

# Imagining a Bus Stop as an Intergenerational Contact Zone

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**The Intergenerational Contact Zone (ICZ) concept could stimulate our imagination and creative efforts to bring new energy and activity into public spaces that tend to be non-interactive and somewhat lifeless, even bus stops.**

This chapter looks at the Intergenerational Contact Zone (ICZ) framework as a way to transform not only spaces, but the human processes of creating those spaces as well. Inclusion and integration of different generations can be part of the purpose and, indeed, the fun of planning ICZs. Intergenerational collaborations allow a more innovative multi-perspective approach focused on creative potentials that goes beyond a framework based solely on assumed limitation. Thinking about ICZs encourages us to ask what a world and the built environments we move through might feel like to a seven year old child or an eighty-seven year old adult. What happens when these perspectives are brought together into a shared cognitive and communicative ecosystem (Hydén, 2014) like an ICZ? I suggest that ethnographic approaches may offer some insights for cultivating this multi-perspective approach.

As a cultural anthropologist specializing in aging societies and care of the elderly, I was immediately drawn to the ICZ project and the idea of translating notions of well-being, relationality, play, and community into real designs for living. Critics of the "aging-in-place" model of later life point out that simply staying put does not mean that one can retain a healthy sense of community, as people and environments are not bounded and static (Andrews, Evans, & Wiles, 2013). Connecting generations is potentially much more complex (Hopkins & Pain, 2006), but the benefits to health and well-being are clear (Portacolone, 2015). [As a health risk, social isolation is equivalent of fifteen cigarettes per day.](#) Who wants to age-in-place all alone?

Having lived in Japan for many years and now as an US ex-pat living in the UK, I know how it can feel to be on the outside of a community, buffeted around by the visible and invisible forces that the rest of the world takes for granted and seems to navigate with ease. I imagine many older adults feel like this as well. Cities are too often no place for old men or women. This makes people unsure of how to engage in many of the everyday spaces and worlds that younger people inhabit. It can be frustrating to be on the outside, without a clear sense of belonging and mattering.

American cultural anthropologist, Ruth Benedict famously remarked, "The purpose of anthropology is to make the world safe for human difference." This should include generational differences as well. Anthropologists have looked at relationships across the life cycle by starting with the idea that although each individual composes their own unique world of feelings, memories, and ideas, there are nonetheless ways in which we share in each other's worlds as well. Members of a speech community share a common tongue but do not (usually) speak wholly in unison. Other gestures, like the giving and receiving of gifts, feasting, and dancing are all ways humans have developed to cultivate sustainable connections between culturally distinct communities who might otherwise ignore each other, or even come into direct conflict.

Another popular cultural anthropologist, Margaret Mead (1970), addressing the youth movements of the sixties, recognized the potential for older people to be pushed even further to the periphery; a reversal of what she termed "post-figurative cultures" where the honored elders passed on vital traditional skills and knowledge. She cautioned young and old to find ways to learn from and support each other without trying to return to the past or jump too quickly into the future. This process of intergenerational negotiation is echoed in contemporary policy thinking on adapting to aging societies (Biggs, 2014).

ICZs must also supply a set of norms and conventions that utilize and enhance shared experiences while minimizing the disruptive effects of cultural barriers. But how does one do this without creating something constrictive or boring?

Then it came to me: best to ask the experts.

Which is why I asked my seven-year-old son, Auden, what he would do.

The day after I attended the Oxford Institute of Population Ageing sponsored workshop on ICZs, I told Auden about this group of people I met who wanted to come up with all the ways for grannies and grandpas and little kids and everyone to do more things together.



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As I was explaining this, we walked past a bus stop. I pointed to the stop; an older woman sat with some shopping at her feet, a teenager with leaning on the plexiglass thumbing her phone, some bored looking children waited slumped against their father.

What about a bus stop? How could we redesign a bus stop to be an Intergenerational Contact Zone?

Auden loved the idea. "I know what I would do" he said, building my curiosity like a good salesman. "I would make a chess set that could come out of the side, so you could just pull it out."

"Oh, so then you could just start a game with whomever is there, right?"

"You don't have to play, you could just watch too. That would be cool."

I encouraged Auden to think about it more, and he decided that since pieces would get lost, you could have an electronic chess set. His imagination was fired up, and he was getting excited about all sorts of features like holograms and audio announcements of the moves. I suggested that he draw the idea up:



Figure 1: Auden's (age 7) proposal for converting a bus stop into an intergenerational contact zone.

Even in this plain pencil sketch, the scene is lively and people are engaged. There are things to occupy the time and more importantly, the imagination, which seeps out beyond the game itself and into the spaces and relationships all around it. For a child, the game is all-encompassing--it is not simply about completing some discrete task, but entering into a cultural world where anyone could join in. Older people and children could teach each other about new technology and ancient strategy, onlookers might become players as a bus arrives and disrupts a game. Some might appear even when they do not have a bus to catch. There are chances for encounters both subtle and dramatic. The idea that all of this could happen at the most mundane of public spaces didn't seem odd at all from the point of view of a seven-year-old. Now what if some seven-year-olds and some seventy-year-olds collaborated with designers and social scientists?

The insight of the chess bus stop may be that ICZ is about play. It calls us out of our everyday age-segregated worlds and invites us to establish new relationships that unfold in unexpected ways but without any genuine risk. This is an insight found in the new field of [gerontoludics](#), which explores the importance of play in old age. Gerontoludics brings together a growing body of literature that breaks down stereotypes of older people (yes, older people do play videogames) and calls our attention to new design principles, like "playfulness over usefulness" (De Shutter & Vanden Abeele 2015). From this initial state of play and collaborative brainstorming, an idea can progress to reach a state of 'flow,' where participants unlock deeper potentials for creativity within each other. This is a wonderful lesson to apply to an intergenerational/ life course rich environment. By transforming a utilitarian bus shelter into a setting of play, by subverting the default attitude of "killing time" with an activity that is both engrossing and spontaneous, different generations not only tolerate each other's differences, but thrive because of them.

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