



# Greenspace

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**Having green spaces is one the most commonly mentioned age friendly features.**

*(WHO, 2007 pp. 13)*

Greenspace is one of the most diverse forms of land use in the urban environment. It takes numerous forms, large or small parks, open plazas, or boulevards. Greenspaces provide tremendous opportunities for activity and social interaction, which each are important aspects of healthy, urban living. This is why greenspace is also highly relevant for seniors.

The World Health Organization document, *Global Age-Friendly Cities: A Guide* (2007), explains by means of an age-friendly checklist, that outdoor spaces and buildings “have a major impact on the mobility, independence and quality of life of older people and affect their ability to age in place” (WHO, 2007 pp.12). Therefore what this report will endeavour to do, is to describe the major perceptual and physical features of greenspace, and how these features can be developed in age-friendly ways. This report will also explore some of the ways that greenspaces can be adapted for use in other areas of age-friendly urban design.

## Features of Greenspace:

It is certain that greenspace has different forms, but it is less certain that it has different meanings. Depending on the user, it can be seen as a serving a singular purpose, or many. It is this variety that makes it so vital to the urban realm and the people that use it.

After examining some existing literature, this report has determined that there are certain primary features that must be present in any given greenspace, to allow it to be usable by seniors. In broad designation, they fall into two categories, those that are perceptual and those that are physical. The perceptual features can be described in general terms as the legibility (the ability of a person to read and understand signage), and the mobility (the ability of the person to safely and properly navigate), which define the manner in which way-finding occurs (Donnelly & Evans, 1993) and how a person would experience a greenspace.

The physical features relate directly to the perceptual ones, and are: **signs, seating, shelters, and access to public toilets**. Donnelly and Evans (1993) describe the importance of having adequate, readable signage as a foundation for way-finding in any park. These would be visible markers, on poles or on the



Formal garden in Chenonceau, France (Photo Credit: Liam Speirs)

ground, either painted in high contrast colours, or textured onto the walkways. Additionally, non visual cues can be used, and would not only assist in way finding, but can also help to define a space. Fountains and water features create distinct sounds, as do wind chimes. It is suggested that these audible markers can be used to create a pleasing space, and to assist the visually impaired (Donnelly & Evans, 1993). These authors also support the concept of frequent resting spaces, using seats and benches to create way stations. It is important for seating features to be designed as “inclusive”, with multi-height seats and enough room for wheelchairs.

*Barrier Free Site Design* (U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development, 1975), reaffirms the ideal of inclusiveness in greenspace. Mobility and access should accommodate seniors. To this end are the suggestions of open and free walkways, and clear entrances to park areas. However, the WHO article (2007), illustrates some of the concerns with universal access. Wide, open paths would allow for fast bicycle traffic, roller blades and skateboards, which can intimidate senior pedestrians. Formal gardens, like that at Chenonceau, France, or the English Garden in Assiniboine Park, Winnipeg, with their unique shapes and designated entrances, can provide a pedestrian only area for seniors.

Also of interest for greenspaces, are shelters and access to public toilets. These features must be many, and be clean, safe, and easy to use. Together, all of these features should provide the safe, clean and pleasant atmosphere that is desired by seniors (WHO, 2007).

### How it Relates to Other Topics:

Greenspace can relate to other topics in a multitude of ways. As access to greenspace is necessary, it can easily be linked to [mobility](#) and [walkability](#). Mobility within the greenspace, as well as to and from it can be a challenge for seniors.

Thompson and Travlou propose that greenspaces, either as a contiguous area, or as a series of smaller areas, can form pedestrian and cycling corridors for

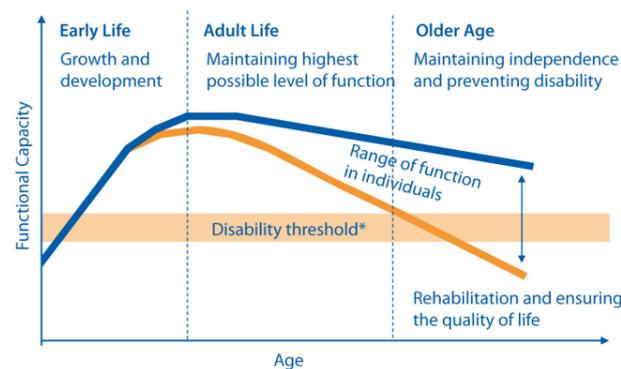


Fig. 1. Maintaining functional capacity over the life course (Source: Kalache & Kickbusch pp.12, from WHO, 2007 pp.6)

Boulevard in Mérida, Mexico (right), and benches in Morden, Manitoba (far right) (Photo Credits: Liam Speirs/Ashlyn Haglund)



transport from one area of a city to another (2007). This would assist with access to the green areas, and also help seniors travel safely to other destinations. A major boulevard in Mérida, Mexico acts as a corridor between the old centre of the city, and a modern shopping area at the periphery, and has many trees to shade pedestrians. This would provide [access to other resources and amenities](#).

Such boulevard greenspaces could also be potentially adapted for use with [traffic calming](#). Small parklets could be used to extend the pedestrian zone in relation to the street, as curb-outs, or simply to act as a barrier between the sidewalk and street. These same elements, which are inherently aesthetic might also be taken as a form of [streetscaping](#).

### Conclusion and Suggestions:



A seniors playground in Hyde Park, London, England (Photo Credit: The Associated Press)

For seniors, greenspaces serve several activities. They provide a location for social interaction, they are hubs of active living, and they can allow seniors to travel within their city, but only if certain features are present. Without legibility Bednar reiterates (1977), it can be difficult to find ones way in a park, or even to the park. Without appropriate seating, there is no resting space for seniors.

But if these, and the other features are present, greenspaces can provide a vital element to the lives of those who use them, and can connect them physically and socially with other people and areas of the city.

The WHO suggests that more frequent, smaller greenspaces, spread over a built up urban zone, would allow increased integration for seniors (2007). Another suggestion, this one for maximizing the potential of existing greenspace is the creation of seniors playgrounds. These playgrounds feature low impact exercise equipment (The Associated Press, 2010), ideal for seniors, that can help in maintaining their active and functional capacities (*Fig. 1*).

The cost for these suggestions, and to implement age-friendly features in new greenspaces is minimal (U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development, 1975), but it can have a tremendous positive effect for seniors.

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Front page picture: Boston Common, Boston, MA (Photo Credit: Liam Speirs)