

Executive Summary

Populations around the world are aging—fast. People are living longer now than at any other point in history, and more often than not they are living in cities (UN, 2020). This unprecedented shift has led many to question whether cities are ready to meet the needs of an aging population. Aging often results in shrinking social, physical, and cognitive life spaces (Greenfield et al., 2012). This makes older adults as a demographic more vulnerable to experiences of loneliness and social isolation. While many planners and academics are focused on the ways in which older adults can age-in-place, being confined to the four walls of home does little to address the issue of isolation. Rather it is the surrounding physical environment that plays a defining role in determining older adult health and wellbeing (Black and Jester, 2020). Because older adults are more likely to spend time in their homes and immediate neighbourhood than other age groups, they are particularly vulnerable to experiencing barriers that limit their participation in the physical environment.

One overlooked approach to improving older adult wellbeing is play. Play improves community relations, mental wellbeing, and physical health (Kerr and Apter, 1991). As a result, play is well-suited to address older adult loneliness and isolation. Yet, common societal conceptions of play frame it as a child's activity, without the acknowledgment that humans are instinctively playful (Huizinga, 1950), and that play can extend throughout one's lifecycle into older adulthood (Donoff and Bridgman, 2017). Play has only recently been recognized as an urban design consideration capable of shaping and improving daily interactions and experiences (Donoff and Bridgman, 2017). But it has yet to be considered as an age-friendly planning intervention. Built environments designed for play can go beyond narrowly designated structures and age-compartmentalized activities. There is an opportunity to instead conceptualize and actualize play

as an important addition to the built form that can inspire happiness and playfulness (Donoff and Bridgman, 2017).

The overarching questions behind this report are: How do older adults view play in public spaces? What kind of environments cultivate play? And what kind of environments suppress it? Three research objectives were designed to address these overarching questions: (1) Determine older adult perceptions of play in public spaces through a participatory photovoice process; (2) Analyze the relationship between older adults' perceptions of play and public play space planning and design, and; (3) Develop recommendations to design public play spaces so as to enable older adult play.

The report is based around the single case study of older adult play in Victoria, BC. Victoria was selected as the location of the study as it is Canada's demographically older city with over 23% of the city's population being over the age of 65 in 2021 – considerably higher than the national average of 19% (Statistics Canada 2022a; 2022b). The study employs the participatory research method of photovoice to get a look into the world of an older adult to examine the environments which they find to be limiting or enabling of play. Fourteen participants over the age of 65 years were recruited to take part in the study. Participants each captured two photos of environments that enabled them to play and two photos of environments that limited their ability to play. Three in-person focus groups were conducted in May of 2022 in which participants were given the opportunity to share their photos, conceptions of play, and experiences in enabling and limiting play environments. These discussions were recorded, transcribed, analyzed following Tsang's (2020) four stage photovoice analysis process with emphasis being placed on the participants' interpretations of photographs for their ability to provide insight on into older adult perceptions of play in the built environment.

Findings were grouped into three distinct categories: conceptions of play, themes relating to enabling play environments, and themes tied to limiting play environments. Participant conceptions of play were grouped into four unique themes: *play as an activity of youth, play as a state-of-being, play as open and closed, and play as freedom*. A total of six themes were identified with regard to enabling play environments, and are as follows: *social play, intergenerational play, interactive play, nostalgia, natural, and accessible and inclusive design*. Lastly four themes emerged from limiting play environments, that they are: *noisy, dangerous, have restrictive design, and are inaccessible and exclusionary*. Limiting environments were described in term of their physical features, while enabling environments were described by how they made the participant feel. These observations point to enabling environments as facilitating emotional and physical connections.

Based on the findings four broad recommendations for urban planners and designers are put forward. In order to encourage older adult play, the environment must be designed to be:

- (1) **Flexible:** *The public realm should be versatile, convertible, and able to serve as the stage for an assortment of uses.*
- (2) **Interactive and sensory:** *Interactive and sensory design should immerse and engage the user conveying a sense of place.*
- (3) **Intergenerational:** *To prompt opportunities for play the public realm should be designed in a way that bridges generations.*
- (4) **Age-friendly and amenity rich:** *Planners must think deliberately when creating play environments to ensure they reflect age-friendly design principles and contain the needed amenities for older adults to use the space.*

It is important to note that additional research is needed in order to more fully understand older adult conceptions of play and to create more inclusive designs that support each individual's ability to pursue their wellbeing through play. Other opportunities for future research can focus on how play can be used as an urban design intervention in cities throughout the world, as well as a closer examination into what environmental features can inspire playful interaction.