

SOCIAL LIGHTING FOR AGEING CITIES

POLICY BRIEF



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CREDITS

This policy is part of an outreach research developed in the framework of ENLIGHTENme. It has been authored by Don Slater, Elettra Bordonaro (London School of Economics) and Joanne Entwistle (King's College London)



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HIGHLIGHTS

- **Older people are diverse** in their lifestyles, use of public space and tastes in lighting and design. It is crucial for cities to design for diverse ageing people rather than treating them as a homogeneous category of 'the elderly'.
- **Experiencing and learning about light** – through workshops, demonstrations, events – is critical. Older people can seem conservative in their lighting preferences when consulted in the abstract, but are more than willing to consider a wide range of lighting design options – eg, darker and warmer light – when this is part of a learning and community engagement process.
- **Design lighting in terms of 'journeys', not places.** Older people generally need to plan trips (shopping, socialising, exercise); lighting is most useful in supporting trips through effective wayfinding, reducing visual confusion, marking out important amenities like benches.
- **Lighting can 'interpret' key aspects of positive ageing** in terms of how particular types of older people understand them. 'Active ageing', for example, may mean very different things to different ethnicities and lighting can be used to highlight very different activity potentials in a public space.

AIM

This policy brief focuses on ways to focus lighting design for urban public spaces on the needs and concerns of older segment-s of the population. It identifies the key concerns that cities need to address that are specific to the diversity of ageing experiences both within and between cities. This should provide a basis for making a case to lighting and design relevant policy makers and operational departments that the concerns of older public space users require special and informed attention.

BACKGROUND

Older demographics comprise a constantly increasing share of urban populations, and an increasing share of city resources in social care, health provision, public space management and community facilities. Lighting as part of urban public space design also needs to attend to age specific concerns, including the need for multi-generational public spaces. Moreover, most European and North American research and policy on ageing strongly focuses on imperatives with implications for public space use: ageing policy is centrally concerned with 'active ageing' including both outside activities and maintenance of civic and social participation; universal access to public space as an essential precondition of social inclusion; social integration, participation and inclusion as fundamental to positive ageing; and most cities emphasise 'ageing in place' for as long as possible. In all these respects, public spaces should play a fundamental role in positive ageing, and lighting that supports this role is crucial.

At the same time, 'ageing' is a complex and diverse experience. There is no such thing as 'old people'; rather, there are many different patterns and stages of ageing, all of which are different both within and between cities. The ageing experience and concerns of a physically active 65 year old Italian man in Bologna will be radically different from that of a 65 year old Moroccan woman in Amsterdam. And of course both will differ enormously from the concerns of an 85 year old inhabitant of Tartu navigating frozen streets with macular degeneration. Moreover, older people share public spaces with other demographics such as teenagers and young families, often with conflicting needs; and at the same time there is often a desire for public spaces to support intergenerational relationships and socialising.

Using lighting in creating supportive public spaces for diverse older people therefore involves considerable location-specific and demographically refined knowledge and understanding of the needs, practices and lifestyles of diverse older people. This social mapping of ways of ageing normally needs to be supplemented with other kinds of expertise: medical, social care, transport and technology. Finally, lighting is only one element of design for older populations, and it needs to be integrated with other elements of urban design: for example, for many older people a trip to the shops involves careful calculation of their available energy along a route, involving benches and resting places, stairways and slopes, careful wayfinding and negotiation of hazards – all of which can be aided by judicious lighting of amenities and signage. Indeed, lighting for older people is best thought about in terms of lighting 'journeys' rather than fixed places, considering all aspects that support urban mobility.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Lighting urban spaces for older people requires two essential ingredients: a knowledge of the different lifestyles and activities of the main older demographics involved by a public space; and a focus on how lighting can support the typical 'journeys' taken by different older people.

Disaggregate 'the elderly'

Cities to understand the main patterns of ageing and the different public space needs each one involves. For example, considering the different public space practices of physical fit and active people, the more frail, ethnic and gender differences and older people with specific involvements in public space (eg, walking and exercise groups). This disaggregation and investigation will generally involve both social research and consultation with professional experts on aspects of ageing.

Disaggregate ageing policies

Most city policies on ageing focus on active ageing, social inclusion and participation and ageing in place. However all of these terms have different meanings and implications for different ageing citizens. 'Being active' may mean informal socializing for some, or joining in organized groups for others; and social inclusion has very different meanings depending on ethnicity. For some older people, the ambience and meaning of a public space – reinforced by atmospheric lighting – may be crucial to their participation; for others public space is purely a functional route to the shops, in which lighting should play a purely wayfinding role. Rather than using lighting in relation to generic policies, good city lighting for older people should adapt to citizens' understandings of positive ageing.

Design 'journeys' not places

For many categories of older people, the impact of lighting is best understood in terms of whole trips (eg, shopping or

exercise) rather than individual places: being economical with energy and time generally means considering all the obstacles to be navigated (eg, stairways, streets, risky areas to avoid) and helpful amenities along the way (eg, benches, water fountains, cross walks). Lighting is often most useful where it can make both obstacles and amenities more legible as part of a whole journey that needs to be managed.

Community engagement and learning about lighting

Older people – like most demographics – have little knowledge of lighting. When asked in general about lighting preferences, the response is invariably, 'we want maximum brightness, for safety'. When involved in experiencing and learning about lighting properties design options, these views change dramatically. This means that cities should be sceptical of one-off consultations and surveys of lighting and design, focusing instead on working with older people, as part of wider community engagement. This generally allows for better and more creative design, better servicing of older people's needs and designs that respond to a wider range of demographics.

Experimentation and demonstration

Our research has shown that older people will accept and even prefer much darker and warmer lighting after they have experienced different lighting effects. Prototyping and demonstrating lighting options is crucial in developing good lighting for public space

