

Some Lessons Learned about the Design and Functioning of ICZs

In this chapter, we draw from the previous 13 chapters to coalesce some themes in terms of how the concept of Intergenerational Contact Zones (ICZs) can be used to: aid in the study of complex, multi-generational community settings; broaden the range of intergenerational activity possibilities in diverse community settings; and generate innovative ideas for developing intergenerational meeting "spaces" which may be converted into socially meaningful "places."

Overview

We began our work on this publication with the primary goal of increasing our understanding of the design and functioning of settings and spaces able to facilitate and promote intergenerational engagement.

The primary focus is on Intergenerational Contact Zones (ICZs), spatial focal points for different generations to meet, interact, build shared meaning and relationships (e.g., trust and friendships), and, if desired, work together to address issues of common concern.

We aim to highlight some of the main principles and lessons learned with regard to developing effective and innovative ICZs. These preliminary principles are presented not as a rigid set of rules or guidelines, but rather as part of a broader effort to crystallize our understanding of the overall ICZ concept and lay the foundations for exploring new applications for intergenerational living and learning.

Design Principles

The following principles include environmental design features, aspects of the design process, and other factors to take into account when designing ICZ spaces.

- 1. Provide Choice:** The inhabitants of ICZ spaces typically appreciate "choice" and the freedom to exercise this choice on their own terms. This includes choice in terms of how much and how to interact with others in ICZs. The emphasis here is that interaction should not be forced. In a park setting, for example, some older adult park users may prefer their intergenerational interactions to be "passive," like sitting and watching children play.
- 2. Flexibility:** ICZ spaces should be flexible enough to accommodate various types of use. Community spaces that tend to function well as intergenerational places tend to be open, welcoming, and evolving rather than static, defensive, and rigid. Flexibility is one of the primary design considerations emphasized by Hatton-Yeo and Melville (2016) in their chapter, *Community Centers as ICZs*: "Flexibility in the space is crucial in the design of an intergenerational environment that allows for planned and unplanned activity and different levels and types of interaction between the generations."
- 3. Visibility:** Even before entering an ICZ setting, people like to have a sense through visual contact of their intergenerational interaction options upon entry to that particular setting.
- 4. Activity Layering:** In the context of working to improve existing ICZs, this principle refers to layering additional activity options that might broaden or otherwise enhance the intergenerational experience in these settings.
- 5. Meaningfulness:** One way to buttress the social dimension of ICZ settings is to plan activities that help participants to unearth and share their personal experiences, understanding, narratives and the various meanings they ascribe to intergenerational engagement.
- 6. Tradition and modernity can coexist:** There are benefits to designing ICZs that include conventional elements of environmental design and high-tech elements which can generate additional modes of interaction. For example, in the chapter on "Supermarkets as Intergenerational Contact Zones," Thang, Taslim, Tan, Wong, & Hong (2016) describe a hybrid environmental strategy for creating "food conversation hubs" that serve to extend family conversations about which foods to



purchase and how to prepare them. They propose designing these spaces to include physical environmental features, such as mini-clusters of benches, chairs, and small tables, as well as a virtual environmental feature (in the form of online family-play games with nutrition education themes) to facilitate family-based learning and conversations about food and nutrition.

7. Consistency with the goals and objectives of the overall setting: The design of ICZ spaces should reflect the primary objectives of the overall settings in which they exist. For example, the "Intergenerational Reading Rooms" spaces in The Intergenerational Schools in Cleveland, Ohio (noted in the chapter by Whitehouse, Whitehouse, & Sanchez) were designed to provide a welcoming, engaging, reasonably quiet, and semi-private reading and conversation space where students and their adult mentors could learn and grow together in the framework of a school approached as a community of lifelong learners.

8. Plan and organize space in such a way as to facilitate interaction without violating people's need for privacy: For example, Zheng (2016), in her chapter on intergenerational relations and the quest for developing cohesive community lifestyles in co-housing communities, emphasizes how quality of life in these communities also depends on maintaining privacy (and the choice of when and how to find privacy).

9. Planning process matters: Engaging participants in the (design) process was a theme presented in several chapters of this *ICZs - Compendium of Applications* publication (e.g., Zheng's chapter on co-housing and Azevedo's chapter on a large urban park in Portugal). It is a way to elicit community interest, promote a shared sense of place, and establish a sense of local support in favor of maintaining ICZ spaces as valued components of communal settings. Furthermore, as noted in Hatton-Yeo and Melville's chapter on age-integrated community centers, collaborative approaches to the delivery of services and programming become particularly important during times of shrinking public resources.

Beyond Design

Welcoming spontaneity:

The challenge of creating communal spaces that function as meaningful, lively, and popular ICZs is not entirely a matter of rational design. In fact, sometimes the appeal of an intergenerational setting has nothing to do with the preliminary design process. For example, the inhabitants of a setting might spontaneously come up with new ideas for how to use the space in intergenerational relationship-enhancing ways.

Such occurrences of serendipitous initiation or modification of ICZ spaces are consistent with the principles of "choice" and "flexibility" noted above, and should be seen as a positive complement to intentional planning. It is also a prompt to approach the design of ICZs with an open mindset. In the least, members of the environmental design and development team should consider the question: Does the ICZ design scheme provide "opportunities" and prompts for spontaneous (unanticipated) meetings, informal interaction, and new ideas for developing and using the ICZ space?

Another thread of the argument in support of approaching ICZs with an open mindset was underscored in the Introduction (Chapter 1), where it was noted that the inhabitants of ICZ spaces are not passive recipients of environmental influence. As an illustration of this point, consider O'Neill's description of the social ecology of West Lake, a heavily utilized ICZ in Hangzhou, China. She identifies several factors that contribute to the site's success and popularity, such as the inclusion of great amenities that are "age neutral" and then leaving it to park visitors to "follow their own interests" in making choices about which activities to engage in and with whom.

"Provide 'amenities' that are age neutral. Beautiful walkways, parks, and gardens provide people with a focal point or means to follow their own interests. Not only can they walk, bike or boat, they can, for example, bird watch or enjoy the ornamental gardens" (O'Neill, 2016).

Transforming mono- and multi-generational spaces into intergenerational spaces:

There are many community spaces designed with mono-generational and multi-generational objectives in mind. In this section we share some strategies for weaving an intergenerational component into such spaces.

First, we provide brief definitions and examples of each type of space:

- Mono-generational spaces: Refers to community spaces that are designed from a single generation-specific perspective, such as to be "elder-friendly" or "youth-friendly." Emphasis is placed on meeting the needs and interests of a single age group.
- Multi-generational: Refers to designs aimed at enabling and even encouraging the simultaneous presence of people from more than one generation. Tends to include special measures to attract and ensure enhanced accessibility for diverse generations (e.g., public parks playgrounds and fitness areas allowing coexistence of older adults and children within the same space).

- Intergenerational: An intergenerational framework for developing communal spaces includes, but goes beyond, multi-generational objectives. Intended emphasis is placed on promoting intergenerational awareness, understanding, interaction, and perhaps even collaborative/joint action: in this case, emphasis is addressed not only to "being together" (i.e., in physical co-location) but also to "interacting together" (i.e., in relationships).

Several chapters illustrate efforts to converting mono- and multi-generational spaces into intergenerational spaces. For example, Spencer and Jones (2016), in their chapter, "Can Urban Streets and Spaces be Intergenerational Cycling Zones," describe a number of measures that are taken in some cities to reallocate and redesign road space, solely from motor vehicle use to create space for cycling and walking. Traffic engineering actions such as the widening of lanes, and policies such as inserting slower speed zones in local communities, provide for a more diverse landscape for cycling, one which embraces all ages and abilities. This also makes it possible for residents to use streets as social spaces. For example, the wider streets allow for side-by-side cycling, which makes possible the growth of cycling as a family-oriented recreational activity while maintaining the option of cycling as an efficient, environment-friendly means of practical transportation.

It is also relevant to consider the *bridging function* of ICZs, i.e., how ICZs can provide space and opportunity for the inhabitants of two adjacent mono-generational spaces to meet and engage one another in joint activity. Thang (2015) provides two examples of how ICZ spaces can soften the social and behavioral boundaries between adjacent mono-generational spaces. One is a playground in Singapore which has exercise stations for older persons located on the outskirts of the playground. The other example is a "community café" in Japan (Fukuoka) which draws older people meeting for tea as well as young children and their mothers who spend time in an adjacent play area. Although both sites still accommodate mono-generational activity the ICZs at the spatial intersections of these mono-generational activity nodes add intergenerational socializing options to these settings.

The role of creativity and imagination in creating ICZs:

In Bob McNulty's (2016) chapter on arts and cultural institutions ("Culture as Animator of Intergenerational Gathering Places"), he notes that creating great intergenerational gathering places depends not only on their specific design, but also on "how they 'animate' diverse gatherings of young and old to associate and mingle. Through this programming, they become 'civic glue' and reward any location."

The challenge of "animating" an intergenerational space is a hard thing to operationalize, particularly since it is not always known when, where, or from whom the creative "spark" will materialize. How about from a 7-year old boy's imagination? Jason Danely (2016), in his chapter entitled, "Imagining a Bus Stop as an Intergenerational Contact Zone," shared his 7-year old son's ideas for redesigning a bus stop so it would be a better place "for grannies and grandpas and little kids and everyone to do more things together." One of his son's provocative, "out of the box" ideas for spicing up the experience of waiting at bus stops is to build giant electronic chess sets into the physical infrastructure of bus stop stands. These sets would have the capacity to generate holograms and audio announcements of the moves.

Paying attention to routines, rituals, and socio-cultural norms:

In Zheng's chapter ("Beyond Contact - Intergenerational Living in Cohousing Communities"), she notes that what makes many cohousing communities in the U.S. function so well as intergenerational living environments is not only the ample provision of communal spaces that are (all) age-inclusive and support a wide variety of intergenerational activities (e.g., "common houses," dining rooms, lounge areas, playgrounds and other communal spaces), but also the evolution of social *norms, routines, and rituals* in influencing how residents perceive and use these communal spaces in relationship-enhancing ways.

In O'Neill's chapter ("Intergenerational Gatherings among the Water and Willows"), she notes how West Lake, a large natural park in Hangzhou, China, functions as sort of an epicenter of local music, dance, tai chi, Chinese chess, and other activities that reflect the shared cultural heritage and sense of cultural identity that attract people of all generations, and that invite them to interact.

ICZ as a sensitizing concept:

For those who plan and operate intergenerational programs, the topic of intergenerational contact zones provides a reminder to pay attention to the role of the physical environment (natural and built) in influencing how participants - across generations - meet, feel about, and find opportunity to get to know one another. It's a conceptual vehicle for thinking spatially about intergenerational engagement. For those who operate in the arenas of environmental design and community planning and development, an incisive look into how ICZs function provides a reminder as well as a trigger to consider psychological, social, institutional, and other factors that affect what takes place in intergenerational settings.

Final thoughts

The idea of demarcating a set physical space or time for meaningful intergenerational engagement is, in many ways, a complex undertaking. As noted in the "Multiple dimensions of ICZs" summary chart (see Appendix 1), beyond looking at physical characteristics of an ICZ space, such as spatial configuration and functionality, there are many other factors to consider when trying to plan or understand ICZs. Here we are referring to psychological, social, economic, political, institutional (including for site management practices), historical, and a host of other cultural factors that affect what takes place in intergenerational settings.

On the psychological or perceptual side, it is reasonable to expect that many people who arrive at an ICZ will have distinct notions about age and intergenerational communication, some of which might entail negative age-related stereotypical thinking. This undoubtedly has an impact on how ICZ inhabitants perceive and feel about one another - Is there (interpersonal and/or generational) interest? Trust? Curiosity? Respect? Patience?

The sociocultural context also has a powerful influence on how ICZ *spaces* may become meaningful *places*. Socially (and culturally) defined norms, traditions, and values (especially those concerning the understanding and use of public places) affect how inhabitants view and behave within any given ICZ setting.

There is also the temporal dimension to consider. The use of a great ICZ space might change over time, with shifting meanings and uses of that particular space. For example, a park space with an amphitheater that is heavily utilized by intergenerational music and dance groups during the day might be seen as a place to avoid during the evening due to safety concerns.

Typically, labelling a space as ICZ is something which comes after a sense of place has already been achieved. In principle, any space might be transformed into an ICZ place insofar as intergenerational awareness and practices are infused in meaningful ways. ICZ spaces serve many functions, depending on the setting, the participants, and community and cultural context. For example, ICZs could generate opportunities for: play, exercise, environmental education, community activism, cultural arts education, local history study, caregiving, etc. Therefore, the ultimate challenge is not as much with setting up ICZ places from scratch as it is with transforming already existing spaces into spatial focal points for different generations to relate meaningfully.

In large part, transforming and creating successful ICZs is a question of process: we'll need intentionality, know-how and time to make it happen. Like any other intergenerational process, the making of ICZs is a complex endeavor; therefore we should not rely on simplistic notions about the all-good nature of intergenerational encounters. The fact that we intend a harmonious contact to happen in spaces denoted as sites for intergenerational engagement should not overshadow another important fact: there is always a degree of contingency and uncertainty when different generations approach to interact.

Nevertheless, as illustrated in the chapters of this *Compendium*, it is possible to take a balanced approach to creating intergenerational places, recognizing the potential for intergenerational misunderstanding and tension, yet working proactively to establish programs, policies, and environmental design strategies that encourage people to challenge negative age-related stereotypes, learn about one another, communicate in open, relationship-enhancing ways, and act together for the common good.

References

- Azevedo, C. (2016). [A Portuguese city park as a potential intergenerational contact zone](#). In M. Kaplan, L.L. Thang, M. Sanchez, & J. Hoffman (Eds.), *Intergenerational Contact Zones - A Compendium of Applications*. University Park, PA: Penn State Extension. Available [online](#).
- Danely, J. (2016). [Imagining a bus stop as an intergenerational contact zone: Enlivening everyday spaces and playing with perspective](#). In M. Kaplan, L.L. Thang, M. Sanchez, & J. Hoffman (Eds.). *Ibid.*
- Hatton-Yeo, A. & Melville, J. (2016). [Community centers as intergenerational contact zones](#). In M. Kaplan, L.L. Thang, M. Sanchez, & J. Hoffman (Eds.). *Ibid.*
- McNulty, R. (2016). [Culture as animator of intergenerational gathering places](#). In M. Kaplan, L.L. Thang, M. Sanchez, & J. Hoffman (Eds.). *Ibid.*
- O'Neill, P. (2016). [Intergenerational gatherings among the water and willows](#). In M. Kaplan, L.L. Thang, M. Sanchez, & J. Hoffman (Eds.). *Ibid.*
- Spencer, B. & Jones, T. (2016). Can urban streets and spaces be *intergenerational cycling zones*? In M. Kaplan, L.L. Thang, M. Sanchez, & J. Hoffman (Eds.). *Ibid.*
- Thang, L.L. (2015). Creating an intergenerational contact zone: Encounters in public spaces within Singapore's public housing neighborhoods. In R. Vanderbeck & N. Worth (Eds.). *Intergenerational spaces* (pp. 17-32). London, UK: Routledge.
- Thang, L.L., Taslim, W.H., Tan, Z.H., Wong, Z.H., & Hong, L.W. (2016). [Let's go shopping together: Supermarkets as intergenerational contact zones](#). In M. Kaplan, L.L. Thang, M. Sanchez, & J. Hoffman (Eds.).

Whitehouse, C., Whitehouse, P., & Sanchez, M. (2016). [Intergenerational Reading Rooms: Lessons Learned from The Intergenerational School](#). In M. Kaplan, L.L. Thang, M. Sanchez, & J. Hoffman (Eds.). Ibid.

Zheng, L. (2016). [Beyond contact - Intergenerational Living in Cohousing Communities](#). In M. Kaplan, L.L. Thang, M. Sanchez, & J. Hoffman (Eds.). Ibid.

Authors

Matthew Kaplan, Leng Leng Thang, Mariano Sanchez, and Jaco Hoffman

extension.psu.edu

Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences research and extension programs are funded in part by Pennsylvania counties, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Where trade names appear, no discrimination is intended, and no endorsement by Penn State Extension is implied.

This publication is available in alternative media on request.

Penn State is an equal opportunity, affirmative action employer, and is committed to providing employment opportunities to all qualified applicants without regard to race, color, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, disability or protected veteran status.

© The Pennsylvania State University 2020