

AGEING IN PLACE: PROVIDING SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS FOR OLDER MEN

Helen Kendall, Linda Corkery, Susan Thompson

INTRODUCTION

The well established link between the qualities of the built environment and our ability to be healthy as part of everyday life, is related to physical activity and social connection with others in the community. For older people, particularly those who cannot readily move beyond their local neighbourhoods, the provision of inclusive urban infrastructure to support physical activity and social connectedness is key to healthy ageing in place. The benefits of viewing and being immersed in nature have long been understood. Since the mid-19th century, renowned landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted, recognised the importance of having nature in close proximity to city residents (Fisher 2010). Over the past 20-30 years, the benefits of natural settings, from wilderness (Kaplan and Kaplan 1989) to the parklands of densely populated urban cities (Lynch 1960; Lynch and Rivkin 1959) have been well documented.

In view of the increasing ageing population and preference for people to age at home, it is critical for research to focus on optimal living environments for older citizens. The current qualitative study addresses a gap in the literature about older people's desire to live in environments which maintain health and well-being (Alves et al. 2008, p. 434; Sugiyama and Ward Thompson 2007b, p. 1954). The study is underpinned by research on social gerontology, the biopsychosocial benefits of green natural space, and healthy built environments. This paper focuses on findings from individual neighbourhood 'walking interviews' with five older men. The aim is to explore the men's perspectives about the environmental components that make urban neighbourhoods desirable places in which to live. This research is part of a larger study on ageing and natural environments currently underway. Following an overview of key healthy built environment literature, the methodology is outlined in the paper as a prelude to introducing the older men and the local neighbourhoods in which they walk. The results are discussed in relation to overarching thematic findings. We conclude by considering the importance of the natural environment for healthy ageing in place and the role of research methodologies such as ours, in illuminating what is important to older people – in this case, men.

HEALTH BENEFITS OF GREEN SPACE FOR OLDER PEOPLE

The presence of green, natural settings can facilitate physical activity (Kent et al. 2011). The benefits of natural, green and open spaces extend well beyond the provision of facilities for walking and sporting activities (Beer et al. 2003; van den Berg et al. 2007; Hartig 2008). Rooted in the biophilia hypothesis, popularised by Appleton (1975) and Wilson and Kelling (1984), research suggests that there is an instinctive bond between human beings and other living systems. Removal of this bond by 'building out' natural elements (including plants, animals and even the weather) is fundamentally detrimental to health. Attention restoration theory (Kaplan 1995) further reinforces the critical role of nature for good health which suggests that nature provides conditions for 'effortless attention', whereas daily activities in urban areas (such as working long hours, driving a car or dealing with noisy and visually stimulating environments) demand 'directed attention', or disciplined concentrated effort. The resulting mental fatigue can be debilitating to the extent of causing irritability and even antisocial behaviour (Kaplan et al. 1989, pp. 177-183). Everyday views of nearby nature are as vital to well-being as being immersed in nature (Kaplan et al. 1989, p. 78; Ulrich 1979; 1981; 1984).

The health benefits associated with mere visual contact with nature are well substantiated. Grinde and Patil's (2009) comprehensive appraisal of 50 studies concluded that an environment devoid of nature has a negative effect on health and quality of life. Focusing on mental well-being, Townsend and Weerasuriya (2010) evaluated a large body of literature to demonstrate the many direct benefits of green spaces and nature for health.

In the Australian context, Sugiyama et al. (2008) explored relationships between mental and physical health and perceived greenness in the environment. They found a significant relationship between greenness and mental health, although recreational walking and social coherence only accounted for part of this association. They hypothesise that there are restorative effects of natural environments that may explain the connection.

In a Danish analysis, Schipperijn et al. (2010) found the main reason for use of green space was to enjoy the weather and get fresh air – not necessarily to engage in physical activity. Similarly, research by Frick et al.

(2007) revealed a preference for low stimulus natural areas to promote relaxation and escape, rather than organised physical activity. Abraham et al. (2010) reviewed 120 research articles to find commonly cited health benefits of contact with nature. These include the promotion of mental well-being through attention restoration, stress reduction, and social engagement and participation. In the Netherlands, Maas et al. (2009) explored the hypothesis that green space improves health simply due to the way it can foster increased social contact. They found that the more green space in people's living environment, the less likely were feelings of loneliness and a perceived shortage of social support. Cohen et al. (2008) made similar conclusions from their work in the US. It was determined that parks set the stage for neighbourhood social interactions, thus serving as a foundation for underlying health and well-being. This finding was echoed by Sugiyama and Ward-Thompson (2007a) who found that parks were integral to interaction in an elderly cohort of UK residents.

There is evidence that contact with nature is particularly important in highly urbanised environments (Beer et al. 2003; Neilsen and Hansen, 2007; Hartig 2008; Maller et al. 2010). Small scale encounters with nature and people within natural settings are equally as significant to health as access to large areas of natural open space. Maller et al. (2010) investigated links between inner city high-rise living, access to nature, and health and well-being in Australia. Natural scenery such as trees, parks, or bodies of water was preferred and simply having a view of natural elements induced feelings of relaxation and resulted in self-reported awareness of enhanced well-being. Some residents had access to rooftop gardens which were described as important in providing a range of nutritional, physical, social, and psychological benefits. Not least was an opportunity to better accommodate companion animals – a consistently cited catalyst to social capital and mental and physical health (as reviewed by Cutt et al. 2007).

METHODOLOGY

The material reported in this paper is part of a larger qualitative study examining local environment factors that support ageing in place. The research included purposive sampling of older people residing in selected Sydney suburbs, an in-depth home interview and a related, but optional, unstructured walking interview. Following ethics approval, participants were recruited through advertisements displayed in various community facilities and seniors' popular magazines. Several participants were gained through snowballing. Thirty older people (24 females and six males) participated and the interviews were carried out between January 2008 and October 2010.

The in-depth interview was conducted in the homes of respondents. It focused on living situation, the residential physical environment, social interaction, and health and ability status. The optional walking interview into the local neighbourhood was derived from a similar methodology used by Burton and Mitchell (2006) in their study of older people with and without dementia living in the UK. Twenty females and five males agreed to participate in the walking interviews, which followed an open-ended format (Minichiello et al. 2008, p. 53), and allowed participants to select a familiar and frequently taken route. Interviewees set the pace of the walk and discussed features that were important to them along the way. The researcher made observations, took photographs, and recorded the conversations. The aim was to capture participants' interactions with their surroundings and to note the quality of the environment (Cannuscio et al. 2009; Rodiek and Fried 2005; Tuan 1979). To avoid interrupting their normal activities en route, the interviewees were not asked to take photos themselves.

The locations for the walking interviews encompassed the Lower North Shore, Inner, and Inner Western suburbs of Sydney, selected for similar characteristics such as proximity to public transport services, local shopping centres and presence of natural features. All except one suburb are historic, well established residential areas, with a mix of single-family and multi-family housing. The topography and vegetation vary, providing generally walkable streetscapes and access to nearby public open spaces and foreshore reserves. Perspectives of the five older men were sought about the positive and negative environmental components of their neighbourhoods.

THE WALKERS AND THEIR NEIGHBOURHOODS

The following section introduces the five participants, each of whom has been assigned a pseudonym to preserve anonymity. We describe their suburbs and their walks. Locations are provided in Fig. 1.

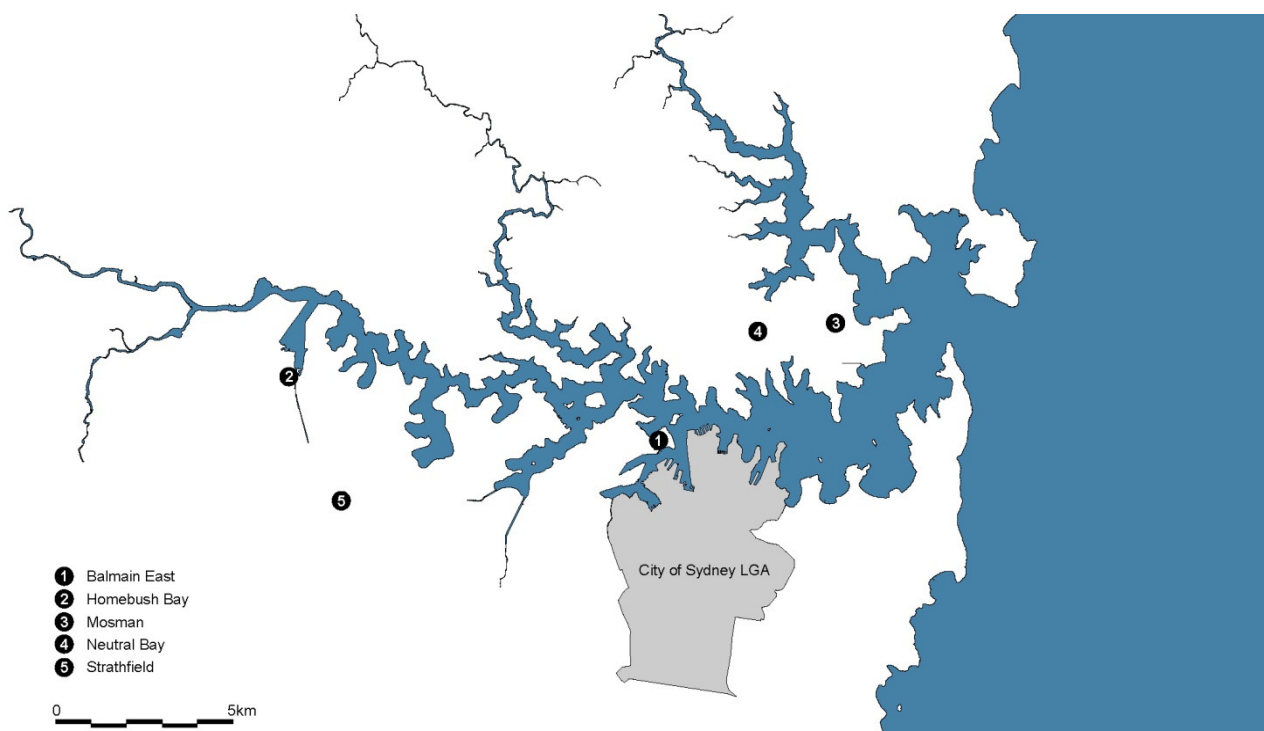


Figure 1 – Sydney suburb location map

Paul



Paul, aged 84, is a retired schoolteacher, and has lived in Strathfield for about three years, sharing a communal house with seven other retired religious brothers.

Established in the 1860s, the housing stock of Strathfield today includes stately Victorian, Federation and California bungalow-era homes, and from the 1960s apartment blocks (Strathfield Council: Subdivision and Early Development). Extensive stands of native vegetation and mature trees feature in the landscapes of local parks and residential streetscapes.

Paul's walk took about an hour and fifteen minutes on a hot, dry summer's day. His destination was the shopping centre in the adjacent suburb, to post letters, pick up a paper, and visit the local library. The home-to-home loop comprised a complicated route of 4 km in total; shorter on the way back. The terrain was mostly flat, the pace leisurely. From his front gate, we set off straight across the road into the quiet residential streets, walking through a large park and passing other walkers en route.

Steven



Steven, 83, is a retired storeman and packer, and has lived in the established suburb of Mosman for 50 years, 40 of those in his present apartment. He has lived alone for the past 29 years following the death of his flatmate.

The suburb of Mosman began to develop in the 1880s with the natural beauty of the bushland and water vistas attracting residents. Today the housing stock varies from large detached Federation-era houses to 1950s and '60s apartment buildings, such as the one in which Steven lives. Retaining the natural environmental features, such as street trees and open space reserves remains a council priority (Mosman Council: About Mosman).

Steven's walk was relatively brief, just under twenty minutes, due to an arthritic ankle. Despite this, he walked at a purposeful pace, stopping to take in distant vistas of water and close views of private gardens. The straightforward home-to-home loop was 1.2 km in total, first along a short

stretch of the 6-lane noisy and heavily trafficked main road from his home. The walk was then mostly through quiet residential streets with little or no traffic, returning partly via the main road.

Christopher



Christopher, aged 80, is a retired mechanical engineer who lives in the densely populated suburb of Balmain East. His two storey brick and timber-clad house where he and his wife have lived for 31 years, has been renovated over time.

Balmain was originally an industrial area, established in the 1830s to the 1850s, when it was serviced by regular ferries and coastal vessels, Balmain East being densely populated by shipyard workers. In the 1970s the demographic character of the suburb changed dramatically with gentrification. Resident action influenced the development of foreshore parks to afford public access. In the 1990s, further previously zoned industrial sites were redeveloped for housing

(Leichhardt Council: Our Suburbs: Balmain). The housing stock in Balmain East today includes a variety of dwelling types, including mostly detached and attached houses, some original, some with small private gardens, as well as more recently developed townhouses and apartments (Leichhardt Council 2006).

Christopher's walking interview took just over an hour. It was a mild and sunny, partly cloudy spring day. His home-to-home loop was almost 3 km. He was less verbally expressive than the other four men, but his walk was the most varied of all. He chose a convoluted route traversing steep narrow roads with no footpaths, connecting public steps and a relatively long concrete ramp. This opened out to a large open foreshore park where he sat briefly to take in city views across the water. The area was quiet despite the proximity of busy roads. Christopher's walk took in small dog-friendly parks in residential streets, and vistas of the Harbour along the way. We returned via the park edge to the 'back' entrance of his house.

Robert



Robert, 73, a police officer now retired, works casually as a carpenter/joiner. He and his partner have lived in the established suburb of Neutral Bay for about 30 years, just over 20 in the present apartment block, typical of 1960s apartment blocks.

Neutral Bay's commercial centre evolved along its main arterial, Military Road. Its housing stock of Victorian and Federation-era styles reflects its history, as do apartment blocks dating from the 1920s, alongside more contemporary higher density residential buildings. Foreshore parks and natural reserves complement the built form and provide close access for recreational pursuits (North Sydney Council: Community Profile).

Robert's walk took about an hour and fifteen minutes on a sunny spring day. The home-to-home loop was approximately 2 km, to a local reserve with mature native trees through which views could be seen, a grassed hillside around the foreshore and picturesque harbour views. He raised concerns about some negative characteristics in the physical

environment en route, as well as a specific destination. Nevertheless, he stressed that it was one of his favourite walks, alone or with his partner.

Tony



Tony, 65, a semi-retired consultant industrial engineer, is at a different life stage to the other four men, being a baby boomer. He and his wife downsized from a large family home in the northwest of Sydney, to a two-bedroom apartment in the newer suburb of Homebush Bay. They were attracted by the resort-style apartment complexes built there in the 1990s around the water's edge, adjacent to Sydney Olympic Park and Sydney Bicentennial Parklands.

The present site of Homebush Bay did not exist until significant reclamation was undertaken in the 1920s and '30s. It was initially used as an industrial site and following massive landscape remediation, residential and commercial redevelopment began to emerge (Auburn Council 2005). The post-2000 Olympics site and Parklands are incorporated into this suburb, with a centralised water treatment plant for irrigation purposes and recreational green space and wetlands within walking or cycling distance, away from the main roads of surrounding suburbs.

Tony's walk took an hour and forty-five minutes on a mild, cloudy spring day. It involved a cross country walk of approximately 4 km around the Sydney Bicentennial Parklands via paved paths, a timber boardwalk in the mangrove swamps, grass and unsurfaced tracks. The pace was leisurely but energetic. He was enthusiastic, vocal and well-informed about features in the Parklands at which he often stopped to point out. There were few vehicles on the short stretch of the 2-lane road from home to the shared pathway into the mangrove swamp, and no other walkers on that path. It was peaceful in this environment, with bird calls and hum of traffic from Homebush Bay Drive. It was even quieter being immersed in the mangrove swamps than in the open park areas.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the walking interviews are based on the themes which emerged and observations made during the walks with each man. In discussing our findings, we also consider how they relate to the literature. The interviewees all responded in a self-confident and animated manner throughout the interview process and seemed to gain satisfaction from being given the opportunity to verbally express themselves.

Motivation for Older People to Walk

Physical activity is known to be associated with significant positive health benefits (Kent et al. 2011) and subjective psychological well-being in older people (Ruuskanen and Ruoppila 1995). Neighbourhood

walkability appears to protect against depression in older men (Berke et al. 2007). All five men in this study displayed a high level of physical fitness, motivation and determination during the walking interviews. Venturing into the local neighbourhood was a daily activity for each man. Three of them chose to walk a home-to-home loop rather than making any stops, except to rest very briefly or admire a natural or built feature along the way. These five men's trips were primarily for exercise and leisure, although one incorporated task-related destinations – a post box, newsagent and café; another took the opportunity to buy a drink from a wharfside kiosk and have a rest on a park bench. In each case, the selected walks were related to scenic views en route and at destinations, featuring water and/or well vegetated parks. The walks were one of a number of routes that each took for exercise or leisure during an average week. Their physical ability enabled them to readily navigate the neighbourhood environment (Sugiyama et al. 2007a, p. 174). All interviewees completed their selected home-neighbourhood loop without any apparent discomfort, including Steven who used a brace to support his arthritic ankle. The men were enthusiastic and energetic throughout the walk, despite hot weather conditions and sometimes challenging topography. Their physical ability and positive attitudes clearly defied the stereotype of the frail aged person (Willcocks et al. 1987, p. 79). The men put it this way:

...when I'm walking I'm in heaven! It is pretty hot [today], but I don't feel it... I think that when you are elderly, do things, push yourself a bit, don't just sit down inside and say, 'oh I'm tired' or that, if you can do it, go and do it, get out! (Paul)

I don't walk that far anymore, [but] I think if you walk a little bit like this every morning it, ah, it helps. (Steven)

The beauty of walking or running this run [is] you see a lot more [than driving]. You pay a lot more attention to what's going on. (Robert)

Social Interaction

Three participants, Robert, Christopher and Tony, regularly walk their chosen route with their respective partners with whom they live. Steven and Paul, who reside alone, normally walk unaccompanied. None of the five men take the particular route as a routine for socialising with friends, but do enjoy chance encounters. Christopher mentioned that he had come to know a former politician, now in his late 80s, who lives on his walking route; and while socialising is not the main motivation for walking in the neighbourhood, feeling part of the general community is most important. Social activity is generally organised and scheduled into other weekly activities, whereas walking for exercise or transport can be more spontaneous. Nonetheless, chance encounters with passers-by were welcomed (Gehl 2006, p.14) and three of the men did greet others during the walking interview.

Neighbourhood Amenity and Supportive Environments

For all respondents in this and the larger study, *neighbourhood amenity* was found to be the most important all-embracing concept for a desirable neighbourhood. This concept refers to sensory pleasure derived from places which are pleasant to be in or to experience through the senses. Vision is known to be the sense most often employed through which curiosity can be satisfied (Tuan 1979, p. 414) and in this study, viewing nature predominated over other sensory experience. The well researched health and well-being benefits of viewing natural environments were discussed earlier in the paper. The environmental attributes also relate to feeling safe from physical hazards, as opposed to feeling safe from criminal violence (Quine and Morrell 2008). Moreover, physical proximity to others who are out and about creates a sense of social support (Cohen et al. 2008; Maas et al. 2009; Sugiyama et al. 2007a).

Neighbourhood amenity for these five men comprised a number of environmental attributes. These are listed below using the words of each man to describe the nature of the environmental amenity.

- A sense of safety from accidental injury in the neighbourhood.

...we could conceivably get around [in Homebush Bay] without cars at all.... We thought that...we could always have...little electric buggies...they're absolutely ideal, because you're talking about not mixing with the traffic.... Now there'd be no reason why we couldn't run a...scooter down this [protected] main road. (Tony)

- A sense of freedom being outdoors to engage in activities in the local neighbourhood.

We've sat...and had lunch just under the trees here...even on a hot day you can come over here and find somewhere shady [because] the park isn't formally shut...it's virtually open for pedestrians... all the time...so you've got the ability to come over here in the evening [when] it's cool and go for a run. (Tony)

There's a beautiful spot up there at Georges Heights where the army moved out and they've got a big gas barbecue to use...and you can just go up there and have a picnic. It's fantastic, and they've got a big park up there, and you [wouldn't] know where it is, you know, unless you were told... (Steven)

Yeah, this is a wonderful park here.... Just further around, on good evenings, either spring or early summer, you get people who bring picnics down here. [My partner] Shelley and I bring a picnic...sit on the grass, look at the Harbour Bridge and the Opera House... (Robert)

- Borrowed views of landscapes with visual appeal dominated by natural elements.

Look there's another park...Fitzgerald Park – so very nice. Everywhere in Strathfield you have this. Beautiful! (Paul)

- A variety of interesting natural and made features in the landscape.

...the trees are magnificent [in Strathfield]..., wonderful - trees, trees, trees. (Paul)

This is a fascinating bit of sculpture over here. I like this...it's a lovely clean piece of work. (Tony)

...it's just these little areas that they've created within the bigger scope of the park. Of course these are the areas that have just matured, like all these trees [in the parklands].... The trees we are looking through here (pointing) [my wife and I agreed] 'isn't that a lovely setting, doesn't that work nicely'...the groupings of trees... (Tony)

- Evidence of positive human intervention in the landscape, in particular, stewardship and well maintained privately owned and public areas in the neighbourhood.

As you can see the houses are nicely done up.... There are some lovely spots [in Balmain East]. (Christopher)

Not bad to be near a [harbourside] pool like that if you want it! (Robert)

- Being in an intergenerational environment for vicarious pleasure, with opportunities to engage as spectator and speak with casual acquaintances.

...particularly in the evening, when the sun goes down, it's so great to get out [and come to the park here]...and you meet ordinary people. (Paul)

I come down here [to Cremorne Reserve] in the morning early, about seven o'clock - and the number of people walking! (Robert)

- Comfort and convenience, such as adequate public transport as an option to walking, familiar routes and walkable destinations with facilities for refreshment, affordable grocery shops, choice of routes, and shaded streets and parks.

See so Homebush [has] a station...and...a 408 bus goes every hour from Strathfield Station to here...it's handy, like if I'm at Burwood, and ah, I want to go to Strathfield, I just get the 408 bus - goes straight through. (Paul)

That's a little skinny street I sometimes go up...but we'll walk up this way today...it's not quite as steep [as down further], that's why I go up here sometimes. (Steven)

You know, you can walk down [this street] when the sun is shining on a hot day, and you have...shade [from the trees] most of the way, and...in winter, you can walk down here when it's raining [without getting wet]! (Paul)

- The notion of 'serendipity' or pleasant surprises, such as suddenly coming across a particularly picturesque vista, colour in the landscape such as seasonal flowering, seeing or hearing an unusual bird, exchanging positive words with a passing stranger or acquaintance, or a nostalgic memory evoked by sensory elements in the landscape.

One of the things I love about [this] bush track is that...you get some gorgeous little birds, ...tiny, tiny things...smaller than a finch.... My favourite [is] the Eastern Whip Bird. ...I've seen one once and we've searched and sometimes you'll be running...or walking along, and they'll go w-h-i-p! I love to hear them – so much so when I [do] I say, 'thank you'. (Robert)

I loved creeks as a kid, I used to walk up creeks...[This canal] goes on and on and on and doesn't it? (Paul)

...I love riding my bike along [this unsurfaced track in the Parklands], because...it's like the country roads I used to ride my bike on when I was a kid – same gravelly sound. (Tony)

Smith et al. (1997) developed criteria for the quality of physical form of urban places. These include: "liveability", "character", "connection", "mobility", "personal freedom" and "diversity" (p. 232). According to their criteria, the environmental qualities revealed most often by the five participants for walking in their local neighbourhoods were: *liveability* in terms of comfort, and safety from accidental injury, *character*, particularly a sense of place, and aesthetics, and *connection* in terms of a sense of belonging to a place to where one can return (p. 233). *Mobility* embracing accessibility, convenience, activity and legibility was also key, *expression* in relation to landscaping of streets, parks and edges around bays and harbourside environments, and *diversity* of physical form such as variety, choice of ways to get to and from neighbourhood destinations and interest in natural elements, made elements and social diversity (p. 237).

This study revealed that the quality of streetscape on the neighbourhood walking route was highly important, not only the quality of environmental features at destinations. Choice of routes was also a preferred characteristic adding variety to their walks, which gave the men a sense of freedom and control. Viewing slides of different environments and their components, as in Ulrich's (1981) study, does not allow the opportunity for participants to point out or describe other positive or negative features in the landscape. The walking interview enables participants to express themselves whilst physically being in the situation, responding to environmental cues in the real world.

Dominance of Natural Landscape in the Urban Neighbourhood

In line with other research findings on the benefits of the natural environment, all five respondents emphasised the pleasure they took from the scenic aspects of the natural environment during the walk. Positive natural features incorporated views of vegetation, including mature trees and gardens both en route and at destinations.

In their study of older people living in the Netherlands, Borst et al. (2008, p. 358) identified positive street characteristics including domestic gardens, trees and passing through parks. Similarly, Paul's neighbourhood has a number of large parks. He chose to traverse one with an oval and stands of mature trees to reach his destination – the shopping centre in an adjoining suburb. He also commented favourably on what he perceived to be well kept houses and attractive gardens. In fact, all of the men enjoyed the presence of large dwellings, together with renovated and well maintained smaller dwellings along their walking routes. They liked seeing extensive, luxuriant and landscaped gardens. It was evident that borrowed views of these environmental features contributed to the pleasures inherent in their walks. Four out of five routes afford harbour views, which were also highly appreciated. Further, most interviewees expressed appreciation for, and interest in the variety of wildlife on the walk. Birdsong was apparent en route and at different destinations including trees in private gardens, on the street and in public parks. Where there is no private garden, often with apartment living, access to nature in the neighbourhood might be considered all the more important (Talbot and Kaplan 1991). However, all five men, irrespective of the dwelling in which they lived or whether they had a home garden, benefitted greatly from access to neighbourhood nature.

Although nature benefits affect people of all ages (Moore 1990; Ulrich and Simons 1986), for older people in particular, an inclusive built environment is necessary to enable them to remain as active and independent as possible. The home range of the everyday environment and the social life of the older person can be greatly supported or hindered by the design of the built environment. An inclusive environment ensures legible, familiar routes and connected places, easy access to everyday services, and opportunities for

socialisation, which can motivate people to maintain their fitness and independence. Further, stress is alleviated when places and spaces are accessible via hazard-free, well maintained and pleasant routes which are enhanced with natural elements incorporated into the urban landscape (Burton et al. 2006; Cooper Marcus et al. 1998; Kaplan et al. 1998).

Unsupportive Environments

The five interviewees were equally vocal about negative features of their neighbourhoods. Personal safety from accidents was the major concern. The main environmental hindrances included:

- Excessive vehicular traffic.

The thing about Sydney [is] you can't take for granted that there won't be traffic... (Paul)

We've got to get off the road! There's a lot of traffic down here. Although it's a dead end, and there's (sic) about 180 houses down here, you'd be amazed how much traffic goes in and out, particularly going to work and back... (Christopher)

...some people drive down here at a hundred miles an hour, and [the speed bump] doesn't slow them down at all! (Robert)

- Cycling on roads in busy areas.

I've got a couple of bikes [but] I'm almost afraid to use them.... It would have to be 'bike only' lanes.... If [someone in a parked car] suddenly decides to throw the door open, there's only going to be one loser, and it's going to be me! (Robert)

- Potential trips and falls from poorly maintained streets and destinations, poorly lit walking paths, dappled light and obstacles on the path.

This footpath is a bit dangerous...and oh, that is very common in [this suburb], all over the place there are walls falling over – we will probably pass quite a lot, where the wall has been knocked over [by tree roots]... (Paul)

...someone is going to sue [the council] if they fall over that hole [in the pavement]. Well, they've marked it but it's been marked for years. When the white paint wears off, they just spray it again. (Robert)

...see the dappled light - where there's sunlight and shadows? If someone was running past you at the same time, it wouldn't be too hard to step over the edge.... Yes, it's a good couple of feet, probably 700-800 millimetres... (Robert)

Falls are particularly prevalent in people in the fourth age and the physical environment is a major contributor where hazards exist. For instance, high step risers, slippery surfaces, unmarked edges, discontinuous handrails, poor lighting, glare, uneven or broken footpaths and lengthy distance to seating and toilet facilities in the neighbourhood can all pose a danger (WHO 2008, p. 18). Not only can a fall result in fractures as one consequence, but also to a fear of falling, resulting in “dependence, loss of autonomy...immobilisation and depression” (p. 2). At one point during Christopher's walk, plantings encroached over the footpath from the public gardens alongside the path. He suddenly tripped on some of this vegetation, but recovered without falling. The cause of the stumble was not immediately obvious to him and he turned back to see what had happened. If his reaction time had not been as swift or he was frail, he might have fallen.

All five men expressed negative views about heavily trafficked roads and a lack of continuous walking paths. These views contributed to the perception of potentially dangerous streets. Paths with dappled light were considered to be trip hazards. This was particularly the case where the surface was irregular. Environmental features thought to be dangerous contrasted with those the men found irritating, spoiling an otherwise pleasant environment. Traffic congestion on the road, the sight of poorly kept or derelict buildings, objects or pavements in disrepair, unkempt green areas, a lack of seating and lack of shade in parks were considered to be annoyances which affected some of the men's sense of well-being. Whilst Robert felt it was too dangerous to cycle in lanes with parked vehicles on the road in his suburb, Tony, an experienced cyclist, liked the fact that his new Bicentennial Parklands neighbourhood poses far less danger away from main roadways, than his previous suburb.

Although most walks were conducted in neighbourhoods relatively close to Sydney Harbour waterways where visual amenity is generally high, the interviewees lived in dwellings typical of Middle Australia. The desire to 'stay put' in their present neighbourhoods, or in Tony's case, to downsize to a newer area dominated by waterscape, reflects the aspirations of other older people who actively seek 'sea [and tree] changes' along the Eastern Seaboard (Burnley and Murphy 2004). This is also related to the many physical and mental health benefits of ready access to natural environments for physical activity and relaxation (Kent et al. 2011).

CONCLUSION

The 'walking interview' methodology employed in this study was a powerful way to elicit an in-depth understanding of what motivates older people to walk in their home environments. These particular older men were independent and self-directed individuals, living in relatively privileged, well-serviced and physically connected and walkable areas supporting physical exercise for leisure and transport. Further qualitative research to contrast the findings in this study with others which focus on people with dementia living at home, areas with poor amenity, gender or cultural differences, would determine commonalities and differences between groups. The walking interviews revealed participants' enthusiasm about features that they enjoyed and disliked in their everyday environments. The authenticity of a walking interview contrasts with a controlled viewing of artificial environments using only images, and the familiar walk allowed the men to open up and talk about their experiences in an informal and relaxed way. Walking through a scene involves multisensory perception which can evoke rich and deep meaning about past and present lived experience.

In summary, these five older men preferred mixed urban environments which afford optimal neighbourhood amenity, including safety from accidental injury, comfort and convenience, with dominance of natural landscape for physical activity and sensory pleasure – particularly the viewing of nature. None of the five men felt marginalised by their age, but took pleasure in the social fabric of the intergenerational community of which they felt a part. Stewardship and maintenance of the physical environment was crucial to their enjoyment of walks in the neighbourhood. Neighbourhood amenity fosters positive memory of place and a sense of well-being, encouraging repeated outdoor activity, which in turn encourages independence and an active and healthy lifestyle. The desirable characteristics preferred by older men in this study add to current knowledge, revealing qualities of supportive environments which should be considered by built environment professionals for remediation of less privileged neighbourhoods and in the design of new environments.

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