

Community Centres as Intergenerational Contact Zones

Community centers can function as intergenerational as well as mono-generational and multi-generational activity spaces. This chapter highlights an example of a community center in London designed as an intergenerational shared site.

Introduction

"Intergenerational relationships are always located in place" (Mannion, 2012).

The literature has primarily focused on interactions within age-segregated environments but there has also been an increase and recognized growing need in the field to consider older and younger adults' engagement with and attachment to age-integrated communities and spaces. As such, more recent literature has focused on the use of different public spaces in urban areas that are shared by many generations. Therefore, a growing interest in exploring public shared spaces and places that are intergenerational is not only increasing but essential as we develop new integrated models to address the aspirations of citizens in a time of significant demographic change.

One of the critical issues emerging within the intergenerational field is a lack of attention to how the built environment plays a crucial role in influencing intergenerational interaction (Melville, 2013; Jarrott, Smith, & Weintraub, 2008; Kaplan et al., 2007; Kuehne & Kaplan, 2001; Thang, 2001). From an intergenerational perspective, the objective of a physical space is to create an environment that is appropriate for various age groups, but is also conducive to intergenerational interactions - that is, an environment that fosters meaningful engagement between generations.

A community center as an Intergenerational Contact Zone (ICZ) can be conceptualized as a place and space in the local community where the generations can potentially come together in a number of ways and for a variety of reasons. As such, the development and/or management of a community center as an ICZ must consider both the environment and, specifically, people's relationships with(in) their environments. This proposal is predicated on the idea that many community spaces, such as a community centers, currently being utilized by various generations independently could in fact be used 'intergenerationally'.

Discussion

The opportunity to consider community centers in the context of the emerging discussion regarding Intergenerational Contact Zones (ICZs) is a timely one. The impact of austerity in the UK and a reconsideration of the reciprocal responsibilities between State and Citizen have created a new dialogue in the UK. There is an increasing emphasis on local solutions by and for local people and a reappraisal of buildings as community assets that need to rationalize and optimize their use to enable them to be both economically and socially sustainable.

This article builds on the study the authors undertook in 2013 for the Welsh Government on Intergenerational Shared Spaces (Hatton-Yeo & Melville, 2013) and the emerging European Age-Friendly Environment movement (AFE-Innovnet). Both recognize the importance of seeing people's participation and engagement as being influenced by their physical environment. What is more, the idea of 'community' and 'community center' are also contested terms. Individuals and communities both share having multiple and complex identities and interests and it is essential to take account of this complexity in any discussion of community. It is too easy, and we would argue negligent, to define community in terms of geographical location without taking account of the communities of interest that people also belong to.

Acacia Intergenerational Center (Merton) the outside entry point.



In the UK the creation of social cohesion has been a key driver for much of our policy (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2007). This sees the development of intergenerational relationships as a core element to help bind communities together, i.e. to be socially cohesive. However, the meaning of social cohesion itself remains open to debate. The literature broadly emphasizes two principal elements to the concept: 'the reduction of disparities, inequalities and social exclusion' and 'the strengthening of social relations, interactions and ties' (Berger-Schmitt, 2000, p.28). In much of the literature the second element dominates and is often closely tied to the concept of social capital.

Social capital is associated with "people's sense of community, their sense of belonging to a neighbourhood, caring about people who live there and believing people who live there care about them" (Portney & Berry, 2001, p.21). Putnam (2000) argues that positive attitudes and beliefs in one's neighbourhood contributes to cohesion within the local community and hence to residents' willingness to participate in local affairs and to cooperate. Life in communities with high social capital is seen to be good. Given such a move in the UK to seek to develop such 'civic communities' (Putnam, 2000), consideration of the community center as the physical space to foster interaction between people over time is essential.

A community center may be a building managed by a local resident committee for the use of local people or owned and managed by the Local Authority for the benefit of local people. Such a building will have a range of physical resources which can include sports facilities, rooms to be used for meetings, learning activities, groups to meet, arts and drama, social and recreational use, etc. Larger community centers may also have a cafeteria and crèche (daycare) facilities.

By the very nature of the activities that are offered such a center lends itself to serving the needs of particular communities of interest in segregated sessions. People may attend different groups at different times reflecting their interests and this will be of personal benefit but does such a center contribute to the overall goal of strengthening social relations between the generations? In fact, it might lead to weakening such relationships if different groups see themselves as 'owning the building' at different times. To build a sense of community the building, and its use, has to intentionally create opportunities for people to mix and do things that go across traditional group divides. For instance the growth of interest in baking in the UK (The Great British Bake-Off) has created a wonderful opportunity for people to learn, cook and eat together in an unforced and natural way, but only if the center has the facilities to enable this to happen.

An example of a Community Center becoming an ICZ in the UK

The Acacia Intergenerational Center, the UK's first purpose-built intergenerational center, was developed to "provide a range of shared services and facilities under one roof for older people, children as well as families" (LDA, 2009: 72). Driven by increasing concerns about the generations becoming more isolated from one another and reinforced by different groups feeling they were competing with each other for resources, for public space(s) and to get their voices heard, the London Development Agency (LDA) in partnership with the Greater London Authority was tasked with looking at innovative ways of addressing these issues. By merging activities and facilities for older and younger people, the LDA anticipated that a center would help break down barriers and improve educational attainment, reduce crime and provide a better sense of community spirit and well-being.

Findings from research during the development and management of this center suggest that utilizing existing research and best practice in the field is crucial (Melville, 2013). For example, access to wider EU networks that have experience developing and delivering similar centers, making use of guidance available and collaboration with professionals in the field of intergenerational practice, who were seen to be 'experts' and have previous experience and knowledge is one method for utilizing examples of best practice and research.

Flexibility in the space is crucial in the design of an 'intergenerational' (IG) environment that allows for planned and unplanned activity and different levels and types of interaction between the generations (Epstein & Boisvert, 2005).

Furthermore, how the community center and its staff communicate what the center 'is', who it is for and how it can be used, had a considerable effect on who used the center and for what purpose.

The quality of staff working in a community center (as an ICZ) is another key element for success - staff have a potentially important role in the planning and implementation of IG programming. More specifically, staff who possess the skills and knowledge to meet age-appropriate developmental needs, and are able to develop and implement IG activities, has consistently been highlighted in the literature as a critical factor in the management and delivery of a variety of intergenerational programs (Melville, 2013). Finally, appropriate planning and implementation is essential to meet the complex demands of activities and services that are appropriate for all ages. Equally, how activities and services are planned and delivered can influence how the generations interact with one another in any given setting.

What are the key elements for a community center to become an effective ICZ?

We would suggest that for a community center to become a successful ICZ, it should aim to possess a number of essential attributes:

1. Participants from different generations are actively involved in the planning and running of the activities and services the center provides.
2. Staff are trained to work with both older adults and young people and have an explicit understanding of the fundamental aim to allow all generations to collaborate on positive activities of shared interest and mutual benefit.
3. Both staff and participants approach risk assessment (i.e., safeguarding children and older adults) as a positive opportunity to build safe relationships and partnerships.
4. However the space is constructed or defined, everyone continually questions how it can be made 'age friendly' to facilitate interaction across - and between - the generations.
5. Both formal and informal opportunities exist - or are created - for people of different generations to come together and enjoy regular contact, both formally and informally.

In summary, as public resources shrink and opportunities for the generations to interact remain limited, more collaborative approaches to the delivery of services and programming will become a necessary step for all of society, in practice. Finally, anyone considering embarking on the process of promoting a community center as an ICZ needs to give equal weight to the activities, programs and services (i.e., what happens within these spaces) as to the various or physical spaces and the end users involved.

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