

## Designing Inclusive Cities from the Elderly Perspective

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### 1 ABSTRACT

Societies are aging rapidly worldwide which affects global, national and local economic structures. Such demographic change is attributed to increasing longevity and decreasing fertility, arguably due to higher living standards. International migration has also contributed to changing population age structures. According to the World Health Organisation the percentage of the population over the age of 60 will increase by 34% between 2020 and 2030, already exceeds that of children under five and will surpass young people between 15-24 by 2050.

These trends led the UN and other international organisations to seek answers. UN World Assemblies on Ageing produced Plans of Action and principles for older persons, recognising their specific needs, most specifically exclusion, but also isolation, paternalism and neglect. Among others, WSIS focused on ICTs and older persons, DESA addressed elder abuse and UNIDOP adopted an age-inclusive agenda. UNDP stated that the UN Sustainable Development Goals have to recognise older persons as active agents of societal development, not just vulnerable people, to achieve truly transformative, inclusive and sustainable development outcomes. WHO produced an international perspective of age-friendly cities and communities, set up an environment-friendly environments mentoring programme and a global database of age friendly practices. Many other international and intergovernmental organisations undertook initiatives for ageing societies with remarkable cooperation between them across their specialised fields.

This paper focuses on digitalisation, intergenerational relations, and of course planning and design solutions for age-friendly cities, considering them of particular interest to professionals of the built environment. When examining scope for action it relates these issues to the four aspects related to the Leipzig Charter (discussed by the authors in their CORP 2021 contributions) – social: unwanted loneliness and technological neglect; economic: minimum pensions to cover the cost of living and in particular of ICT access; environmental: inadequacy of urban spaces and mobility provision; political: neglect of priorities for elder persons as opposed to ‘urgent’ ones; and enactment of labour legislation which tends to exacerbate age discrimination.

A key issue emerging from this situation are the intergenerational effects of the treatment of old age. The paper explores what measures could be adopted in an ageing society to achieve a more equitable balance between the generations. This includes the response of young people to the comparative disadvantage of maintaining the current state of affairs for the elderly and whether they would support redress which may affect their relative advantages.

The second part of the paper will explore how the decade of action in which international policies have focused on the elderly has translated into their everyday life and critically comment on selected results. It will attempt to identify how these actions distinguish themselves from other initiatives to provide for special needs, in response to research on ageing, such as that undertaken by ARUP, and whether the recommended interventions have managed to improve specifically the quality of life of the elderly. It will also refer to undertakings both in Spain and the UK. The paper will conclude by identifying more age-friendly urban developments and how planning and urban design practices could facilitate them.

Keywords: ageing, design for special needs, user-friendly built environment, equal access

### 2 PREAMBLE

Ageing issues have only recently been included in urban planning and public space design. According to the authors, these issues have not been part of the concerns of urban planners until the late 1980s, when health-related agencies, especially the World Health Organisation (WHO), pointed to the necessity of adapting the physical environment to accommodate the needs of this growing segment of the population. At that time, the working-age male was no longer the generic reference for urban planning, giving rise to the concept of inclusive urban space, capable of responding to the needs of diverse social groups: children, women, the

physically handicapped, the elderly. The technical responses to these demands produced a wide catalogue of tried and tested urban interventions.

However, the elderly are a special group within the social diversity as their needs are framed in a specific life time, strongly linked to the conditions of the existing health and care environment. This uniqueness places the issue of the elderly in a sphere of action that goes beyond the prescriptions of urban planning: how to ensure the welfare conditions of the elderly in cities and, in particular, in rural areas affected by the ex-migration of the young population? For the authors, the adaptation of the physical fabric to the conditions of the elderly – and of the entire population at some point in their lives – focuses on the action of the fourth pillar of urban sustainability: the political-administrative one.

This paper explores these aspects. First, it focuses on the 'problem' of ageing and documents the origins of the issue; secondly, it reviews urban planning practices designed in this regard; and thirdly, it reviews some municipal responses designed to contribute to creating age-friendly cities and communities as mandated by UN-Habitat, detecting their similarities and singularities.

### **3 INTRODUCTION: THE UNDENIABLE AGEING OF THE POPULATION**

The rapid and worldwide aging of societies is affecting global, national and local economic structures and – of relevance to planners – their repercussions on cities and how they are used, managed and transformed. Although they vary in different parts of the world overall current demographic trends are attributed to both increasing longevity and decreasing fertility, arguably due to higher living standards.

Data from the United Nations (UN) World Population Prospects 2022 shows that worldwide, people aged 65 and over outnumbered children under five for the first time in 2018. In 2022, there will be 771 million people aged 65 and over, three times more than in 1980 and projected to reach 994 million in 2030 and 1.6 billion in 2050. As a result, by 2050 there will be more than twice as many people aged 65 and over as there are children under the age of 5, and their number will be almost the same as that of children under the age of 12. While in some countries the rapid growth of the older population is mainly due to sustained high fertility levels in the past, the continued reduction in premature mortality of successive generations is the main driver in other countries.

The spatial distribution of this trend varies. Europe and North America had the most ageing population in 2022 (almost 19% of people aged 65 and over), followed by Australia and New Zealand (16.6%) and will continue to age considerably in the coming decades. The same is true for Latin America and the Caribbean, with an increase of over 65s of 9% in 2022 and 19% in 2050. In East and South-East Asia, it will increase from about 13% in 2022 to 26% in 2050. On a smaller scale, Sub-Saharan Africa over 65s are projected to increase from 3% in 2022 to almost 5% in 2050.<sup>1</sup>

### **4 WHEN THE PROBLEM OF THE ELDERLY IN CITIES GAINED INTERNATIONAL ATTENTION**

The intergovernmental organisations – United Nations (UN), World Health Organisation (WHO), UN Habitat – were at the forefront of recognising the global issue of ageing. Already in 1977 WHO singled out the importance of health for productive lives. In 1986, The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion stipulated strategies, among them “making supportive environments: physical, social, economic, political, recreational and cultural”.<sup>2</sup> In 1982, the First World Assembly on Ageing took place in Vienna under the auspices of the UN. It was a forum for debate on a new demographic reality: the ageing of the population that affected the countries with the highest economic levels. The purpose of the Assembly was to guarantee the rights of the elderly and the implementation of a series of measures to that end. In 2002, the 2<sup>nd</sup> World Assembly on Ageing was held in Madrid. By then, population ageing had spread throughout the world and the Assembly proposed its International Plan of Action on Ageing. It recognised the right of older people to enjoy a dignified life by participating through their own efforts in the socio-cultural, economic and political

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations. Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2022). *World Population Prospects 2022: Summary of Results*.

<sup>2</sup> WHO. (2007). *Global Age-Friendly Cities: A Guide*  
<https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/43755>

development of the environment in which they live. It also adopted the concept of "active ageing", coined a few years earlier.

The specific treatment of ageing in cities can be traced back to the Age-Friendly Cities project, conceived in 2005 at the 18<sup>th</sup> World Summit on Ageing during the XVIII World Congress on Gerontology in Rio de Janeiro. Promoted by WHO, the congress aimed to devise a model of an age-friendly city. The result "Global Age-Friendly Cities: A Guide" was published in 2007 and presented on 1<sup>st</sup> October, on the International Day of the Elderly. The Guide was based on the results of a research protocol (Vancouver Protocol) applied in 33 collaborating cities in all regions of the world. The focal points of the Guide addressed several aspects under eight headings: outdoor spaces and buildings, transport, housing, social participation, respect and social inclusion, civic participation and employment, communication and information, health and community support services.<sup>3</sup> In 2010, WHO created the Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities and Communities with the aim to connect cities, communities and organisations that share this common vision. Currently the network includes 1.333 cities and communities in 47 countries covering over 298 million people worldwide.<sup>4</sup> In 2016, WHO adopted the Global Strategy and Plan of Action on Ageing and Health as the Decade of Healthy Ageing for the period of 2016-2020, later extended to 2021-2030. A comparison of international initiatives of age-friendly environments relevant to planners identifies three particularly sensitive issues: the allocation of percentages of affordable housing for older people; the participation of older people in the design of public space and mobility; and the distribution of health and care facilities to enable "ageing at home".<sup>5</sup>

The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development launched in 2015 also included the elderly issue, although its mention was limited and somewhat random. Despite this, the Agenda offered several strategic entry points which could be used to raise the visibility of older people.<sup>6</sup> The New Urban Agenda adopted by UN-Habitat in 2016 focused on quality of life of older people in cities. It highlighted the importance of built space as a key factor for the quality of life of older adults, underlined the need for age-sensitive planning and committed governments to promote safe, secure, healthy and inclusive environments, by engaging stakeholders in governance to strengthen civic dialogue. Specific areas of intervention are mobility and transport, housing, public green spaces, communication facilities and public service provision, including information technology, considered as a component of accessibility.<sup>7</sup>

The actions taken by the various branches of the UN successfully mobilised many other international and intergovernmental organisations into cooperation across their specialised fields to seek specific responses to the ageing problem. In 2021, the European Commission launched the Green Book of Ageing to produce a broad policy debate on the matter. The book sets out the principles for an ageing and prosperous European society, including the promotion of healthy and active ageing, lifelong learning, access to education, the provision of new opportunities after retirement and the implementation of adequate, fair and sustainable pension systems to avoid poverty in old age.<sup>8</sup> Among others organisations addressing ageing are the World Summit of the Information Society (WSIS) which focused on Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and older persons; the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) which addressed elder abuse and the UN International Day of Older Persons (UNIDOP) which adopted an age-inclusive agenda.

<sup>3</sup> <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/43755>

WHO (2007), *Global Age-Friendly Cities: A Guide*

<sup>4</sup> WHO. *Global Network for Age-friendly Cities and Communities*

<https://extranet.who.int/agefriendlyworld/who-network/>

<sup>5</sup> Bosch-Meda, J. (2021). *Is the Role of Urban Planning in Promoting Active Ageing Fully Understood? A Comparative Review of International Initiatives to Develop Age-Friendly Urban Environments*. ACE: Architecture, City and Environment, 16(47)

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/356616659\\_Is\\_the\\_Role\\_of\\_Urban\\_Planning\\_in\\_Promoting\\_Active\\_Ageing\\_Fully\\_Understood\\_A\\_Comparative\\_Review\\_of\\_International\\_Initiations\\_to\\_Develop\\_Age-Friendly\\_Urban\\_Environments](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/356616659_Is_the_Role_of_Urban_Planning_in_Promoting_Active_Ageing_Fully_Understood_A_Comparative_Review_of_International_Initiations_to_Develop_Age-Friendly_Urban_Environments)

<sup>6</sup> Courtis, C. (2017) *Las personas mayores y la Agenda 2030 para el Desarrollo Sostenible: oportunidades y desafíos*. CEPAL, UN

<https://www.cepal.org/es/enfoques/personas-mayores-la-agenda-2030-desarrollo-sostenible-oportunidades-desafios>

<sup>7</sup> UN. (2016). *The New Urban Agenda*.

<https://habitat3.org/wp-content/uploads/NUA-Subject-Index-English.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> European Commission (2021). *Green Book of Ageing*

[https://ec.europa.eu/info/files/green-paper-ageing-fostering-solidarity-and-responsibility-between-generations\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/files/green-paper-ageing-fostering-solidarity-and-responsibility-between-generations_en)

These proposals are not dissimilar to those formulated for sustainable and inclusive cities for all, proposed by UN Agenda 21.

## 5 REDESIGNING INCLUSIVE CITIES FOR ELDERLY PEOPLE

After forty years of global action on ageing to guarantee economic and social security for older persons, the concrete actions proposed have not yet produced adequate preparedness for ageing dynamics.<sup>9</sup> Although a comprehensive approach is recommended for actions focusing on health, work, education, income, social cohesion, multigenerational wellbeing and climate sustainability, the generic nature of government recommendations on adapting the built environment to ageing have limited the amount of age-specific actions. The most practical solutions are mainly proposed by age-related interest groups and NGOs.<sup>10</sup>

There exists a plethora of guidelines for good design of age-friendly cities. However, many of them are reiterating attributes which characterise liveable cities more generally. Criteria of good design for special groups have been directed towards children, youth and the disabled and did not specifically respond to the vulnerability of the elderly.<sup>11</sup> While many constraints of the elderly also apply to other groups with special needs it remains important to identify the specific provisions for age-friendly cities. The intention here is not to address abstract knowledge of good design and regulations, but to deliberate how they can be translated into practice. Such an undertaking has to start from the 'is-state' and, in particular, the broad range of living conditions of the less affluent older people. They vary considerably from city to city, country to country as well as globally, as they are affected by the actual configuration of cities, as well as place-based economic barriers and political impediments.

For planners and urban designers there are numerous questions that remain without concrete answers, most important among them: are cities designed and prepared to manage long-life societies? how to promote healthy ageing when this aspect has not been part of the design and management of urban spaces? how to provide for active ageing and how to accommodate the economy, services, housing, transport to the way the elderly use urban space? The needs and demands of older people require more specific studies also on other aspects: where do the elderly live? what are their housing conditions? how do they use unadapted public spaces? what are the reasons for their strong sense of place and of the neighbourhoods where they live? what about their low mobility, routine behaviour, home ownership? Do they want to stay in their homes as long as autonomy allows or do they prefer to move to desired locations such as coastal cities or childhood environments? To what extent does their interest in the neighbourhood or the city in which they live disappear when they are forced to move to sheltered residences? Many questions are raised about age-friendly cities and communities but answers remain often generic and overlap with solutions for other special needs groups.<sup>12</sup> There seems to be general consensus that best practice needs to enable older people to get involved in the design of their urban environment. The Age-Friendly Movement may be best placed to help develop new models of age-friendly cities, age-friendly assessment tools, and to provide criteria for age-related digitalisation of society. What really matters is how to reduce physical and psychological fears, real or perceived, produced by a combination of spatial (accessibility, quality of housing), environmental (noise, pollution) and social (crime, insecurity, poverty, health, abandonment, loneliness) aspects.

## 6 PRACTICAL ANSWERS FOR THE DESIGN OF INCLUSIVE AGE-FRIENDLY CITIES

Finding answers for gerontological urbanism involves reviewing the available information, both theoretical and practical. An example is the research undertaken by ARUP, presented in "Cities Alive – Designing for

<sup>9</sup> Oxford Institute of Population Ageing (2022). *Forty Years of Global Action on Ageing: what has been achieved? And what next?*

<https://www.ageing.ox.ac.uk/blog/Forty-years-of-Global-Action-on-Ageing-what-has-been-achieved>

<sup>10</sup> Ageing Well: A Housing Manifesto, Older People's Housing Champions, 2017

<sup>11</sup> Specific references are lacking on the emerging issues and recommendations by thematic areas in the Report of the Ninth Session of the World Urban Forum, May 2019

<sup>12</sup> J van Hoof, HR Marston, JK Kazak, T Buffet. (2021). *Ten questions concerning age-friendly cities and communities and the built environment*. In Building and Environment 199 107922, Elsevier

<https://reader.elsevier.com/reader/sd/pii/S0360132321003267?token=67578CB5DE2D84D25F5DBBD575EF2BEB4AA896562ACC5B39731708505BDBC6FF1FDC9335005CDAED76CEEA5B4AC8CF95&originRegion=eu-west-1&originCreation=20220715105132>

Ageing Communities”.<sup>13</sup> It analyses four basic needs of older people – autonomy and independence; health and well-being; social connectedness; safety and resilience which have been identified and acknowledged internationally as discussed above. The research proposes 14 strategies and 28 actions to meet these needs. 40 case studies from all over the world illustrate evidence of age-friendly places and neighbourhoods based on these criteria and design interventions.

The 14 strategies encompass physical as well as social approaches. In terms of design tasks they create walkable environments, ensure access to public transport, enable ageing-in-place by adapting homes, and provide wayfinding and city information with landmarks and tools suitable for the elderly to preserve their autonomy and independence. Urban design solutions also provide access to health services within reach, space for exercise and recreation and facilitate connections to nature for the elderly to enhance their health and wellbeing. Security and resilience of age-friendly neighbourhoods and homes are achieved by preparedness for extreme climate incidents, safe design of streets and public spaces and special urban design solutions for dementia-safe surroundings. Combining spatial with social solutions fosters connectedness by creating intergenerational spaces and adapting spaces for older people to stay in their communities, thus alleviating loneliness and isolation and promoting inclusion and civic participation.

From the 40 case studies the research extrapolates 28 very practical and well-rehearsed urban design and planning solutions to satisfy the four basic age-related needs respectively. Actions for autonomy and independence include: creating compact mixed use development, redesigning public spaces for all users, locating housing, jobs and amenities along transit routes, making transit access suitable for people with limited mobility, improving their homes, retrofitting homes and designing new housing adaptable to senior use, improving the public realm and providing way-finders. Actions towards health and wellbeing include: locating health facilities near transit and co-locating them with provision for daily needs, places for adult and active recreation, more green spaces and buildings with biophilic principles. Actions for social connectedness aim to empower older people to organise their own community activities and give them a role in planning their built environment; they also include: designing intergenerational housing so that elderly can live with or near family, co-locating facilities and places for seniors and youth, and broadening house types by adding accessory units and spaces to facilitate downsizing within their community, reducing costs for the elderly and freeing space for the younger generations. Actions for security and resilience include: mitigating heat wave effects, retrofitting buildings for climate change, ensuring walkability with physical infrastructure, improving dangerous intersections, and creating dementia friendly neighbourhoods and dementia villages.

## 7 CASES CONTRIBUTING TO AGE-FRIENDLY CITIES AND COMMUNITIES”

The Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities and Communities is compiling a comparative review of international incentives which cities the world over are putting into place to adapt themselves better to the needs of the elderly. A study of the specific plans which cities have elaborated following the requirements of the Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities and Communities<sup>14</sup> assesses to what extent these criteria have been taken into account. From the results, it could be argued that many solutions these cities have implemented apply equally to needs of other groups: children, people with physical or mental impairments, communities with specific cultural, religious backgrounds guiding their customs, behaviours and aspirations. This may mean that specific adaptation of cities to the elderly is unlikely to command particular attention.

### 7.1 The Madrid Plan

Madrid joined the Global Network of Age Friendly Cities in 2013<sup>15</sup> and approved its first Elderly Friendly City Action Plan for the period 2017-2019. The Madrid Plan encompasses ageing in three strategic areas: 1 Civic and social environment: a city for all generations; 2 Prevention and comprehensive care: a city that

<sup>13</sup> ARUP (foresight, research and innovation and integrated city planning teams). (2015). *Cities alive, Designing for Ageing Communities*

<https://www.arup.com/perspectives/publications/research/section/cities-alive-designing-for-ageing-communities>  
<sup>14</sup> WHO (2018). *The Global Network for Age Friendly Cities and Communities, looking back over the last decade*  
<https://www.who.int/publications-detail-redirect/WHO-FWC-ALC-18.4>

<sup>15</sup> Ayuntamiento de Madrid (2021). *Plan Madrid Amigable con las Personas Mayores 2021-2023*  
<https://www.madrid.es/UnidadesDescentralizadas/Mayores/Especial%20informativo/Madrid,%20ciudad%20migable/Plan%20de%20Acci%C3%B3n%20Madrid,%20ciudad%20amigable%20con%20las%20personas%20mayores%202021-23.pdf>

responds to the needs of the older population; 3 Friendly urban environment: a city that adapts to all people. The Madrid Plan contains many strategies towards creating a more user friendly city which aims to be inclusive of all people with special needs, thus also the elderly. For that reason fewer actions may be specifically designated for the ageing population, although that group is singled out in the strategy for care. Nevertheless, the strategy to create a friendly environment for all people includes several actions specifically directed towards ageing. Among them are: allocating 5% of rental housing of the Municipal Housing Company to the over 65, according to family circumstances, disability or degree of dependency; social interventions in neighbourhoods with and for the elderly specified in the neighbourhood plans; maintenance and promotion of the use of areas for the elderly, including elementary sports circuits; dynamic evaluation of facilities for the elderly in areas with 20% or more population over 65, subject to availability of vacant land; promoting pedestrianisation with special itineraries for the elderly to municipal centres; improving mobility and safety for the elderly in public spaces; planting trees in parks near municipal senior citizen centres; ensuring universal accessibility and safety of public transport use also for the elderly. Furthermore, the many actions in the Madrid Plan aimed to improve the sustainability of Madrid's environment benefit the ageing as well.

## 7.2 The Greater London Plan

Greater London in the UK has not joined the age-friendly WHO network, possibly because strategically, the London Plan 2021<sup>16</sup> does not devise specific policies to satisfy the needs of the elderly. London is selected to illustrate the interdependence – synergies as well as unplanned contradictions between sectoral objectives which is inherent in all strategic and urban planning. This applies also to the relation between age-friendly and other city strategies identified in the latest London Plan adopted in 2021. One example is the compelling strategy to improve air quality, considering that London's air pollution is exceeding recommended maxima most of the year. Some 4000 deaths are attributed annually to poor air quality in Greater London, among them disproportionately the elderly. However, better air quality aims to reduce the death toll overall which would also benefit children and persons with respiratory diseases among others. Implementation of this strategy brought about unforeseen consequences. The congestion charge in central London, aimed to reduce car journeys, led to segregation between those who could afford the charge and the less affluent, not least those with compelling reasons to travel by car to the central area. Adding ULEZ (Ultra Low Emission Zone) up to the inner ring road aimed to reduce car journeys and encourage the use of electric cars, but again discriminated against those who could not afford to scrap their petrol and diesel cars. Extending ULEZ to the boundaries of Greater London will simply increase segregation, especially in outer areas with poor public transport. While air quality had improved noticeably during covid lockdowns air pollution is now exceeding pre-covid levels as workers were encouraged to use their cars to avoid catching covid on public transport. Another example is affordable housing, a key strategy of the labour mayor's London Plan. Providing more of it should benefit the poorer elderly, but many other families on low income share this need and leave demand unfulfilled.

## 7.3 Ageing in Manchester

Although a relative young city due to its student population and attracting younger workers, by 2040 one third of the population will be 50 and older.<sup>17</sup> As 36% of the Manchester's older residents were income deprived, while 59% of older people lived in the most deprived neighbourhoods at the turn of the century the city decided to act. Manchester, the second largest metropolitan area of the UK became a pioneer on ageing and was first to join the WHO Age Friendly World.<sup>18</sup> In 2003 it devised its initial age friendly strategy: "Valuing Older People", transformed in 2009 into "A Great Place to Grow Older"<sup>19</sup> updated in 2017. This led to three strategic priorities: promotion of age equality, age-friendly neighbourhoods and age-friendly

<sup>16</sup> Mayor of London, The London Plan, A Spatial Strategy for Greater London, March 2021

file:///C:/Users/teref/Downloads/III\_plan\_amigable\_personas\_mayores%20(4).pdf

<sup>17</sup> City Monitor (2020). *Manchester follows Asia's lead in designing age-friendly cities.*

<https://citymonitor.ai/community/neighbourhoods/manchester-follows-asias-lead-in-designing-age-friendly-cities>

<sup>18</sup> WHO. *Age Friendly World: Manchester UK*

<https://extranet.who.int/agefriendlyworld/network/manchester/>

<sup>19</sup> Age-Friendly Manchester Programme. *A Great Place to Grow Older*

[https://www.manchester.gov.uk/download/downloads/id/25294/manchester\\_a\\_great\\_place\\_to\\_grow\\_older.pdf](https://www.manchester.gov.uk/download/downloads/id/25294/manchester_a_great_place_to_grow_older.pdf)

services. For their implementation the city government set up the Manchester Older People's Board, the Manchester Age Friendly Assembly with senior representation, and the Age Friendly Culture Working Group, a network of over 100 older volunteers who help increase the cultural participation of older people in the city. Other concrete measures are: a 50+ employment and skills support group, dissemination of information on age-friendly work and the council becoming an age-friendly employer. The council also initiated the "Take a Seat Campaign" asking local businesses to make seating, toilets and drinking water freely available for the elderly. A 1 million £ initiative funded by Sport England led to pilot projects in 8 neighbourhoods which, inter alia, involved the elderly in the design of ways for them to take up physical activity with tangible results.<sup>20</sup> Acknowledging that age friendly initiatives remain a patchwork across the city of Manchester has pledged to achieve age-friendly features in each neighbourhood, quotes concrete actions to get there and has instated a monitoring system to measure progress.

#### 7.4 The Bilbao City Plan for an age-friendly city

After the city joined the International Network of Friendly Cities in 2010, Bilbao drafted three documents: Plan I (2012-15), Plan II (2016-2019) and Plan III (2020-2024). The current Plan<sup>21</sup> is structured around 10 strategic objectives responding to the conditions of the environments recommended by WHO: outdoor spaces and buildings, mobility and transport, activities and social life, citizen participation and employment. The Plan focuses in particular on five areas aimed at improving the living conditions of older people in the city: fostering social participation; strengthening community relations in neighbourhoods from an intergenerational perspective; contributing to the empowerment and social recognition of the elderly; guaranteeing their quality of life from the perspective of care; moving towards new residential models; improving their mobility and accessibility; involving older people in sustainable urban development and promoting active and healthy ageing. The 34 actions associated with these objectives are mostly related to social aspects (25), with comparatively few actions related to urban space (9). The measures are of a generic nature, mostly supported by ongoing municipal initiatives. Actions of a social nature are aimed at stimulating the participation of older people in the life of the city and its neighbourhoods and municipal governance, contributing to their empowerment through lifelong learning and changing stereotypes and attitudes that hinder their social recognition. Physical, mental and emotional health, unwanted loneliness, social exclusion and gender inequality are crucial issues, which are addressed by strengthening care services, promoting physical and sporting activities and taking measures to improve accessibility to information and reducing the digital divide. The actions aimed at urban space focus on three aspects: housing, mobility and sustainable development. With regard to housing, the goal is to delay the need for residential care homes by means of adaptation and accessibility measures for existing housing and by developing pilot projects to investigate new residential models for the elderly. With regard to mobility and accessibility, the municipal plans incorporate the age perspective and promote the participation of the elderly in their design. In relation to sustainable urban development, the plan aims to involve older people in the UN Sustainable Development Goals and to tackle the climate crisis by promoting the use of renewable energies and recycling.

## 8 CONCLUSION

The concept of "age-friendly city" is not new. As the paper shows, Intergovernmental organisations like the United Nations, the World Health Organisation and many others have promoted age-friendly cities for some decades, although progress has been slow. Measures to make cities more age-friendly are both managerial and physical. The latter, aiming at adaptations of the built environment are concerning architects, urban designers and planners. Age-friendly technical as well as design solutions have been developed and applied to buildings, mainly housing, but also workplaces and public buildings, albeit not at the scale necessary.

<sup>20</sup> Greater Manchester Moving. *Active Ageing Programme*  
<https://www.gmmoving.co.uk/commitments/people-families-and-communities/active-older-adults/active-ageing-programme>

<sup>21</sup> Ayuntamiento de Bilbao (2020). *III Plan Amigable con las Personas Mayores*  
[https://www.bilbao.eus/cs/Satellite?blobcol=urldata&blobheader=application%2Fpdf&blobheadername1=Content-disposition&blobheadername2=pragma&blobheadervalue1=attachment%3B+filename%3DIII\\_plan\\_amigable\\_personas\\_mayores.pdf&blobheadervalue2=public&blobkey=id&blobtable=MungoBlobs&blobwhere=1274334927749&ssbinary=true](https://www.bilbao.eus/cs/Satellite?blobcol=urldata&blobheader=application%2Fpdf&blobheadername1=Content-disposition&blobheadername2=pragma&blobheadervalue1=attachment%3B+filename%3DIII_plan_amigable_personas_mayores.pdf&blobheadervalue2=public&blobkey=id&blobtable=MungoBlobs&blobwhere=1274334927749&ssbinary=true)

Equally, age-friendly urban design solutions have been developed and implemented, focusing on parks and open spaces, streets and mobility, again not at a pace which could satisfy all needs of the elderly.

In planning, the four case studies show how cities have incorporated age-friendly policies in their plans. They reveal the differences between cities that have joined the WHO international network (Madrid, Bilbao and Manchester) and those that have not (London). The former three show how the instructions contained in the WHO Age-Friendly Cities Guide have guided municipal actions in adapting the content of their plans to the needs of the elderly. The case of London reveals that a strategic urban plan is not the ideal instrument to address the needs of a specific segment of the population. The initiatives to curb excessive pollution and to redress the lack of affordable housing are affecting the whole London population and aspects directly related to ageing would require specific instruments leading to targeted policies.

The three cities associated with the WHO network focus their interests on different but concurrent strategic areas. Madrid aims to be a city for all generations responding also to the needs of the older population. Manchester actively promotes age equality, age-friendly neighbourhoods and age-friendly services. Bilbao calls for empowerment and social recognition of the elderly and includes many sectoral measures to improve their quality of life. However, most measures put in place for older people focus on social aspects to the detriment of spatial aspects, while all these measures apply also to the whole population. Madrid stands out for setting aside a percentage of rental housing for the elderly in public developments and its studies on the dynamics of facilities in areas with a high percentage of elderly people; Manchester for generating numerous age-friendly organisations after the approval of its plan; and Bilbao for empowering older people through lifelong learning, access to information, reduction of the digital divide, prevention of loneliness and involvement in the Sustainable Development Goals.

Over the recent past, age-friendly city strategies have been devised and implemented by many cities, albeit pragmatically, often as pilot projects, rather than as successful comprehensive city strategies which may be attributed to the inertia of the built environment. Nevertheless, the paper aims to show that many actions which benefit the elderly are taking place in the real world and are therefore doable. It suggests that the reasons why age-friendly solutions are not more mainstream may well lie outside design solutions and social engineering. Fragmentation into silos unwilling to cooperate or share is widespread in planning and design and history shows that such segregation may well be an inherent characteristic rooted generally in the structure and organisation of human society and its power relations. Arguably, the way the needs of older people are divided into four categories and treated separately in the case studies of the ARUP research may indicate such unconscious but deeply internalised features of human perception and understanding of its own nature. Thus progress may have to shift from spatial or technical solutions to political action, leading to changes in human behaviour to achieve not only age-friendly cities, but cities where all parts of society can find a sustainable way of life.

The paper demonstrates that age-friendly design and planning measures are equally applicable to other special needs groups, and indeed are the attributes of what are conceived as liveable sustainable cities today. It is therefore difficult to isolate specific measures for the elderly, although they tend to benefit from innovative designs and urban management approaches developed for more general purposes, such as recent adaptation and mitigation of adverse climate change effects, or adjustment of the built environment to pandemic conditions. It may be argued that good architecture and urban design would have to produce buildings and neighbourhoods which are user-friendly for all groups of society. This does not mean though that there is no need to understand and provide for the specific needs of the elderly when adapting existing buildings and neighbourhoods or designing new ones. The four short case studies show initiatives towards age-friendly cities at the strategic planning level, but also in terms of practical solutions. An important aspect to take into account when designing age-friendly cities is the compatibility or possible contradiction between special needs and how to reconcile them with each other, or to negotiate compromise design solutions. For example, parks are used by very different types of people and ideally such open spaces should be able to accommodate contradictory needs which presents real design as well as political challenges.

Finally, assertive user groups have led to wider community engagement and mobilised the built environment professionals to adopt new planning and design approaches, design codes being among the most recent ones. However, even the latest design criteria, such as the compact city, the 15 minute city, mixed uses or blue-green corridors are not really new. They have existed for a long time among the planning paraphernalia,



albeit in a more prescriptive form, such as desired maximum distance between a school, a bus stop or even a high street and housing estates when land use was segregated and confined to zones rather than integrated. This planning history should be taken into account when thinking of how to incorporate demands of more consciously recognised special needs, including those of the elderly in rapidly ageing societies.

## 9 ACRONYMS

CIFAL Global Network

DESA Department of Economic and Social Affairs

ICT Information and Communication Technology

ILC International Longevity Centre

INPEA International network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse

SDG Sustainable Development Goals

WHO World Health Organisation

WSIS World Summit of the Information Society

UN United Nations

UNDP United Nations Development Programme

UNFPA UN Population Fund (former: UN fund for population activities)

UNHCR United Nations High Commission for Refugees

UNIDOP United Nations International Day of Older Persons

UNITAR UN International Training Centres for Authorities and Leaders