Ageing in Space: Remaking Community for Older Adults

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore the needs of older adults for social interaction by investigating how local and everyday communities are produced by service organisations and experienced by their patrons. We approach the social needs of older adults through the lens of 'community,' both as a concept and as a lived experience. Our attention to communities of peers and arenas for everyday interaction is discussed in the context of the dominant policy discourse of 'ageing in place.' In this discourse, 'place' is predominantly interpreted as physical infrastructure, with little formal recognition of the importance of the arenas of social everyday interaction for older adults outside the home/family. Our exploration draws on the empirical study of three organisations in Toronto, Canada and Bergen, Norway that, in various ways, represent places for everyday interaction. We discuss how belonging is understood from the perspective of different older groups and how it is facilitated by organisations and services, through the creation of shared, informal social spaces. Even though there is considerable difference in size, aesthetics, target population and geographical impact field, all three organisations offered their patrons a space for informal social interaction in which they were allowed to claim the space as their own. Our analysis indicates a pronounced need for a diversity of arenas for older adults to interact socially. Furthermore, we portray how these spaces for everyday interaction are created often in addition to, or even in divergence from, the official mission of these organisations, in a form of co-optation by patrons.

Keywords: Community; Older Adults; Ageing in Place; Space

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Introduction

Social isolation and loneliness among older adults have been portrayed as a pressing and indeed increasing societal challenge, in both popular policy and academic outlets (Freedman and Nicolle 2020; Grenade and Boldy 2008). Nevertheless, research on social isolation among older adults remains both scarce and varied (Van Regenmortel *et al.* 2016). Older adults are also portrayed as particularly connected to their neighbourhoods or local environments, in part because many have lived there for a long time, in part because they, in a rapidly changing world, 'connect' with the local (Buffet *et al*. 2012, 15-16; Gardener 2011, 264). Yet, and particularly in urban areas with more potential for providing social spaces for dealing with issues of inclusion, belonging and social identities (Gamba and Cattacin 2021), older adults report low involvement in social networks (Blekesaune and Haugen 2018). This is perhaps an indicator of the lack of social arenas for meaningful social interaction particularly designated for an older age group, many of whom are ageing at home, alone (Blanchard 2013, 6). The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has also drawn our attention to the lack of social interaction experienced by older people; a societal challenge also pre- and post-pandemic. Relatedly, welfare states have been critiqued for over-emphasizing medical needs over social needs of the older population (Ågotnes and Jacobsen 2017; Eggebø, Munkejord, and Schönfelder 2020), contributing to a silencing of the importance of meeting *social* needs of older adults.

In this paper, we explore the need for social interaction by older adults by investigating how local and everyday communities are produced by different community service organisations and experienced by their patrons. We approach the social needs of older adults through the lens of 'community,' both as a concept and as a lived experience, including the dimensions of space and place, and a sense of belonging

or fellowship. Our exploration draws on the empirical study of three organisations in two cities that, in various ways, represent places for the everyday interaction of groups of older adults. We discuss how belonging is understood from the perspective of different older groups and how it is facilitated by organisations and services through the creation of shared, informal social spaces.

Drawing on rapid, team-based ethnography studies in two cities, Toronto, Canada and Bergen, Norway, and an analysis of observational data and interviews with staff and patrons of three organisations catering to the social needs of older adults in diverse ways, we ask three overarching questions. First, what do the organisations provide (and, by implication, seen not to be provided elsewhere, including in the local welfare system)? Second, how are the boundaries of these organisations maintained (who has access, who does not, who is considered the 'right patron,' who is seen as a 'space invader')? Third and consequently: how are informal communities of older adults constructed, facilitated and perceived?

Our attention to what can be construed as communities of peers and arenas for everyday interaction is discussed in the context of the dominant policy discourse of ageing in place (AIP). We argue that within this discourse, 'place' is predominantly interpreted as physical infrastructure, resting on a notion of the private home as ideal. In many official AIP policy discourses 'place' is understood as a physical container with distinct boundaries. AIP polices also often have an inherent normative dimension. They assume that if needed, older adults should receive service provision *in* their home. The relevance and need for community in a broad sense, and a community of peers in particular, is absent in such policy discourses. Perhaps as a reaction to this policy silence, a need to move from 'ageing in place' to 'ageing in community' has been voiced (Blanchard 2013), in which, for instance, older adults can gather in community dwellings. The need to address social issues of older adults has also been made in research scholarship, for instance, through a framework of 'community gerontology' (Greenfield *et al*. 2018) or through calls for an explicit focus on "places of aging research" moving away from the large body of research on ageing in place (Gardner 2011, 263). Our analysis, similarly, highlights a pronounced need for a diversity of arenas for older adults to meet and interact socially and portrays how these spaces for everyday interaction are created often in addition to, or even in divergence from the original or official mission of the social service organisations, in a form of co-optation by patrons.

Ageing in Place & Community

Our paper draws on literature on AIP policy and, given the growing concern with social isolation among older adults, on alternative perspectives on 'community,' 'place,' and 'space.'

Ageing in Place

Across the global north, AIP policies have developed in response to the burgeoning pressures of ageing populations and, in particular, the financial cost of providing long term care (Pani-Harreman *et al*. 2021; Starr and Szebehely 2017). Societal expectations are also changing and maintaining independence well into old age is an assumed goal of older people today. The steady increase in the acceptance and implementation of AIP is seen as "aging at home rather than in a home" (McDermott *et al*. 2009, 246). The policy goal of supporting people in their own homes—the idea of 'ageing in place'—is extended to focus on those supports but is very much about keeping someone in their homes as long as possible, thus alleviating pressure on services and being cost efficient. However, research also supports older adults' preferences for staying at home as long as possible (Buffet *et al*. 2003, 16). While there are diverse understandings of what constitutes 'place' in AIP policies, the role of housing and the home remains central (Martens 2018).

In many countries, AIP policies have seen some decentralisation of government responsibilities at the local level and the development of programmes to help frail older adults remain in their own homes (Pavolini and Ranci 2008). In Norway, which will serve as an example here, the conceptualization of AIP by Norwegian health care authorities as a goal for older adults has led to the implementation of policy initiatives for the older population (Ministry of Health and Care Services 2015a, 2015b). The balance of formal long-term care services for older adults has shifted, with an increase in home help services and assisted living facilities and a relative decrease in traditional institutional care, or nursing homes (Otnes 2015), following patterns seen elsewhere in Europe (Spasova *et al.* 2018). The model of institutional care has also shifted towards an ideal of 'homelike,' for instance by having smaller units and single rooms with adjoining bathrooms (Ågotnes 2017; Otnes 2015). The downscaling of institutional care towards less extensive and more cost-efficient care at home rests on a cost containment policy logic—that the current system of significant public and institutional service provision is not sustainable (Blix and Hamran 2017). Furthermore, a shift away from the State towards the individualization of responsibility of the service recipient and their family has accompanied these developments (Christensen and Fluge 2016), in parallel with general changes in the distribution of responsibility, or welfare-mix, between various sectors. The volunteer sector role is seen as contributing in line with these shifting responsibilities, specifically to address social isolation and loneliness among older adults (Ministry of Health and Care Services 2019, 43-46).

Ageing in What Place?

In the literature, there are diverse understandings of ageing in place which extend to attachment to place which brings social connection, security and familiarity (Pani-Harreman *et al.* 2021). Yet, there is scant analysis of the role of social networks within the AIP policy literature (Pani-Harreman *et al.* 2021, 2054). Further, as Dalmer (2019) points out, the policy narratives of AIP are surprisingly unexamined. In many instances policies focus mainly on self-reliance and independence. Such policies frame AIP as a process that can and should be responsibly managed by older adults—as a matter of choice. However, they produce only one option for people, which is to age in place in their own homes (Dalmer 2019).

Further, critiques of AIP policies point to their normative force and the absence of the voices of older people in their construction. For example, a study in the Netherlands found very different understandings of AIP by professionals and older adults (van Hees *et al*. 2017). For the professionals, AIP was much more about requiring objective features of neighbourhoods such as access to amenities, mobility and meeting places that enable older adults to stay living independently. In contrast, the older adults associated AIP more with their own lived experiences and attachments to "specific, intangible and memory-laden public places" (van Hees *et al.* 2017, 11). Other studies have highlighted the ways in which AIP policies ignore multiple systems of power and oppression that operate to exclude certain cohorts of older adults (Sixsmith *et al.* 2019) as well as the "emotional geographies" of ageing in place, particularly pertinent to migrant older communities (Warnes and Williams 2006). A study on older LGBT people also points to the importance of the normative social and policy context, highlighting how their experiences with AIP varied depending on the extent to which the contexts (places and spaces) in which they are ageing were able to accommodate LGBT lifestyles (Hoekstra-Pijpers 2020).

The dominant AIP policy discourse is related to a discourse on 'the age-friendly city' (AFC), addressing issues of city planning, transportation, accessibility, and inclusion in a broader sense (WHO 2015). However, like AIP policy discourses, many AFC policies presuppose a normative older population (Gamme and Rafoss 2020). While liveability indicators such as income and access to social housing may be recognized, much more rarely recognized are diverse characteristics of the older population such as gender, class, ethnicity or first nations status. Both AFC and AIP policies pay, as such, scant regard to

the intersectional location of older people (Sixsmith *et al.* 2019, 646-648) across different axes of advantage and disadvantage.

While the importance of social networks is recognized in some AIP and AFC policies, they are generally conceived of in static terms, as "a strategy that focuses on providing for physiological and safety needs, but one that too often fails to provide opportunities for the other basic human needs of love and belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization" (Blanchard 2013, 10). There is little recognition that social networks are dynamic and change over time and thus that there will not be just one static experience of place for an individual older person (Vos *et al.* 2020). Consequently, there is a general absence of any formal recognition of the importance of the arenas of social everyday interaction for an ageing population, outside what can be considered as close-knit networks (in the private home and the family). 'Place' in aging in place is therefore not understood as "an integral and meaningful part of peoples' social lives that is constructed by past experiences and desired futures" (Van Hees *et al*. 2017, 12). As such, AIP discourses overemphasize older adults attachement to 'home' as opposed to that of 'people' (Hillcoat-Nallétamby and Ogg 2014).

Feminist geography represent a contrasting or perhaps nuancing perspective to this, by conceptualizing 'spaces' as distinct from 'places.' Pruitt (2008a), for example, uses the term 'space' as an abstract concept that refers both to physical surroundings (physical space) *and* to the impact that particular spatial configurations have on many aspects of life, from social relationships to social spaces. 'Space' is further conceptualised as the product of interrelations as constructed through interactions from the global to the tiny and, because it draws on multiplicity and heterogeneity, is always under construction (Massey 2005, 31-32). 'Place,' meanwhile, is conceptualized as a concretization of 'space', containing identifiable characteristics making, on an emic level, a given place at a given time distinguishable from others (Pruitt 2008b, 341).

Conceptualizing Community

By analysing meaning-making and belonging among older adults, we suggest that also 'community' can serve as a relevant analytical lens in supplementing existing AIP literature. Community is, however, both complex and contested as empirical phenomena and as an analytical term. According to Dominelli (1995, 133-134), for instance, 'community' is notoriously difficult to define, leading to 98 different interpretations, alluding to a variety of themes and attributed concepts from the more or less hyperlocal to the nation-state (Svensson and Nielsen 2020, 39), and, we can add, the global and digital. 'Community' thus relates to both place and space, where 'place,' according to Cresswell (2015, 12-14) inspired by Agnew, contains both locale, location, and sense of the place. However, 'community' does not only relate to 'place' as a geographical entity. Turunen (2009, 49-50) for example, writing in the context of community work, suggests a threefold operationalization of 'community': a) a geographical area (a district, a village, a part of a city, a neighbourhood), b) a social system for interaction (an association, an organisation, the workplace, a network), and c) a symbolic unit of belonging (shared values, traditions, interest). Significantly, the three categories can and often do overlap, for instance for minority groups living in the same geographical area.

Regardless of this division, 'community' is characterized by having both a sense of belonging and of interaction, both of affinity and of practice. Community is therefore more than merely the sharing of characteristics within groups of similar people; an aim or a purpose is also present. Furthermore, 'community' can be operationalized based on membership: ascribed and acquired. Communities based on acquired membership can also be described as 'imagined communities,' that is, communities in which members strive to be members, and must make an effort to be able to do so (Larsen, Sewpaul,

and Hole 2014, 4). Such communities have, therefore, a stronger bond, compared to communities where membership is automatic.

Furthermore, 'community' is conceptualized as non-static: communities are interpreted and negotiated and change character, for better and worse (Ledwith and Springett 2014, 49). Literature on community thus describes the changing nature of communities in connection to globalization and migration, for instance, in which peoples' affinity in and between groups have a more sporadic and porous nature. While not completely novel—Luckmann (1970, 581) described 'modern man' as part-timers in multiple belongings some time ago—the idea of belonging to multiple, changing communities does speak to changing patterns in mobility of both people and ideas, supported, for instance by Massey's (1994, 2005) notion of "a global sense of place." Savage *et al.* (2005) proposed the term "elective belonging," in which one's affinity to a place is based on choice. Yet, it is further argued, communities are not completely imagined, even in a globalized world: they exist and matter, while relating to something more than strict geographical locales. Communities are lived and experienced. Soja's (1999) conceptualization of "thirdspace"—as the intersection between the specific/material places and the perceived/imagined space—captures these lived experiences of agents. For older adults, this can take the form for instance of neighbourhood networks (Gardner 2011), simultaneously informal and bounded by 'place.'

Methodology

The paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork in two cities, highlighting three service organisations. It is part of a larger project investigating Age Friendly Cities. Field research is being undertaken in a number of cities and this paper draws on fieldwork conducted in Toronto, Canada and Bergen, Norway in 2018 and 2019.

The methodology used is team-based rapid ethnography (Baines and Cunningham 2013). This methodology, which ensures multiple perspectives from multiple researchers over a relatively short, but intense, period of time. This method has a number of advantages in negotiating policy and cultural issues in cross-national studies and in deepening understandings of a specific context through multiple analyses of the same events (Millen 2000). In particular, involving both insider and outsider researchers in all aspects of data collection and analysis—where typically insider researchers know the case study site and the national content within which it is located and outsiders are less familiar with both, provides shared opportunities for reflection and critique (see also Rubin and Rubin 2005). In our case this allows practical and theoretical links to be made between the everyday life of community organisations and the city context in which they operate (see Szebehely 2007).

Building on extensive background research on each city, including its policies, organisations and services related to the needs of the elderly, a team of 10-20 insider and outsider researchers spent a week in each city doing observations and interviews. These involved meetings with key policy stakeholders as well as conducting fieldwork in teams in selected organisations. When conducting our team ethnography, 'locals' and 'natives' were paired in both cities, and collaborated in discussions on-site and in later analyses. 'Locals' also assisted practically, for instance with translations during interviews and conversations. While all participants in the Canadian fieldwork were proficient in English, language barriers occurred more frequently in the Norwegian fieldwork. Here, a Norwegian speaking partner served as an on-site (and later textual) translator for informants who spoke limited or no English.

Our site visits centred both on geographic neighbourhoods within each city with particular characteristics (income, cultural mix) and demographic communities, such as migrants or the homeless.

The data on the selected organisations included fieldnotes of each researcher based on observation, interviews with program participants, staff and volunteers, and background material collected by the team. During the week of the site visits the team met at least twice to share their insights. Fieldnotes and interview recordings and transcriptions were later made available for the team to use in their analyses.

For the purposes of this paper, in line with the overall project, we targeted organisations focusing either exclusively or indirectly on older adults, while offering some form of either organized or *ad hoc* social activities. These organisations had a low threshold for admittance, while also, as we shall see, targeting various (sub-)populations.

Two of the selected organisations are in Bergen and one in Toronto. Toronto, the largest city in Canada, is ethnically and racially diverse, with a large immigrant population. Geographic neighbourhoods tend to differ in both cultural mix and income. Bergen is a relatively small city, with a more ethnically homogeneous population. While the policy context differs, the range of organisations serving various populations is quite similar, thus providing a comparative foundation. They include multi-service organisations offering a range of programming to older adults in a geographic neighbourhood and programs targeting a particular demographic, such as migrants, immigrants, or LGBT. These are typically run by not-for-profit organisations with some public funding. In addition, there are what we term one-off initiatives that contribute to the quality of life of particular groups of older adults, whether it be cultural programs or community gathering places.

All three selected organisations, given pseudonyms beneath, offered their patrons a space for informal social interaction in which they were allowed to claim the space as their own. Our intention with our three different cases was not to analyse the interplay between context and practice. While the significant contextual differences among the case studies could serve as an important rationale for their selection, our three different cases were chosen for the purposes of illuminating aspects of the lives of older adults that transcend organizational and policy contexts. Relatedly, our goal was to explore commonalities despite contextual differences rather than compare organizations in different countries.

We chose a large multi-service organisation in Toronto, referred to as the *The Centre.* Like many such organisations it offers a range of programmes for an older population (55 plus), including drop-in activities, lifelong learning programs, recreation and fitness programs, health clinics, referrals to other services, and a cafeteria. Founded to serve the needs of the local older Jewish population, it is located in a geographic neighbourhood with a concentration of largely Russian Jewish immigrants.

The second organisation, referred to as *The Coffee House,* is targeted to those considered to be socially disadvantaged in the city centre of Bergen, with a particular emphasis on a) those suffering from long-term substance use and b) illegal work migrants. It runs a coffee house that serves as a positive space to hang out and make connections and an entry to other services. The organisation provides counselling, referrals and advocacy on behalf of its clientele. While not specifically targeted to older adults, many of the patrons who visit *The Coffee House* fall into this category.

The final organisation is a unique program in an older suburban neighbourhood of Bergen, referred to as *The Second-hand Store*. As the name suggests, the organisation runs a second-hand store targeting a neighbourhood considered relatively impoverished. Its particular focus is a) providing inexpensive clothes and homeware for poorer families, many with a migrant background and b) providing a place to meet for older adults, many of whom volunteer at the store. In addition to offering an affordable shopping space, snacks and coffee are provided in one section of the shop.

Creating Spaces for Community

Here we present four key aspects of how the organisations we studied provide spaces for community among different groups of older people and how those cohorts adopted and adapted this provision: a) the exterior of the place and how the place relates to the space beyond, b), the interior of the place, c) inclusion and exclusion at the place, and d) content of the space.

Location, Location, Location: A Place Within a Space?

The experience and utilization of the organisations as physical places is connected to their interior, their aesthetics and atmosphere, as we will return to, but also to how the places relate to the spaces outside its boundaries.

The Second-hand Store in Bergen is located by a main road in a what is considered the local centre of that part of the larger city, a fair distance outside the city centre. It is located near a shopping centre, a nursing home with attached assisted housing, a church and the newly build city light rail. This local part of the city ('bydel' in Norwegian) is considered relatively poor with an overrepresentation of social housing tenants, migrant populations as well as poorer seniors who have resided in the area for a long time. *The Second-hand Store* was portrayed by both staff and patrons as a place belonging to this extended neighbourhood, as opposed to the larger city, serving, primarily, a small geographical area. Other people belonging to different parts of the city are welcome to shop, of course, while contributing to the revenue of the store, ultimately benefitting the extended neighbourhood. This role of the store in the larger geographical community was not an official policy but was communicated by both volunteers and patrons when describing the vital function of the store in the surrounding area. Three female patrons of *The Second-hand Store*, one also serving as a volunteer, speak about this relationship between the store and their community, having different experiences and histories. One of the patrons talks positively of the old days in the community, perhaps alluding to how younger generations finds connections and meaning in the wider community and/or how the wider community have changed over time. Regardless of interpretation, *The Second-hand Store* is presented as filling a function not covered elsewhere:

> So, I have lived here, in this part of the city, for sixty years. We really like it here, we thrive here. It's both rural and central at the same time, so you get everything. And then I am a part of this store. I'm also a volunteer and have my own shifts. I meet a lot of great people, former neighbors, former colleagues.

> I have lived here for 10 years. I'm from [name of neighborhood], *where I lived. I was very well received* [here at *The Second-hand Store*], *a very nice place. We have sort of a club for those over sixty, well not a club with membership, but still… You don't sign a form, but are sort of asked to join. I was a bit sceptical at first, but I am very glad now, now it's just great.*

> I have also lived here for sixty years, well next year, I will have lived here for sixty years. Then we were very young. I had a child of two and a half years and was expecting a second child. Everything around us was un-finished, we had to walk over make-shift boards or bridges to get around, and I remember the postman struggling to find his way. But it was nice because there were so many young families. In our hallway, there were 18 children, but at night time all was quiet. It was idyllic, green lawns and playgrounds… We lived in a three-room apartment but when the children grew older, we moved to a four bedroom apartment close by, well where she lives. And I have lived there since. But now I will move to a serviced apartment. But yes, I really

like it here. And two of the children moved up here, when they were married. (Focus group interview, *The Second-hand Store*)

The Coffee House in Bergen is located on an average street (combined commercial and residential) in the city centre and appears to blend into its surroundings: the building is similar to the surrounding ones, while *The Coffee House* itself blends into the building, having the appearance of a regular coffee house, with large windows near the seating arrangements making the space between the interior and the city outside very small. Having a more targeted demographic, as described above, *The Coffee House* caters to a larger downtown geographical area, rather than focusing on a particular neighbourhood or area of the city. Public transportation makes access possible, as well as being within walking distance for many, being located in a relatively small and compressed city centre. *The Coffee House* belonged to all geographical areas, in other words, while not belonging to all social groups, as we will see later.

The Centre located in Toronto differed considerably from the two other cases, both in location and access. It is located by a busy road, like *The Second-hand Store*, just beside one of the main streets, being easily accessible by car. In this geographical area, several social housing estates are located, in which many patrons live. *The Centre* is also located in a far larger city than the Bergen cases, making its connection to its specific part of the city important. *The Centre* was, in other words, thought of as belonging to one particular geographical part of the city, while also catering to a particular population. As one patron explained, a sense of belonging, as communicated through involvement at *The Centre*, related to both geographical and ethnic belonging:

> *I feel like there's a real shared sense of community in a lot of the folks, who've grown up along the Bathurst Street Corridor, or even there are some folks who all grew up in Ottawa together, because I guess the Jewish community is quite small in Ottawa and so they all knew each other. And so even though they've moved from Ottawa and they haven't seen each other in 50 years, they're like oh, do you know this person? Yeah, I know that person or that's so and so's niece. And then they have this kind of instant connections, so that's kind of this really powerful thing where everybody knows somebody or knows somebody's somebody, you know?.* (Interview, staff member, *The Centre*)

The Centre served both a geographical area and an ethnic population, while apparently having some flexibility about the eligibility of patrons belonging to the ethnic population but residing outside the geographical area.

In summary, in all three cases, the organisation as location is not separate from the outside world, but, relates to it in different ways and is shaped by it, connected to who has physical access, creating possibilities and limitations for nascent or more established communities of older adults. The organisations also differed concerning whether their patrons were considered as belonging to a geographical area or if membership was based on other characteristics. These differences have implications for who is seen to belong to the organisations, as we will return to, making access much more than a question of transportation and physical movement. Finally, the organisations are located in ever-changing geographical spaces, which mould the physical surroundings for older adults who have lived 'in place' for many years, if not their whole lives, seeing their neighbourhood or city change around them.

Before returning to issues of belonging and ownership to the places, we dwell on the more internal aspects of them, connected to atmosphere and aesthetics.

Locale: Aesthetics and Ambience of the Place

While being connected to the world outside their walls, the organisations also represented physical places in a more confined sense, being locales with distinct physical boundaries and an interior content. Within these walls, the organisations created a physical ambience, more or less welcoming, more or less specifically adapted to communities of older adults they saw as their main clientele. However, we observed considerable variation in *how* the organisations interpreted what a community of older adults entails.

Most of the interior of *The Second-hand Store* was set aside for the display of the many items for sale. These were arranged in rows of large shelves, somewhat eclectically ordered throughout a large area, giving it the appearance of a warehouse. The rows were, as for other similar stores, divided into various subsections: goods for children, kitchen utensils, art and so on. The display differed, meanwhile, from similar stores in that they did not have a separate section for furniture. Rather, furniture for sale was arranged in several seating arrangements placed throughout the store. These seating arrangements also functioned as places where patrons could sit, relax and chat, thus blurring the boundaries between a traditional store and a social arena. The boundary of the store part of *The Second-hand Store* is, meanwhile, clearly demarcated by the checkout till. Just outside the checkout till, but still inside the actual building, is an area set aside with a couple of large tables not for sale. Here, volunteers make coffee and waffles and serve cookies for patrons, providing a place where visitors can stop and have snack. This part was particularly elaborately arranged, with tablecloths and nice furniture. It was old fashioned and cosy, in a form of place mimicking what an older cohort might be assumed to prefer. A counter with waffles and coffee was placed just beside the large table, available for the staff and volunteers who serve the patrons there.

This part of *The Second-hand Store* offered a welcoming scene, particularly adapted to the older groups of adults who used this section frequently. The aesthetics of the seating arrangements and the atmosphere contributed to providing a place to meet as opposed to shop, as one patron explained: *"We feel that we are nicely welcomed and this place to come where you don't have to buy things"* (Interview, patron, *The Second-hand Store*).

This old-fashioned aesthetic was, meanwhile, not apparent at *The Coffee House*. When entering one arrives directly into the coffee area, similar to most other modern coffee houses. It has been newly renovated based on plans by a famous architect, with a carefully thought-through style throughout, largely relying on solid oak furniture. The renovation included both the café and the open plan kitchen adjacent to the café, with fancy new appliances and white tiles on the walls which changed the area from a "home kitchen on steroids to a professional kitchen," as one of the staff members explained. In the café, which used to be painted white and was described as "institutional-looking," now one wall had bench seating its full length with shelving that held plants and board games. The three longer rectangular tables along the bench side had lowered lighting, the rest of the lighting was pot lights and the remaining 12 tables were smaller and square, with a lit candle on each. There was also a counter at the window with a couple of higher stools (and a guitar perched on top), offering variation in both seating options and general aesthetics, further downplaying the sense of being institutional-like. The furniture was high end, fashionable and comfortable.

A staff member explained that the design of the interior and atmosphere was a deliberate attempt to provide people with a more luxurious daily life, for example to sit on expensive furniture in a café and talk with others. As such, the design and aesthetics provided a break from everyday life for the patrons,

a sense of having or being part of something nice—visible to the world outside through the large glass windows leading out to a busy street outside.

The Centre provided yet another approach to design and aesthetics, or perhaps a lack of a deliberate approach. The building is a single storey brick building appearing somewhat worn down. The interior, meanwhile, is similarly bland and relatively sterile, brown bricks dominating. When entering the building one immediately enters the cafeteria, similarly to *The Coffee House*. Apart from this commonality, the difference is striking. Here, one is reminded of a hospital cafeteria—sterile and standard—and the entire area is relatively cold, being close to the entrance and apparently having no heating. Several tables with six to eight chairs each are placed next to a booth selling warm (kosher) meals. The seating arrangement was also standardized, not offering options or variation for the patrons.

Food could be purchased at a reasonable price from a kiosk at the far end of the seating area. While this arrangement was identical to *The Coffee House*, several differences were noticeable: there was less variation in the food for sale, no aroma of food (no adjacent kitchen), and there was far less traffic between the sitting area and the food. Some patrons also brought their own food to *The Centre*.

Going past the open space, one enters a hallway leading to various small and large rooms, most of which offers a wide range of programming and activities. There was a constant stream of people going back and forth this hallway, all passing, and most stopping, at the open space. This open space, having the function of a transit zone, appeared as the liveliest and most vibrant part of *The Centre*.

The three organisations represent three vastly different examples of aesthetics, both in their interiors and use of space, providing different physical contexts for facilitating social interactions between older groups. These different adaptations, deliberate or not, have consequences also for how a sense of fellowship or community was communicated by the organisations, and interpreted by older patrons. At *The Second-hand Store* the physical surrounding was deliberately created with which many older cohorts of adults might identify. At *The Coffee House*, a similarly deliberate approach to aesthetics contributed to the creation of a space of relative luxury, offering the patrons something different from everyday life. At *The Centre*, the place was not as aesthetically pleasing as the two other cases, yet a space was provided for many patrons to meet or interact, offering a large degree of social flexibility and variation. These approaches, as well as the boundaries between the place and the outside as previously discussed, is again connected to the boundaries of inclusion at the place: who is considered the 'right' patron.

Inclusion at the Place: A Sense of Community?

At all organisations, albeit in different ways, the idea of who belonged was negotiated by both the organisations and the patrons. Designating 'the right patron' was, in other words, significant for the organisations perhaps in a process of carving out a service niche, while equally so for the patrons, allowing them to designate whether they belonged.

At *The Second-hand Store*, visitors were diverse in both age (in contrast to *The Centre* and to *The Coffee House*) and ethnicity (in contrast to *The Centre*), as illustrated in this fieldnote:

> *In the shop space, there was a constant stream of visitors, some dropping stuff off, some buying, some coming for coffee and waffles, the latter of which led to a truly lovely smell of baking throughout the place. The visitors ranged from babies to people I'd guess in their 90s. There were lots of mothers with babies in carriages, and we were told there are many single mothers in the*

area as well as many newcomers to Norway. Many of the visitors had visible disabilities. (Fieldnote, *The Second-hand Store*)

For the older adults attending the store, such a diversity was portrayed as a positive, as an alternative to arenas solely focusing on a (white/Christian) ageing population:

> *We'll see, of course, people – so many different people coming here. That's very interesting because very often you go to places where there's just elderly, just white people, just Christian people, whatever. So it is segregated. And here you see it's such a wide variety. Different cultures, different background, different ages, different problems. Also, people looking for nice things and* [who] *have lots of money.* (Interview, volunteer, *The Second-hand Store*)

As such, *The Second-hand Store* provided an arena of diversity and variation for patrons, attuned to the neighbourhood the shop was serving, but perhaps not constituting a community of peers. But, within this diversity, various roles were assigned: both volunteers and older patrons distinguished between the 'visitors' (older adults – mostly female and white) and 'shoppers' (poor – migrant). These groups were assigned different areas in the store, one to the store part, one to the coffee area. This distinction was facilitated by the allocation of space within the organisation, allowing for patrons not buying goods and creating a unique place for them.

At *The Coffee House*, patrons were categorized, by the organisation and themselves, into two major groups: the old guard and migrant workers. The first group comprised ethnic Norwegians of both sexes, most of whom were older adults and considered socially disadvantaged. For this group, this disadvantage was associated with both substance use and poverty, often but not necessarily in combination. The second group, migrant workers, comprised of (predominantly) men and women of Romani origin, on average, younger than their Norwegian counterparts, and categorized as poor but not dealing with substance use. The organisation also catered to a third group, migrant workers from other European countries, but this group was declining, and somewhat surprisingly, identified more with the Norwegian than the Romani group. The two groups were easily distinguishable in looks, in age and how they sat and clustered together. The two groups represented, in other words, clearly distinctive social identities, sharing, albeit different, social stigmas.

The Centre, meanwhile, catered to a specific ethnic grouping, in contrast to both *The Coffee House* and *The Second-hand Store*: the Jewish community. *The Centre* also had a more specific profile towards an older aged cohort, while not having strict rules for admittance. The inclusivity of *The Centre* is as highlighted in the account of an older man who had been looking for a place to take a yoga class with his wife and found a social milieu in which they both felt comfortable:

> *I always saw that building and it seems a bit strange to me, um, I mean, I just told myself it's not for me, it's not for us, it looks so Jewish, so, and then um, I saw the website, and um, I think um, I read that it was for everybody, so I called and the lady told us—told me that it was for everybody….we have been doing the yoga here for maybe, I don't know, a year and a half now. And also, there are the opera lectures that we appreciate so we come too, and also we meet some people that we're going to get—say we make friends, but um, at least we talk to other people— we socialize.* (Interview, patron, *The Centre*)

Yet, as for *The Coffee House*, most patrons identified as belonging to one of two groups: Canadian/English speaking Jews or Russian speaking Jews. Most Russian speaking Jews spoke limited or no English, making this group particularly tight knit. The English-speaking Jews seemed to be comprised of a larger

variety of nationalities, mainly born in Canada (many of whom spoke about rediscovering their Jewish identity in old age), and those born in other countries, Israel in particular. For the Russian speaking patrons, commuting between their own group and the larger community was a constant endeavour, as illustrated by the following fieldnote also speaking to the vibrant open space at *The Coffee House*:

> *At the end of the common area a group of men, all speaking Russian, are playing chess. They converse constantly with each other, between each other and also across the two tables. Within a ten-minute time period, between four and eight people at these two tables, while two games are going on. One of them suddenly breaks away from the group and goes over to the volunteer desk. He chats with the two women there. One of them is a young lady and he talks about what kind of language they speak, in English. He has a thick fur coat and a matching fur hat.*

> *The phone of one of the other Russian chess players rings in a very loud, traditional Russian guitar melody. He abruptly leaves the table, talking loudly, almost as if leaving his opponent alone to play at the chess table. Another man approaches the remaining player and sits down beside him, discussing it seems like the position on the table. The man in the fur coat has meanwhile discussed another game at another table but has had enough of this and returns to the volunteer desk again, this time addressing the other volunteer, the oldest of the two in Russian this time.* (Fieldnote, *The Centre*)

As seen in this example, within what is considered a relatively homogenous community, a sub-group or 'a community within a community' is identified. Perhaps because belonging to a minority within the larger community, a social identity of Russian Jewish is emphasized.

In summary, at all organisations group identities are negotiated and nuanced into categories. Consequently, various (sub)groups deemed more or less ideal by both organisations and patrons were identified, producing communities of perceived peers among older adults. Context between our cases differs in respect of the boundaries of communities, and of whom, at any time, is considered to be a peer. Yet a core need remains: the need to meet and socialize with peers.

Dynamics of the Place: A Place of What?

Even though there is considerable difference in size, aesthetics, target population and geographical impact field, all three organisations, in different ways, offered their patrons more than their official programming and services might suggest. Looking at this from another perspective, the patrons also utilized the organisations for more than their stated purpose.

The Centre, as previously described, represents perhaps the best example of such a dynamic, in which social life among older adults was pursued despite not providing a particularly welcoming atmosphere. Most patrons did not seem to mind the bleak physicality of the place, or experienced that other positives were more important. A similar social atmosphere or an ambience was observed, particularly at *The Centre* and *The Coffee House*, despite the considerable differences in physical atmosphere. As seen in this researcher fieldnote, the social atmosphere is described as vibrant, dynamic, and loud:

> *It appears as lively, vibrant, and at the time as hectic. It's not hectic and lively in the sense of a sort of constant stream of members going to and from, but rather of different people, individuals or small groups doing different things at different times and in different places, people there all the time, a form of openness, to do as you please. And there appears to be sort of an acceptance of this being a centre for the members, where they can belong and even influence, although they*

perhaps cannot control it. They seem, in other words, at ease, comfortable, not at home but still having a sense of belonging. (Fieldnote, *The Centre*)

In one of our interviews, a patron described what *The Centre* means to her:

It is a beautiful – this is a home away from home, if I may say that. It is beautiful. They have a very big variety. I didn't think that this place was like this until I came, and I see by myself and I experienced the programs that they have here…. I feel like I belong. Like I feel like I have a place to come. I feel like I have to get dressed and I have to come to [The Centre]. (Interview, patron, *The Centre*)

In an interesting reflection about the isolation facing many older adults, this patron also recalled how busy she had been in her working life so that when she retired, she really didn't have many friends.

And because working and raising my children in my life, I don't have too many friends. I have some friends, but they were working; they had their own lives. So, in a way I was ... I will say I was isolated then because all my live it was just my children and my job, work, at home, and the kids. (Interview, patron, *The Centre*)

Even at *The Second-hand Store*, though not primarily intended as a social arena, people, especially older adults, came together to meet in informal ways:

But there are many regulars, many regulars. And I think that fulfils one of our aims to be a meeting place in the community. And not only pushing money and pushing things but being an open place for people. I think there was—it's a hole that we have filled, hopefully. I think it's – we see it at people coming again and yeah. (Interview, volunteer, *The Second-hand Store*)

As such, the organisations offer something more than their official mission and fill a void for their respective (and different) target populations, seemingly filling a need for interaction, sociability and even friendship:

I imagine so because I think people are drawn here because it's very comfortable and I think most people are looking to connect with other people because it's kind of that type of environment. I mean people can sit by themselves if they choose to, but it also seems to be an environment that enhances friendships and people getting to know each other and kind of reaching out to each other. (Interview, staff member, *The Centre*)

In summary, different groups of seniors congregated at the three organisations, in various ways and for various purposes. Some met acquaintances, whom they may or may not have previously met at the organisations, some met to make acquaintances, or just to be in a social space. Some gathered based on prearranged appointments, some met by chance. A common denominator, despite these differences, was that groups of mainly older adults met to socialize among others they considered peers and, one would assume, to meet an unfulfilled need for social interaction. Another commonality is that the patrons had time to spend at the organisations—most spent considerable time there. Perhaps most significantly, the organisations, being very differently structured and having different target groups, all offered their patrons more than the official articulation of their function would suggest, that is: a space for informal social interaction in which they were allowed to claim the space as their own.

Conclusion

The function of the three organisations analysed in this paper—being social support and counselling, to offer a variety of leisure and cultural activities, or provide affordable goods to relatively deprived parts of a city—were interesting and relevant for the patrons, but not the primary reason for seeking out the organisations. The official function, from the perspective of the patrons, provided a gateway into something else, fulfilling different needs. Through social interaction among those considered peers, patrons of the organisations experienced something missing in their everyday lives: reciprocal relations and a sense of community among peers, often in the form of sporadic and unorganized interactions. Thus, our analysis of the case studies provides some material evidence of the ways in which informal and spontaneous interaction can be "very important in constituting one's belonging in a place, alongside the ongoing networks one might develop with people one comes to know personally" (Fincher 2021, 13).

The ways the different places were used can be read as a form of co-option by the patrons: they utilized the places for what they saw as their primary needs, transforming the stated and narrower function of the places by doing so. At *The Second-hand Store*, for instance, this had profound effects on the store, transforming it into something very different than its original mission, while at *The Coffee House* and *The Centre* this co-option took the form of informal spaces being sought out, as opposed to the food and programs that were the official reasons for being there.

From the perspective of the organisations, meanwhile, what constituted their main function differed when it came to how formal and informal social interactions were approached. This difference was highlighted by approaches to aesthetics. In *The Second-hand Store* and *The Coffee House*, the interior appeared to be deliberately designed to contrast with other spaces familiar to the patrons, thus allowing for a familiar surrounding indicating to their patrons what the places were all about. *The Second-hand Store* contrasts with other similar stores, while *The Coffee House* is contrasted to other, less high-end possibilities for the patrons. Moreover, the organisations differed in whether providing social arenas was the very function of the endeavour. Providing or facilitating more or less informal social interaction, was not the primary purpose of *The Centre* or *The Second-hand Store*, as we have seen. At *The Coffee House*, however, facilitating the informal meeting of patrons (having volunteers and staff play a more peripheral role) was explicitly used as a way to 'reach their target group', who were considered to be not only marginalized but also sceptical of official support systems. Here, the social arena was a mechanism to build rapport and confidence in the organisation, and thus a means of offering what the organization viewed as more substantial social services. As such, informal social interaction at *The Coffee House* was a gateway in a different sense than that of the patrons: a gateway increasing the legitimacy of the organisation. At the other organisations, somewhat contrarily, facilitating informal social interactions appeared to be less intentional, and, from the perspective of the organisations, a side-effect of the formal program.

Regardless of perspective, the three organisations offered spaces for social interaction and community building. The patrons, in all organisations, carved out a space within the various places suited for their individual needs, that were, in essence, a search for connection or a community. These communities were both overlapping regarding affinity (geographical belonging, age cohort, interests) and, to some degree, imagined: membership was not automatic, but had to be negotiated and actively sought out on an ongoing basis.

From Ageing in Place to Ageing in Space

Our material speaks of a simultaneous profound and unfulfilled need for informal social interaction. In doing so, different understandings of belonging, social environments to that of AIP policies can be

traced. The patrons in the included organisations expressed and demonstrated needs for interaction, flexibility and variation when creating spaces to meet others, underlining mobility as significant in people's construction of place. For our patrons: "Places thus cannot be seen as containers, bounded, fixed and inward-looking. Rather they are porous and reshaped by affairs of the world and the globe as much as by affairs internal to their dwellers" (Fincher 2020, 11-12). In this framing, engaging in social spaces becomes more than formalized and lasting networks, and includes the informal. This can be seen through chance encounters in which the very space one is engaged in is negotiated (see also Gardner 2011) and where spaces for community, as Massey (2005, 32) puts it, are always under construction. Perhaps most notably, our qualitative material speaks of how older adults interact with their environments, and how they have agency in their everyday lived experiences in 'thirdspaces,' influencing as well as being influenced by their surroundings (Buffel *et al.* 2012, 19-20).

The communities sought out, negotiated and constructed in our study are not fixed, material entities, although they are formed in a physical place. They contain meaning because of the interaction of the people contained in spaces created. As such, our findings re-affirm the position of community as offering negotiations of identity and belonging as dependent on a "complex aggregation of different elements" (Gamba and Cattacin 2021, 3). Our older communities are not static, reducible to a specific locale, they also have a transformative element: they contain different meaning depending on one's position—or place of departure—and in time.

In conclusion, our analysis shows older adults searching for belonging and fellowship, not through the familiar or the stable ('place as home') but through the dynamic and vibrant ('place as space'). This, we argue, contrasts with the static portrayal of older adults in dominant AIP policies. In these policies, which we argue is a form of ageist misrepresentation, the older adult is supposed to 'age in place,' in familiar and safe soundings, representing a view of older adults as both homogenous and reduced to certain familiar characteristics.

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