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The Zoning in and the Zoning out of the Elderly: Emerging Community and Communication Patterns

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Increasingly, senior only residences are zoning seniors out of mainstream residential areas and into segregated living and mature communities. Senior gated communities are variations on a theme of gated communities in which lifestyle is packaged and sold. Active adult retirement communities exclude the young and offer active lifestyle living, with diverse levels of senior living choices. Such an approach contrasts with policies designed to encourage aging in place. It is also distinct from Golden Age Zoning districts designed to allow affordable housing for senior citizens in a public/private partnership. Some towns have zoned public parks to establish areas for children distinct from the elderly. Simultaneously, more and more older adults are embracing the modern media environment. According to the Pew Research Center, baby boomers and seniors are the fastest growing group of social networking website users to connect with family, friends from the past, and seeking information and support with medical issues. This paper explores the person/place relationship and issues associated with design for the social needs of an aging in a media filled world.

There is something about the topic of the elderly that led us to the Pope, actually Popes new and old. 76 year old Pope Francis's book "On Heaven and Earth: Pope Francis on Faith, Family and the Church in the 21st Century," was released in English on April 19, 2013. In it he wrote: "There are many who abandon those that fed them, who educated them, who wiped their bottoms," ... "It hurts me; it makes me weep inside." ... "In this consumerist, hedonist and narcissistic society, we are accustomed to the idea that there are people that are disposable" (Bergogliop & Skorka, A., 2013, p. 98). Pope Francis also warned against a more subtle form of disregard for human dignity: which he called "covert euthanasia."

The Pope described the value of old age and the importance of preserving the memories that are transmitted through the elders of a community. This led us back to the prior Pope. In fact, the first tweeting Pope, 88-year-old Pope Benedict who, tweeted in nine languages, turned his attention to the young. In his annual address in January 2013 he noted: "The digital environment is not a parallel or purely virtual world, but is part of the daily experience of many people, especially the young." This harkens back to a statement he made on World Communication Day 2010, entitled: "Truth, Proclamation and Authenticity of Life in the Digital Age":

The new technologies allow people to meet each other beyond the confines of space and of their own culture, creating in this way an entirely new world of potential friendships. This is a great opportunity, but it also requires greater attention to and awareness of possible risks. Who is my "neighbour" in this new world? Does the danger exist that we may be less present to those whom we encounter in our everyday life? Is there is a risk of being more distracted because our attention is fragmented and absorbed in a world "other" than the

one in which we live? Do we have time to reflect critically on our choices and to foster human relationships which are truly deep and lasting?

It is important always to remember that virtual contact cannot and must not take the place of direct human contact with people at every level of our lives. (Message of His Holiness, 2010, n.p.)

The emerging area of lifespan communication assumes that human communication is developmental and must be understood as changing across time (Nussbaum, 2014). This communication perspective, said to have emerged in 1979 (Nussbaum, p. 1), has been associated with diverse research and methods exploring communication patterns and needs in children, adolescents and older adults. Lifespan studies have looked at family communication, health communication, and entertainment communication and media effects.

From a lifespan perspective, one of the largest groups of the world's population is now considered to be that of "old age" (Fisher and Canzona, 2014). By 2030, it is estimated 20% of the American population will be between 60-85 years of age (Dickson and Hughes, 2014). As more people live longer lives the communication patterns and needs of older adults becomes increasingly significant to understand. Where one lives is a key element to being healthy again from a physical and social perspective.

As we think of where people age, the physical setting in which they reside becomes a critical issue. There is a movement in housing policy and design toward "aging in place" while many other varieties of residential options exist and emerge. This leads to questions of what factors shape our relationship to place and what are the communicative issues associated with each of those residential options? Contemporary existence is located in the interstices of physical location and virtual development. We argue a degree of media determinacy in which any development in the media landscape forecasts a change or configuration of the person/environment relationship. Media theorist Marshall McLuhan observed, "All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered" (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967, p. 26).

This analysis employs a 'media ecology model' appropriate for describing and predicating media effects. This approach relies on Walter Ong's approach "to carefully observe and record what happens in communication, then enter into a kind of conversation with it" (Soukup, 2005, p. 7). According to Paul Soukup, Ong's work is associated with "rhetoric, visualism, the persistence of the word, the media, and the digital world" (p. 1). This suggests a useful approach toward the changing communication environment of older adults. Further, as Soukup has noted, Ong's method "rhetoric, visualism, the persistence of the word, the media, and the digital world" helps with "finding a way through a problem" (Soukup, 2005, p. 7). This conversation is rooted in observations of the physical and mediated environments in which older adults live today.

A Media Saturated Life

Our built environments are no exception in a media saturated world in which an ever increasingly large portion of the world's population is connected to an increasing array of communication technologies, particularly mobile media. The adoption of diverse media and the ways in which media are used to gratify needs is particularly relevant as we hear of the rise of "silver surfers." What follows is a sampling of data that articulates the Internet universe of the elderly:

- In April 2012 the Pew Research Center found for the first time that more than half of older adults (defined as those ages 65 or older) were Internet users (Zickuhr and Madden, 2012). As of 2014 that percentage had risen to 59%, a six-percentage point increase in the course of a year. This is the first time at least half of seniors are going online. This compared with 82% of all Americans ages 18 and older (Zickuhr and Madden, 2012). In research conducted in September 2014, "more than half of all online adults 65 and older (56%) use Facebook. This represents 31% of all seniors" (Duggan et al, 2014, n.p.).
- The Pew study also tracks a drop off of use after the age of 75. "Internet use is much less prevalent among members of the 'G.I. Generation'" (adults ages 76 and older) (Smith, 2014, n.p.).
- 70% of online seniors use the Internet on a typical day but the Pew report warns—41% do not use the Internet at all, 53% do not have broadband access at home (Zickuhr and Madden, 2012, p. 4).
- Seven in ten seniors own a cell phone. As of December 2012, 68% of American seniors have cell phones and 12% have smartphones. This brings us to the question of who is a senior? Among those 50-64 years of age, 85% have cell phones and 32% have smartphones. 13% of seniors 65 and older use tablets as contrasted with 25% of the population as a whole. Much of this is dependent on income with only 10% of those with incomes of \$30,000 using tablets, contrasted with 47% of those with incomes of \$75,000 or more (Smith, 2014).
- According to Pew Internet Research, one in three online seniors use social networking sites like Facebook and LinkedIn and 18% do so on a typical day (Duggan et al, 2014).
- Email use continues to be the bedrock of online communication for seniors (Duggan et al, 2014).
- In a study entitled "Internet Use and Depression Among the Elderly—The Phoenix Center," (Ford, 2009), for the elderly, Internet use may be an effective, low cost way to expand social interactions, reduce loneliness, get health information and treatment, and consequently, reduce depression.
- It is estimated that spending time online reduces depression by 20% for seniors. Depression in seniors is not only a problem for seniors but costs the United States

about \$100 million annually in direct medical costs, suicide and mortality, and workplace costs (Ford, 2009).

- A cautionary note is sounded by Generations on Line (a nonprofit for Internet literacy and Access for the elderly) indicates that 21 million people over 65 do not and will not ever use the Internet. Seniors citing diverse reasons for not going online may be erroneously attributed to disinterest but may actually include apprehension and fear of the computer and anxiety of breaking the computer (Zickuhr, and Madden, 2012).

The bottom line is that a wide range of technologies is available to enable seniors to communicate and connect. Seniors can Skype face-to-face with family and friends free of charge. With geographically dispersed families, “Skype grandparenting” has become important. According to Bob Stephen, vice president of the Home and Family Portfolio at AARP, responsible for senior initiatives ranging from intergenerational communication to aging in place to safe driving, “If you sat down with a young child, you wouldn’t say, ‘So, tell me about your day,’” Stephen says. “You’d start playing with them and having fun. That’s the kind of thing technology allows us to do—even remotely” (Technology ‘Saved My Life,’ 2012). Surveys have shown that seniors as a group prefer email, but many are starting to get more comfortable with texting and social media, because that’s how their children, and especially their grandchildren, like to communicate. Increasingly, seniors are blogging with a growing number of technology solutions available to help them share their life stories and accumulated wisdom. LifeBio, for example, is an online system that simplifies the process by providing thought-provoking questions for seniors to answer and an easy way to publish the results. Other seniors are writing blogs or finding new ways to share their thoughts with friends (Technology ‘Saved my life,’ 2012).

Some programs help seniors stay healthy longer by providing fitness and health management systems. ComScore found those aged 65 spend an average of 33 hours on-line compared to 32 for the 18-24s, and 22 hours for those aged 12-17 (Bates, 2011). Other technological innovations are aimed at meeting the needs of seniors. Beyond telemonitoring access for caregivers, communication and social media solutions for seniors are on the rise.

The accepted wisdom is that technology will provide solutions. Items enable sending and receiving (hearing and seeing) messages: hearing aids, large button phones, extra loud phones, intercoms, personal pagers, simple cell phones and TV telecaption decoders. Assistive technology facilitates computer access making computing and Internet usage easier: modified keyboards, computer screen magnifiers, etc.

A new iPad app that’s free to download and use will keep technologically challenged seniors in safe, simple and easy electronic touch with their friends, children and grandkids. ‘ConnectMyFolks’ delivers email, texts, photos and videos instantly to technophobes of all ages, though it’s designed to be used by people 65 and older. (There’s an app for that, 2012)

Conventional wisdom suggests “it is best to pick the simplest product available to meet the need. Simpler devices are often easier to use, less expensive, and easier to repair and

maintain than more complex devices” (Choosing Assistive Technology). Devices can be wonderful and communication technologies can offer magical options. They do not however provide a panacea for the concerns of the elderly. Too often neglected in our rush toward connection and creation of age-based lifestyle choices we overlook the disconnection facilitated by accelerating technologies.

There is a double-edged sword as seniors with mobility issues or financial concerns seek connection yet disconnect from their immediate physical environment. These technological options suggest both a sense of connection and disconnection between others and ourselves and between ourselves and where we are. In *Alone Together*, Sherry Turkle describes modern life as “a ball and chain that keeps tethered to the tiny screens of our cell phone” (Lehrer, 2013, p. BR15). “We expect more from technology and less from each other” (Turkle as quoted in Lehrer, 2013, p. BR15). Technology has the capacity to disconnect people from place (Drucker & Gumpert, 2012). There is a reciprocal and defining interdependence of place modified by communication technology and that brings us to the creative age-based options associated with place.

Zoning and Segregation

Increasingly, senior only residences are zoning seniors out of mainstream residential areas and into segregated living and mature communities. Senior gated communities are variations on a theme of gated communities in which lifestyle is sold. Developments are designed to provide seniors independent living with organized activities and medical services. Planned unit developments promise living arrangements excluding those younger than 45 or 55, offering a quiet and active lifestyle with minimal home maintenance and transportation options. Some active adult retirement communities exclude young residents or guests for extended periods.

Housing entities vying for market attention are increasingly using terms like “assisted living,” “assistive living,” “adult home,” “enriched housing,” “senior living community,” “retirement community,” and “life care community.”

What follows is a continuum of living choices ranging from modest modification of accommodation to radical alteration of lifestyle (Senior retirement lifestyles, 2011).

I. Aging in Place

- A. *Home modification* – typically grab bars and non-skid strips on the bottom of the tub, walk-in or roll-in shower.
- B. *Home care* – services delivered at home to recovering, disabled or terminally ill persons in need of medical, nursing, social or therapeutic treatment.
- C. *Adult Day Care* – daily structured programs in a community setting with activities and health-related and rehabilitation services to elderly who are physically or emotionally disabled and need a protective environment.

- II. **Accessory Units** – Accessory units are private housing arrangements in, or adjacent to single-family housing.

- A. *Accessory* apartments are often created out of spaces such as garages that are converted into complete private living units including a private kitchen and bath.
 - B. *Elder* cottage housing opportunity (ECHO) units. ECHO units, on the other hand are complete, portable, small homes installed in back or side yards of single-family lots.
- III. **Independent Living** – are designed to enable independent seniors to enjoy a lifestyle filled with recreational, educational and social activities amongst other seniors.
- A. 55+ communities – age restricted communities that offer resort style amenities and social activities. These may be rental ownership or land lease and may be provided in gated communities or operated by homeowner’s associations. Both the home and the community are designed with accessibility and safety in mind. Homes in 55+ communities tend to be smaller, single-level detached houses or multifamily houses with one or two bedrooms and one or two bathrooms. Homes also often have accessible bathroom features, and other floor plan features that are more accessible so that seniors can age in place. Often gated retirement communities are marketed as “offering you the peace and quiet you are looking for. Many feature amenities such as a golf course, pool, or on-site services and activities.” Communities tend to be close to shopping centers, restaurants, churches and libraries, as well as recreation areas, and offer safety features such as community gates and security patrol.
 - B. Retirement communities
 - C. Senior apartments
- IV. **Assisted Living** – provides a combination of residential housing, personalized supportive services and care. Assisted living (AL) is a housing option that involves the delivery of professionally managed supportive services and, depending on state regulations, nursing services, in a group setting that is residential in character and appearance. It has the capacity to meet unscheduled needs for assistance and is managed in ways that aim to maximize the physical and psychological independence of residents.
- V. **Nursing Care** – A nursing home is normally the highest level of care for **older** adults outside of a hospital. This offers nursing care, or skilled nursing facilities designed for seniors needing 24 hour nursing care. Of course there are other variations on this theme including CCRC (Continuing Care Retirement Facilities) which provide independent living assisted living and nursing care in one area offering seniors the ability to move as needs change) (Senior retirement lifestyles, 2011).

While a few of these living options are associated with continued connection and integration with pre-existing community, many are linked to the need to be with others euphemistically referred to as “like oneself.” Creative planning and zoning tools have

been developed and we would argue these have the ability to both connect and disconnect—just as communication technologies do.

In 1991 we looked at zoning as one of the most traditional regulatory devices shaping, determining communication patterns (Drucker & Gumpert, 1991). We noted "...[Z]oning laws, through which design and planning decisions are implemented, serves the vehicle for examining connections between social interaction, media development and environmental planning..." (p. 294). Concern for health and safety led to the partitioning of cities into districts defined by function. The ability to zone by carving out variations on residential, commercial and industrial zones was predicated on the existence of both transportation and media systems that provide movement and communication between precincts. Zoning was not originally designed to segregate but to protect. Separation of land use by area became the means to that end. Clearly these concerns remain dominant factors in public policy, even in an era in which calls for mixed-use zoning and smart codes is on the rise. Seniors are a matter of public policy as distinct from the Golden age of Greece, when Greeks regarded the care of the elderly (called *geroboskia*) as the exclusive responsibility of offspring, and for which failure to fulfill that duty could result in penalties. Public concern is manifested and made enforceable through laws, including zoning.

Today, communication technologies leapfrog zones, merge zones, and erase zones. A sense of who is one's neighbor can be replaced with "chosen others" of a-location. The advantage of the far-away neighbor has been discovered, yet zoning and segregation continue to be relevant to everyday lived experience and quality of life. There has been a shift in the underlying principle behind zoning from "zoning to protect" to "zoning to project." Zoning to protect was regulation in the name of public safety and welfare.

Although zoning to protect was never intended to deprive people of social interaction, that is one of its unintended consequences. The focus of interaction has moved inward to home and media spaces. There has been a redistribution of activity inward and a redistribution of activity unfettered by place which leads to questioning whether existing zoning structures actually continue to function in the public good. Zoning for health and safety never protected social health or community health. We came to zone to protect people from one another. Zoning for public safety never developed to include zoning to protect the public's right to communicate. This takes us to zoning directly related to seniors.

Zoning the Seniors

Localities have several zoning tools at their disposal to achieve a community's goal of creating various housing alternatives for older people—tools such as planned unit developments, variances, special use permits, senior housing zones, a senior overlay zone, or a floating senior district can be used to allow/promote single-family homes for people over a specified age, a variety of multi-unit senior housing models, accessory apartments, assisted living facilities, shared living residences and even grandfamily housing (Beyer, 2012). In New York, for example, the governor's smart growth cabinet called for Retirement Zoning Districts in which a locality "can set aside specific areas as 'retirement community districts' in their zoning ordinances. These districts (base zone,

overlay zone, or floating zone) are also known as golden zones, senior housing districts, and housing for the elderly district,” (Beyer, 2012, n.p.) and the ordinance typically restricts tenancy to residents who are aged... fill in the blank... 55, 60, 62, or 65 plus.

Retirement community districts allow greater density and may include multi-unit dwellings, smaller homes on smaller lots to encourage not only affordability and mobility issues but encourage socialization.

Well planned retirement districts are located closer to important amenities, such as health care, social services, retail stores, public spaces and buildings, and other amenities, as well as transit options to support both walkability and the need for accessible transportation. Within a retirement district boundary, the site should provide ample open space for safe and convenient recreational and social facilities such as walking paths and community rooms. (Beyer, 2012, n.p.)

It is further argued that:

... [a] well planned and well zoned retirement district... supports successful aging in place, by providing older adults with an opportunity to socialize with contemporaries, interact with community members of all ages in the surrounding residential neighborhood, and have easy access to social and other amenities that are necessary for carrying out routine activities and tasks of daily life. (n.p.)

The argument is that this type of retirement zone encourages developers to locate senior housing within communities rather than siting them on a municipal fringe on the outskirts of towns displaced from neighborhoods. But how embedded are they if the housing stock itself is segregated based on age?

Golden Age Zoning districts are designed to allow affordable housing for senior citizens in a public/private partnership. The Golden Age zone classification promotes senior housing by permitting construction of more units per area than normally allowed. In turn, the private developer agrees to sell the apartments at a price well below the current market value and offer property tax abatement. Senior housing is a booming business, leading some communities to amend zoning laws to include facilities for seniors. Floating Golden Zones in areas in which climate or scale prevents walking can still result in seniors disconnected from place and community.

Some towns have zoned public parks to establish areas for children distinct from the elderly. The Fair Housing Act as originally enacted prohibited discrimination in the rental or sale of a dwelling based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin. There are two exemptions to the familial-status discrimination provision: (1) restrictions on maximum occupancy, and (2) “housing for older persons” (Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity). The senior exemption allows communities that satisfy certain requirements to discriminate based on familial status.

Segregated Media Lives

Older adults are living ever more segregated lives. In addition to segregated spaces, there is a shift associated with the digital media environment. Old media and use patterns have

been transformed through digitalization. Digital natives and seniors who are “digital immigrants” have entered a “me media” environment. Television viewing changed with DVRs providing ease of use control and video on demand. Radio listening is available anywhere, anytime online, and on the fast growing satellite radio market. For a generation raised on radio, vintage radio programs are available on satellite radio or free via the Vintage Radio app. Social media connect based on similarity and self-selection. Social networking sites may be deserted by younger users who migrate away from sites based on the age of other users. The case of teenage flight from MySpace to Facebook has been documented as college students migrated to different sites when their parents and even grandparents got into their social media space. (Robards, 2012). Facebook, once seen as the hot spot for teens is changing. Some are moving from Facebook or Twitter back to Myspace and Tumblr for social media supremacy with the younger crowd. As older relatives and advertisers enter the space of the young, the young seem to self-segregate seemingly saying, “stay off my lawn” (Robards & Vromen, 2015).

Research supports the relationship between social interaction and aging well. Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH) researchers found evidence that elderly people in the United States who have an active social life may have a slower rate of memory decline. In fact, memory decline among the most sociable was less than half the rate among the least sociable. Senior author Lisa Berkman, chair of the Department of Society, Human Development and Health, went on to say,

We know from previous studies that people with many social ties have lower mortality rates. We now have mounting evidence that strong social networks can help to prevent declines in memory. As our society ages and has more and more older people, it will be important to promote their engagement in social and community life to maintain their well-being. (Graham, 2011, n.p.)

With the value of continued social contacts throughout the lifespan in mind, the two-pronged approach to senior social life has been the promotion of social media use for seniors and the marketing of senior living. Ads for senior housing options are appealing: “LIVE THE GOOD LIFE!” “Independence doesn’t mean isolation,” “Enjoy a rich, secure and senior-oriented lifestyle while still enjoying the independence and freedom of a typical neighborhood.” Yet, many options for “active adult communities” and “55+ communities” are in gated communities attracting like-minded residents “who seek shelter from outsiders” and reflect a desire for some degree of physical seclusion. According to 2009 Census Bureau data more than 10 million housing units in the United States are in gated communities, where access is “secured with walls or fences” (Dekom, 2013).

Conclusions

Researchers have utilized a lifespan approach toward understanding social interaction that occurs during later life. Research from within the field of communication and aging studies has been somewhat limited and has not fully considered aging associated with the physical along with media communication environments. The relationship between media uses and gratifications and media addiction offer significant directions for research in this area. Much research comes from the fields of gerontology, urban planning, and

environment behavior studies (Ahrentzen & Tural, 2015). Those researchers note the lack of data on the relationship between physical place and mediated interaction for the older adult (Ahrentzen & Tural, 2015).

Our relationship to the physical environment is redefined by the new “me media” and the marketing of senior lifestyle environments or segregated choice. Ong’s ecological approach underscores observation and prediction. It can be predicted that media technology 1) weakens connection to place and 2) introduces a degree of independence without obligation achieved in the connection to an a-spatial place and in the process, its benefits of community for the aging is altered. Future research is needed to test this hypothesis.

Lives of selectivity reshape the potential uses of physical spaces. There is a tension between territorial-located interactions, and media-facilitated emancipation from place. To understand the people/environment relationship and the unique needs of seniors the options associated with distant communities should be considered. Perhaps more problematic is the possibility that communication technologies may be facilitating the zoning of seniors into ever more secluded lives.

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