Co-Motion: Mobility and Wellbeing in Later Life

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Abstract. In considering the role of place in supporting positive well-being choices for all, including older people, there has been an almost exclusive focus on issues of design in the public realm. Emerging findings from the Co-Motion project suggest that the experience of being out and about can be also facilitated or profoundly damaged by the attitudes and behaviours of fellow public realm users.

Keywords. older people, well-being, mobility

1. Introduction

A key aspect of designing a built environment that meets the needs of as wide a range of the population as possible is the demographic context of an ageing society. Considerable research attention has focused on the features and characteristics of neighbourhoods and cities that meet the diverse needs of older people. Global attention to this issue is illustrated by the World Health Organisation's guidelines on the development of age friendly communities. Many localities within the UK have responded to this agenda, with Manchester being a prime example as the UK's first city to be recognised by the World Health Organisation as an age friendly city.

2. The Co-Motion Project

One way that research is being taken forwards in the UK is through the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council's 'Design for Wellbeing: Ageing and Mobility in the Built Environment' programme. Co-Motion is one of seven projects within this programme, and aims to explore the mobility and well-being of older people going through critical but common life transitions. As part of this focus, the project is investigating variations in needs of different groups of older people, and will develop complements or alternatives to the physical design or redesign of the built environment, which can be personalised to individual needs.

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At the core of the research the project included a longitudinal study of older people in three locations in the north of England exploring their mobility and wellbeing as they move through a range of life transitions. Ninety six people aged 55 (+) were recruited to the study who had experience within the previous twelve months of one or more critical but common life transitions.

This aspect of the project used a mixed methods approach, and included a self-administered questionnaire followed by a qualitative face to face interview. There were then four short telephone follow ups over the course of the following year, and then a final self- administered survey and qualitative face to face interview. The project began in 2013 and will complete at the end of 2016.

2.1. Emerging findings: the role of attitudes and behaviours

There is a developing body of practice guidance that highlights design features within built environments that are inclusive of as wide arrange of people as possible. Discussions with some of our research participants, however, drew attention to the extent to which attitudes and behaviours by service providers and the wider public may compromise physical design. For example, footways and accessible features may be rendered unusable by the decisions of people to park their vehicles on footways or across dropped curbs. Respondents who live with impairments also discussed negative social encounters with other people, which militated against the confidence of individuals to be mobile.

These findings can be located in a developing literature that argues for greater attention to be paid to the sensory and emotional experience of movement [1, 2]. Going forwards, one potential avenue is the promotion of awareness raising of the needs of key groups amongst the general public and service providers as part of a broader focus by policy on factors that support age friendly communities.

References

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