Environment and Identity in Later Life: a cross-setting study
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For most older people, the place where they live is the centre of their everyday life. Homes and neighbourhoods are invested with personal and social meaning, and they have particular characteristics that can affect continuing independence and well-being. Older people live in all kinds of places, including 'ordinary' and 'special' housing providing different levels of accommodation and care; domestic and non-domestic. They live in cities, towns and the countryside; alone and with other people. In extreme old age, a greater proportion of the population live in non-domestic age-segregated settings. This research aimed to advance our understanding of the connections between living environments and the maintenance of identity and well-being in later life; and to develop personally relevant tools for evaluating different kinds of living places. These living places were taken to include the dwelling itself, its setting, and the spaces that connect and separate inside and outside; private and public. The study included a wide range of dwellings and three different locations were chosen to take in metropolitan; urban/sub-urban; and small town/village/semi-rural places. These were the north London Borough of Haringey; the town of Bedford, and villages and small towns within the southern part of Northamptonshire.

Summary of key findings

Most people had a favourite space or 'anchor point' within the home, but it was important for them to be able to move away from it, often as a part of their daily routine, in order to return re-energised by the change. For some people this meant getting out of the house completely. For others the 'journey' might just be into another room for part of the day. The action of moving between points had physical and psychological benefits that could be undermined by reduced mobility and/or institutionalisation. It maintained a sense of control.

Many objects in people's homes were significant to self identity. These objects and the way they were displayed represented self to
**self** (to remind; to reinforce selected aspects of personality); **self** to others (claims about personality and achievements) and **others to self** (visual reminders of absent people, including changing images over time e.g. of grandchildren). While many or most of these items individually were not indispensable to the person's well-being, as a set they strongly underpinned the sense of identity.

No longer being able to go out or move independently was a critical stage in identity construction. Without the wider contexts beyond or within the dwelling, the home by itself could become diminished as a source of identity construction. People in this position either made what arrangements they could to be taken out from time to time or used substitutions for going out that included other people, information, memories and mementoes, and talk about places. A form of spatial insideness.

For some people the boundaries of space are crucial. Intervening space, from secluded gardens to the grassed surrounds of residential homes, allows transition from the private world of the domestic interior to the public world of street life. People required different gradients of transition and levels of control over these spaces and correspondingly used, appropriated, or avoided these spaces in different ways.

For many people, regardless of location, the 'home' environment included a significant component of the natural environment. This ranged from long-tended gardens where specific plants were related to people and events, to indoor and outdoor pots in windows, balconies and patios. It included views from certain windows, walking routes, and seasonal variance. Continuity and contrast with the natural environment of childhood and later stages of life helped to frame these aspects of the location within the respondents' self identity and sense of well-being.

Within each of the three study locations there were some people for whom 'home' was definitely location specific, often because of long connection or specific biographical ties. For others the specific location was secondary to the particular dwelling place. This could affect how people identified with the places where they lived and how they made decisions about possible future moves.

Differences in the spread of housing types and tenures (for example more home ownership in Northamptonshire than in Haringey) became more noticeable at neighbourhood level. The socio-economic and symbolic significance of renting a house here, or owning a house there, was more complex than a simple tenure divide. Personal and housing histories had affected several aspects of current housing situations, including whether people now rented or owned their own home; property-related wealth accumulation; and the personal meaning of present housing status.

Some aspects of neighbourhood had a strong impact on how people identified with the places where they lived, including:

- the detail, complexity and interest of the neighbourhood
- the level of urbanisation
- social heterogeneity
The attempt to define and measure 'quality of life' in environmental terms has frequently produced fragmented analyses of specific aspects of the environment. The evidence from this research suggested instead a need for a notion of a 'life of quality' in which those aspects of the environment which are significant to the **individual** map their needs and aspirations closely enough to allow an acceptable level of comfort and flexibility in everyday living.

The data from this study suggests a number of key foci of interest that lie beyond the self and to which people make the connections that sustain environmental well-being and identity. A life of quality is one where the **sum** of these connections is sufficient to satisfy the individual. These foci may include:

- personally significant material household objects
- enough space in the home to allow self actualisation above the level of self maintenance
- a location that is integrated with one's personal history
- a reachable neighbourhood with a level of security, complexity and accessibility that is compatible with personal needs
- a social community, at least part of which is accessible daily
- a comfortable gradient in the boundary between public and private places.

**A Theory of Re-Engagement for a Life of Quality**

The key finding from the study strongly suggests that a life of quality is achieved when an older person can adopt strategies that allow enough, and sufficiently well-founded, connections to the social and material fabric of everyday life. Our data show how people constantly generate, reinforce and dissolve connections with environment. The range and intensity of these connections varies but there appears to be an essential comfort level which people strategically seek to maintain by creating a particular balance between self and society; reflexivity and reflectivity; inside and outside. Over time, these attachments may become compromised by decline in a person's own abilities and/or the demand characteristics of environment. Older people then look for ways to reinforce and increase their points of attachment to place. We have called this process **Option Recognition**. A life of quality is one where mastery is maintained over the strategies necessary to make attachments/connections – to have the capacity to attach to social and material 'fabric'.

**Video – 'At Home: Place, Identity and Later Life'**

Three women and two men took part in the project video called **At Home: Place, Identity and Later Life**. They were selected to illustrate different aspects of these strategies and attachment to place. The video was shot on location in June 2002 in the respondents' homes and neighbourhoods in Bedford, Rushton, Burton Latimer, and Hornsey Vale and Tottenham, Haringey. The video is intended as a focus for groupwork involving older people, Occupational Therapists, Architects, Care Managers, Community Nurses, and others, developing themes of:
- adaptation to the material home
- attachment to place
- community engagement
- transitions between places
- meaning of the natural environment
- loss and adjustment.

**About the study**

The research started with older people themselves and focus groups were held to establish what they thought was most significant about the places where they lived. From this information and previous research findings comprehensive interview schedules were developed for use with older individuals in their own homes. They included a new research tool, a prompt for discussion in the form of a rotating *wheel of life*. Within the three areas, 20 men and 34 women aged between 61 and 93 years were interviewed in depth. Five of these were included in a video about aspects of environment and identity. The homes where the 54 respondents lived included:

- 6 rooms in residential care homes
- 6 flats in sheltered housing
- 8 bungalows including rented and owned
- 4 terraced houses
- 10 flats including 2 high-rise
- 12 semi-detached houses including rented and owned
- 8 detached houses including farm-houses.

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