be proud to be part of.

## Designing with Elders

In the past, the societal design approach regarding aging was rather paternalistic, with an aim of protecting elders, who were seen as needing to be cared for. In the future, the focus must be on creating a physical and social infrastructure that empowers elders and reduces social isolation, filling the gap between home and institution. Societies should explore how to create these environments *with*, not *for*, elders, soliciting their input to ensure that the new environments meet their needs and to begin the process of empowering them and ensuring that they are able to continue to contribute to their communities.

Through my work at Ibasho, creating elder-led community resource hubs in various countries, I have been inspired by the wisdom quietly shared by local elders. I was in my late thirties when I founded the organization, and time and again, I have been given subtle advice or heard profound life stories that have made me question long-held assumptions. I would like others to have the same chance to sit beside and learn from our elders.

It is to everyone's advantage to unlock our elders' potential, making use of the wisdom and strength gained

through their long life experience. It is my hope that design professionals will remember that a thoughtfully designed physical infrastructure can create a social infrastructure. And an infrastructure that is thoughtfully designed to accommodate elders can help us all see aging in a new light, not as something to fear but as something to savor as an engaged and valued community member.

1. Ibasho works with local elders to help strengthen social capital of communities by giving community members of all ages and abilities a place where they can develop deeper connections with each other. These community hubs provide a platform for useful and relevant contributions to the community, such as through the development and implementation of sustainable livelihood projects, and create an enabling environment for traditionally excluded groups by bolstering resilience and agency.

2. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, "World Population Ageing: Highlights," 2017, at [http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/ageing/WPA2017\\_Highlights.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/ageing/WPA2017_Highlights.pdf).

3. World Bank, *Live Long and Prosper: Aging in East Asia and Pacific* (Washington, DC: World Bank East Asia and Pacific Regional Report, 2016).

4. M. J. Koren, "Person-Centered Care for Nursing Home Residents: The Culture-Change Movement," *Health Affairs* 29, no. 2 (2010): 1-6.

5. A. J. Lehning, A. E. Scharlach, and J. K. Davitt, "Variations on the Village Model: An Emerging Typology of a Consumer-Driven Community-Based Initiative for Older Adults," *Journal of Applied Gerontology* 36, no. 2 (2017): 1-14; E. A. Markle et al., "Social Support in the Cohousing Model of Community: A Mixed-Methods Analysis," *Community Development* 46, no. 5 (2015): 616-31.

6. M. P. Lawton and L. Nahemow, "Ecology and the Aging Process," in *Psychology of Adult Development and Aging*, ed. C. Eisoderofer and M. P. Lawton (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1973), 619-74.