An Introduction to Intergenerational Contact Zones

Each of the following 13 chapters (not including this chapter) highlight a specific application of Intergenerational Contact Zones (ICZs for short). The focus is on creating community settings that welcome age- and generation- diverse populations, provide opportunities for meaningful intergenerational engagement, and, in some way(s), enrich community life.

Overview

The driving question that led to the decision to pull together this publication is: How do we create great settings for intergenerational engagement? In particular, we draw attention to the concept of "intergenerational contact zones" and its significance for creating livable, inclusive, and relationship-focused community settings for people of generations.

We begin with some background information about intergenerational programs and practices in general, and then move toward examining issues related to the role of the physical environment. We draw upon the ICZ conceptual framework as a tool for investigating and designing spaces for intergenerational engagement.

Background

First, a definition of "intergenerational practice:" 2

"Intergenerational practice aims to bring people together in purposeful, mutually beneficial activities which promote greater understanding and respect between generations and contributes to building more cohesive communities. Intergenerational practice is inclusive, building on the positive resources that the young and old have to offer each other and those around them" (Beth Johnson Foundation, 2011).

As Kaplan & Sánchez (2014) have explained, in the intergenerational studies literature, we have witnessed slow but steady growth in the production of evidence indicating ways in which intergenerational practices can have a substantial impact on participants' knowledge and skills, level of civic involvement, health, arts and recreation pursuits, social relationships, sense of self-fulfillment, and sense of cultural pride and identity (Brabazon & Disch, 1997; Hatton-Yeo & Ohsako, 2000; Kaplan, Henkin & Kusano, 2002; Kuehne, 1999; MacCallum et al., 2006; Morrow-Howell, Hong, McCrory & Blinne, 2009; Newman, Ward, Smith, Wilson & McCrea, 1997; and Martin, Springate & Atkinson, 2010).

Progress has also been made in establishing standards and guidelines for effective practice in the intergenerational field (Larkin & Rosebrook, 2002; Newman & Olson, 1996; Sánchez, Díaz, Sáez, & Pinazo, 2014). So far, competencies needed for professionals working in intergenerational programs include the ability to:

- work with individuals at many points along the age spectrum
- plan age-integrated activities that are developmentally and functionally appropriate for participants
- coordinate programs with other community agencies
- design effective, sustainable intergenerational programs
- being skilled at promoting contacts, social relationships, interactions and bonds between people from different generations

What seems to be lagging is competency in understanding the role of the physical environment in terms of its impact on program processes and outcomes. More broadly, there is a need for greater understanding and innovation in terms of creating intergenerational settings; this goes beyond a focus on formal intergenerational programs.

On a positive note, there are some recent publications on intergenerational settings, for example, Vanderbeck & Worth's (2015) edited volume on "intergenerational spaces," an article from Buffel et al. (2014) on the "shared places and spaces" campaign in the
northern England city of Manchester, and a report from the Generations of Hope Development Corporation (GHDC, 2015) which highlights the role of physical design in their "intentional (intergenerational) neighboring" model. It is our intent to add to this rich and expanding literature.

**What are Intergenerational Contact Zones (ICZs)?**

Before we embark on defining "intergenerational contact zones," we feel it is prudent to clarify the distinction between intergenerational *spaces* and *places*. Vanderbeck and Worth (2015) use the term "intergenerational spaces" to denote sites that have been "designed for the purpose of facilitating and promoting interaction between members of different generational groups (most commonly the young and the old)" (p. 1).

While space in environmental terms has specific physical dimensions, we are primarily concerned with the conversion of a space into a *place*. In contrast with space, place constitutes a psychological component; a space may remain a space, but it may also become a place as defined by one's emotional feeling and a sense of belonging to the space. In other words, a "space" becomes a "place" once it is has meaning for someone (Thang & Kaplan, 2013). Similarly, Semken & Freeman (2008) describe place as a space "imbued with meaning by human experience" (p. 1,042). Hence, places are meaningful spaces, more than just a backdrop or a container for the action. Specifically, spaces are part of the action when we have in mind child-adult relations and practices (Mannion, 2010, p. 333).

To further aid in clarifying the distinction between space and place, we draw on Harrison and Dourish's (1996) assertion that "place" is largely a subset of "space."

"A place is generally a space with something added - social meaning, convention, cultural understandings about role, function and nature and so on. "The sense of place transforms the space" (p. 3).

When we talk about ICZs, we are simultaneously alluding to space and place. We begin with a simple working definition:

Intergenerational Contact Zones serve as spatial focal points for different generations to meet, interact, build relationships (e.g., trust and friendships), and, if desired, work together to address issues of local concern. They can be found in all types of community settings including schools, parks, taverns, reading rooms, clubhouses, museums, community gardens, environmental education centers, and multi-service community centers.

However, the intergenerational contact zones topic is more complex and multifaceted than this definition implies. Beyond drawing needed attention to the physical configuration of a space in which different generations congregate, it is important to consider sociocultural, political, economic, and historical factors linked to identity that affect how people view and value the site. The "meaning making" process plays out not just at the personal level but also at the social level. There are numerous intersections between the individually held meanings that inhabitants of a space possess; norms and expectations for the intergenerational engagement in a specific setting are negotiated and in large part socially defined.

It should also be kept in mind that the inhabitants of ICZ spaces are not passive recipients of environmental influence. They are active in constructing and refining meanings associated with ICZ spaces and in determining which intergenerational engagement possibilities to pursue. Inhabitants of ICZ spaces also proactively influence how these settings function. They help as well to create opportunities for intergenerational learning, living, recreating, and taking civic action.

**What is the history of the term "Intergenerational Contact Zones"?**

The first use of the term "Intergenerational Contact Zones" can be found in a chapter written by Leng Leng Thang (2015) for a book on *Intergenerational Spaces*, edited by Vanderbeck and Worth. Thang's chapter described her study of a co-(age) located playground in Singapore.

Thang's inspiration came from observing Japanese culture, looking particularly at the norm of "keeping in touch"- and therefore building upon similar work by Pratt (1991) who used the term "contact zones" in the context of sharing cultures, ideas and values in classroom settings. Essentially, Pratt argued that when people come together from diverse cultural perspectives there is the potential for tension and even confrontation, but also for greater understanding if efforts are made to change the interaction dynamic.

The concept of "intergenerational contact zones" (ICZ) runs parallel to that of "cultural contact zones," except that in the ICZ case, the emphasis is placed on bridging diverse generational perspectives and experience.

**Why focus on Intergenerational Contact Zones (ICZs)?**

The topic of ICZs took center stage at a meeting held at the Oxford Institute of Population Ageing during the summer of 2015. A multi-disciplinary group of 13 scholars and practitioners engaged in groundwork discussions and collaborative inquiry aimed at exploring existing approaches and charting new strategies for creating and/or enhancing intergenerational spaces.
As we learned from the rich insights and resources shared by the Oxford meeting participants and scholars who later joined the ICZ workgroup (see Appendix 1), the ICZ conceptual framework can serve several functions, including as:

- **conceptual tool** – for studying complex, multi-generational community settings.
- **programming tool** – for broadening the range of intergenerational activity possibilities.
- **design tool** – for generating innovative ideas for developing intergenerational meeting spaces.

We anticipate that professionals from different fields of practice will have different ways of "using" the ICZ concept. It might be helpful to frame some of these ways. For the environmental design professional, for example, entertainment of the ICZ concept might stimulate innovative thinking about designing spaces that are conducive to the type of intergenerational encounters appropriate to the overall setting in question, whether the emphasis is on joint learning, discovery, invention, caregiving, or some other mode of engagement.

For the intergenerational studies professional, focusing in on ICZs might be a way to reflect on ways to modify the physical environment to better align with program objectives, activities, and organizational policies.

The community development oriented professional might tune into the potential of viable intergenerational meeting spaces/places for reducing social isolation and creating new modes of community activity. This is consistent with the research conducted by Partners for Livable Communities on public perceptions of "community livability," where emphasis is placed on the importance of civic gathering places, where people can meet comfortably, and where there is a welcoming environment for newcomers (McNulty & Koff, 2014).

ICZ spaces - either through design or serendipity, planned or spontaneous modes of interaction - can make a significant difference in people's lives. ICZs can function as hubs for a wide variety of pursuits that have a social dimension, from play to caregiving. They open up new pathways for community exploration and discovery, and they help people form and maintain social networks and relationships that buffer against the specter of social isolation and loneliness.

**About this Publication**

This publication is a part of a broader effort to crystalize our understanding of the overall ICZ concept and lay the foundations for exploring new applications for intergenerational living and learning.

The authors of the 14 chapters in this publication explore ways in which the ICZ conceptual framework could be useful for understanding, creating, or sparking intergenerational engagement in a wide range of practices and settings, including those that exist in virtual as well as physical environments.

The chapters are filled with poignant examples of how ICZs breathe new life into communities and social practices. There are ICZs within which and through which new modes of recreation, new family bonding experiences, new horizons for appreciating the natural environment, new ways to explore local culture and history, and new social groupings and networks are generated.

To draw attention to the abundance and diversity of ICZs in communities, we made sure to include ICZs (or potential ICZs) in settings that are not typically thought of as hubs of intergenerational activity or possibility, such as small, sparse bus stops (see Jason Danely's chapter) and an abandoned castle slated for restoration and adaptive reuse (see Tom Quinlan's chapter).

Throughout the publication an emphasis has been made not as much on presenting theory and concepts as on practical descriptions and developments around ICZs. It has been our purpose to nurture practitioners' capacity to translate and infuse the notion of ICZ into their work. To this regard, the editors of this Compendium would be delighted to get feedback from readers either about further applications from the Compendium's content or ideas for expanding the Compendium with new cases of ICZs.

**References and Resources**


Photo caption: During a “think tank” on Intergenerational Contact Zones hosted by the Oxford Institute of Population Ageing (June 26, 2015), workshop participants engaged in an exercise aimed at exploring ways to apply intergenerational design concepts in various community settings. Pictured (from left to right): Mariano Sanchez (Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Granada, Spain; AESE Visiting Scholar - 2012-13 and Penn State Center for Healthy Aging international affiliate faculty), Alan Hatton-Yeo (MBE, Director of Age Friendly Communities Wales and Communities for All Ages/UK), Susan Langford (MBE, Director, Magic Me - London), Matt Kaplan (Professor, Penn State University; Visiting Fellow, Oxford Institute of Population Ageing), and Jaco Hoffman (James Martin Senior Research Fellow, Oxford Institute of Population Ageing; Professor, Ageing and Generational Dynamics in Africa Programme, North-West University, South Africa).

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1 We use the term “engagement” rather than “interaction” to capture participants’ investment of physical, cognitive, and emotional energies into their intergenerational encounters.

2 From this point onward, we use the term "practices" to include "programs," "policies," and "places."

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