



Outdoor Recreation



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Public exercise equipment in Beijing has made physical activity accessible for all.

It has generally been accepted that a decline in physical activity is a natural part of the aging process, but this doesn't have to be the case. Studies have shown that moderate exercise can have astonishing, positive effects on health in aging adults (Mazzeo & Tanaka, 2004; Kerr, Frank, Rosenberg, 2012). A moderate workout routine can reduce the chances of cardiovascular disease, help manage chronic diseases, and decrease symptoms of anxiety and depression (Mazzeo & Tanaka, 2004). Paradoxically, retirement often results in a reduction of physical activity (Kerr et al., 2012). As people age their geographical worlds shrink (Allen, Hayman, Keeling, Kerse, Palmer, Wiles, 2009) and they become less inclined to take part in outdoor, physical activity due to various barriers including availability, accessibility, weather, cost, and perception of safety (Belza, LoGerfo, Shiu-Thornton, Schwartz, Taylor, Walkwick, 2004). Mezzeo & Tanaka (2004) call for design interventions that increase the involvement of the aging population. Some communities are addressing this in the form of walking trails and public fitness or wellness parks that stimulate gentle exercise through easy-to-use activity equipment (Cohen, Golinelli, Marsh, McKenzie, Williamson, 2012). Aging adults can benefit from this fitness equipment because it is specifically designed to enhance functional capacity through cardiovascular exercises and to reduce muscle mass loss through strength and resistance training. This can result in the ability to age in place through continued independence with respect to daily routine (Mazzeo & Tamaka, 2004). But exercising is only one component of being healthy. Good relationships and social participation are just as pertinent and perhaps more so in regards to emotional and mental wellbeing. The strategic design of fitness parks and placement of public exercise equipment can also encourage social interaction among users (Belza et al., 2004).



Figure #1: Older adults using public exercise equipment in Beijing park

China

Public exercise equipment first began to pop up in Beijing in 2001. These brightly colored machines, each designed to work a specific part of the body, are located along the edges of city parks and are consistently used by the local aging population. The units have no instructions and are not hooked up to a power source but they are designed to simulate traditional machines found in gyms. This installation has reenergized the urban landscape and made the opportunity for physical activity accessible to all (Hall, 2008).



Photo David Isreal

Figure #2: A woman using Tai Chi Spinners in Berlin's Preussen Park.



Photo Credit: Mark Cambell

Figure #3: An elderly woman using an air walker in Dam Head Park, Manchester.

Germany & Britain

It did not take long before this idea caught on and people began to implement it in their home communities. Preussen Park in Berlin was the first of its kind in Germany and was heavily influenced by the aforementioned Chinese fitness parks. It featured 8 steel, graffiti resistant machines in the middle of a forest, that were installed at approximately 1/4 of the cost of a children's playground. This space was designed strictly for adults and had a minimum age and height requirement upon entrance (Gutsch, 2007). Dam Head Park in Manchester opened in 2008, and was the first 'Pensioner's Playground' in the United Kingdom. The playground is located next to a children's playground as well as a multipurpose sports pitch, which unlike Pruessen Park, allows local seniors to visit the park with their grandchildren and encourages multigenerational social interaction (Leifer, 2008).

British Columbia

Lions Wellness Park, in Tsawwassen, British Columbia, opened in 2007. Harry Caine, the driving force behind this installation, created a questionnaire to find out what the aging population in his community wanted and, together with Trinity Western University, designed machines, with a focus on improving balance and strength, that could withstand intense rain (Yaworski, 2010). The park has 15 workout stations, a walking path, and community gardens (Musollum, 2007). Although the machines were initially geared towards the aging population, they are now used by all generations, and grandparents and their grandchildren are often seen using them together. The ground is covered in chipped rubber tire, which provides a soft landing and decreases the risk of getting seriously hurt by a fall. Walking trails are marked so people using them know how far they've walked. The community gardens and the parks close proximity to Winskill Fitness & Wellness Centre, and many senior's complexes, encourage social interaction (Yaworski, 2010). Lions Wellness Park also has fitness instructors on hand to answer any concerns that users might have and Harry Caine often visits senior's complexes to educate people on proper use of the machines (CorpDelta, 2012). This park was the first of its kind in North America and has been recreated in at least 18 additional communities across British Columbia (Musollum, 2007).

This [Tsawwassen's Lions Wellness Park] was the first of its kind in North America.



Photo Bev: Yaworski

Figure #4: Harry Caine giving a fellow senior pointers on how to use a piece of equipment in Lions Park, B.C.



Figure #5: High River Fitness Park in AB.

Gladstone implemented the first Age-Friendly wellness trail in Manitoba.

Alberta

The town of High River, Alberta installed an outdoor fitness park adjacent to High River Hospital, in 2012. This park has 9 durable, weatherproofed machines that use body weight as resistance. With easy-to-follow instructions on use, as well as a description of health benefits, the machines specifically address flexibility, mobility, range of motion, cardio, and strengthening. The town of High River also provides a free, detailed, 12-week workout plan on their webpage for anyone using the equipment as well as a number to call with any questions or concerns (High River, 2012). High River Fitness Park is available for use 24 hours a day, and does see moderate use throughout the winter (Kanygin, 2012).



Figure #6: Committee members getting a first try at the outdoor fitness equipment in Carman, MB.

Manitoba

The Prairie Provinces have recently embraced this type of recreational outdoor activity and Manitoba now has two such parks. Carman received a \$25000.00 grant in 2012 to fund an outdoor exercise park along a popular, well-used walking trail (Redekop, 2013). The project committee specifically chose 6 machines that work the body’s main muscle groups and plan on possibly adding a roof over the existing equipment in the near future (Funke, 2012). Gladstone received a similar grant and used it to implement the first Age-Friendly Wellness

Trail in Manitoba. Opened in July of 2012, it was designed with the intent to bring seniors and those nearing retirement together. The wellness trail is situated in Williams Park and features 5 exercise stations (Redekop, 2013).

For more information on fitness equipment and where to purchase it see:

- <http://www.greengym.ca>
- <http://www.gfoutdoorfitness.com>

Final Thoughts

While geographical worlds may shrink as people age, their attachment to place grows stronger and so a primary desire of older adults is the ability to age in place. Not only is aging in place preferred by the elderly, it also reduces financial burden on local institutions (Allen et al., 2009). Fitness and wellness parks combined with walking trails could provide the opportunity to combat decreasing health in aging adults by offering a place that is legible, free to use, fosters physical activity and social interaction, and is accessible to all.

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