

# Public Spaces

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The preliminary research undertaken for this project focused exclusively on design principles concerning internal spaces. It was upon discovering the book titled, *Inclusive Urban Design: Streets for Life*, by authors Lynne Mitchell and Elizabeth Burton that I began to question the wider environment.



Inspired by the book I decided to include a short journey to the project, from my local post office to my home. This journey was documented through an '8 step' series of photographs and converted into a photo sequence animation (found on the website).

It is with this journey that I have analysed six main topics discussed in the book, these include: familiarity, legibility, distinctiveness, accessibility, comfort and safety (specific definitions of these can be found in the glossary under other information). Below is a summary of the research found, all of which I believe to bare significance in illuminating issues surrounding design for those with cognitive and sensory impairments.

- What types of services are available within a 500m-800m radius from your home?



According to the 'streets for life' principles primary services such as the doctor, post-office, food store etc should be no further than 500m from your home, with secondary services such as parks, library, dentist, places of worship etc no more than 800m away.

- How would you describe the local character of your neighbourhood? Is it formal/informal, what are the distinct forms, styles, colours, materials, and scales?

'Distinctiveness is important to older people as it gives them a sense of knowing where they are, enhancing familiarity and making them feel at home in their surroundings'.

- Are there distinctions in the area through small details, such as the colours of front doors, windows and gardens?



The fragments of our environment that create its distinctiveness come in small and large components. It is important to understand what creates the character of our

local environments to best understand its image to its inhabitants. Any changes to long established streets 'should be small scale and incremental', otherwise people who suffer from cognitive/sensory impairments may find themselves confused and agitated in unfamiliar surroundings. In new developments familiarity needs to be reinforced through 'the use of local forms, styles and materials will help older people to become familiar with the new neighbourhood'.

- How are the streets connected and laid out? Are they regular, irregular, grid system, cul-de-sacs etc?

For those with cognitive impairments problems with conceptualisation, attention and memory can affect abilities to recognise where they are located. Irregular street layouts provide interesting places that are formed with smaller less formal blocks which emphasis distinctive character; regular grid systems (found throughout central Glasgow) tend to look identical, especially on street level, which can be confusing. Streets that are varied in length and width are distinctive and thus help to maintain concentration. Longer streets should, if possible, gently wind revealing emerging views.

- Do you experience a distinct hierarchy of street types, if so how are they defined?



'Familiarity refers to the extent to which streets are recognisable to older people and easily understood by them. Familiar streets are hierarchical and long established with forms, open spaces, buildings and features in designs familiar to older people'.

There is a language that defines each of our local neighbourhoods; people understand their specific language as a series of urban forms, and hierarchies. In Glasgow there is a standard form of wide noisy main roads with mixed-use buildings, shops on ground floor. Then quieter secondary and tertiary streets lined with residential tenements.

- When you are in your local neighbourhood how easy is it to navigate your way around?
- Do you find yourself sticking to familiar routes, how confident would you feel to deviate from these routes?
- If you can imagine a particular route you have taken frequently can you associate areas of significance, perhaps landmarks either architectural or environmental?



Understanding the makeup of our external environments allows us to appreciate what is familiar which can be as equally influential as that familiarity

explored in our private spaces. This can prove essential in encouraging navigation for those who can easily become disorientated.

Without the skills of mind mapping our routes we rely on our ability to distinguish landmarks and points of recognition. Identification of these points enables us to negotiate our environment. On my route I associated the park gates, grand park stairs, war memorial and the Church on the Hill as landmarks. Think about what landmarks you identify with in your local neighbourhood.

■ Consider decision points, such as junctions or where other visual information ends, what do you use to make your decision?

Two kinds of cues can give orientation and assist in decision-making - landmarks and environmental/practical features. Landmarks, as previously discussed, can include 'buildings and structures, places of interest and activity, unusual places, buildings or usages'. Environmental features include aesthetic features: fountains, the Bowling Green etc, and practical features include street furniture, telephone boxes, bus shelters etc.

■ How is information given? How is signage approached through use of font, symbol, colours etc? Is the signage flat or perpendicular to the wall? Is there too much information?



Too many unorganised signs can cause visual clutter, which can cause confusion and frustration as it can create excessive visual stimulation. Signage can provide useful way-finding information but there are several important points to consider for the best possible practice.

Lettering should be large and dark against a light background, red, orange and yellow are the easiest colours for the aging eye to distinguish (think of the inverse of the UK post office sign). Text should be simple and any images should be realistic and not abstract. Signs should be made from a non-reflective material to prevent glare. Ideally directional signs should be on post on a single pointer, and signs locating a place should be represented perpendicular to the wall to be given sight from further distances.

■ Are the buildings clear in their use and function? Is the entrance easily located and understood? Are the doors heavy to open?

Many designers perceive inclusive design as being limiting in that traditional styles are the most important factor, however, 'clarity of use and function appeared to be the overriding positive factor rather than style, whether traditional or modern'. Therefore, styles can be contemporary as long as the important components, such as the main entrance, are easily understood. Think for instance about a glass door, would someone know it was a door or maybe a

window, how is opened? Can someone recognise the handles or way of entering.

- Are public and private spaces clearly defined? What components create these definitions?



Often people with cognitive impairments, such as dementia, struggle to 'interpret the cues that signal the use of buildings, the location of entrances, the behaviour that is expected of them or the intentions of people around them'.

Think about how public and private cues are made, be it boundary walls, style of doors, signs etc, these cues aid those in understanding what is expected in each environment. It is worth noting that those with dementia prefer informal spaces to formal. This is because formal spaces can be perceived as intimidating, whereas areas that are lively, full of activity and vibrant are preferred, as they provide interest, a sense of freedom, and overall feel welcoming.

- Are there frequent opportunities to sit down, how are these areas/furniture represented?



It has been suggested that public seating should be provided every 100-125m, in styles that are easily recognisable at various heights to accommodate a wide range of people. The street furniture should be made from warm, non-conducting materials such as wood. Additionally, if there are several seats, they should be positioned perpendicular, to allow for

maximum communication between those who may have visual/hearing impairments.

- Do you think there is adequate lighting? How does it respond with adjacent materials?

Adequate street lighting is essential in creating ample illumination for those with visual impairments. Light aids significantly in the understanding of the environment. The most important issue with light and materials is that they contrast various environmental elements whilst preventing glare through the removal of reflective materials.

- How wide and flat are the pathways? Are they well maintained? Are the materials in contrast with the walls? Are they wide enough to walk without fear of being bumped into?



Pathways should ideally be 2m wide and well maintained to be flat and constructed from non-slip materials. Consideration should be made to encourage cyclists off the main footway, as many older people feel vulnerable and concerned that they may be knocked down.

- Is there a choice of steps or ramp with handrails in areas of incline?

When a level change is required it should be highlighted clearly with a choice of ramp and stairs where possible. Handrails should also be provided with particular attention to adequate lighting to provide even illumination.

- What are the sounds like on your routes, are there areas of sudden loud noises, such as people shouting, heavy vehicles such as buses passing?

- Are pedestrians separated from bicycles and traffic either through trees, on-road parking etc



Producing a buffer zone between the pedestrian and traffic can be an effective way of creating a safer, more enjoyable and comfortable environment for pedestrians. As mentioned above, people with impairments (especially those who are older) can feel vulnerable on the streets with fast movement and frightening loud noises. Therefore, a buffer zone on busy routes can be beneficial. Effective approaches

include trees, grassy verge or even on street parked cars.

- What are the ways in which people cross roads? Are there clearly audible signals for safe crossing?



As a person ages the ability to detect higher pitched sounds decrease. Therefore, it is important to provide road crossings with audio signals in a lower pitch accompanied with visual signals.

All quotations in this document has been taken from:

Mitchell, L., Burton, E., (2006) *Inclusive Urban Design: Streets for Life*. Architectural Press - Elsevier