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How can we build 'age-friendly' cities?

By [Christopher Phillipson](#)

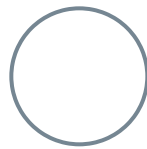


An elderly man in South Shields, 2012. Image: Getty.

The impact of population ageing on the economy and health care is much discussed, but where older people live is also important. Mostly, this will be in cities, with 25 per cent of their populations likely to be over 60 by 2030. This raises urgent questions about how

cities adapt to ageing populations, and how the resources of cities be harnessed to improve the lives of older people.

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One response has been the move – led by the World Health Organization – to create ‘age-friendly’ cities, with the development of the Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities and Communities. Launched in 2010, the Network has grown from a handful of members to one covering over 500 cities and communities across the world. Some of the key actions arising from this have included challenging stereotypes of older people; re-designing and improving access to outdoor spaces; strengthening support networks within neighbourhoods; and campaigns tackling social isolation and loneliness.

But the barriers to age-friendly work are increasingly apparent. Age-friendly initiatives have run parallel with the impact of economic austerity. Many cities in the network have faced reductions in services supporting older people, including the closure of senior centres and libraries and the rationing of home-based care. This has been highly detrimental to older people, who spend around 80 per cent of their time at home or in their immediate neighbourhood.

The debate around age-friendly cities has created an important agenda for re-thinking the way in which we manage our urban environments. Do older people have a ‘right’ to a

share of urban space? Is the idea of 'age-friendly' caring communities compatible with modern urbanisation?

Such questions suggest major issues for the age-friendly movement, in particular whether the idea of 'age-friendliness' will progress mainly as a form of 'branding' for cities concerned with improving their status.

Alternatively, will the movement begin to engage with the serious problems facing cities – notably widening inequality, the impact of climate change, problems of homelessness, and the lack of affordable housing? These have the potential to undermine interventions aimed at improving the lives of older people. They will need a stronger response than presently exists from those involved in age-friendly work.

Our book *Age-Friendly Cities and Communities: A Global Perspective* offers a 'Manifesto for Change' for the age-friendly movement, built around four key themes: challenging social inequality, building new urban partnerships, developing neighbourhood support and co-researching age-friendly communities.

The first area for development concerns grounding age-friendly work in policies which challenge social inequality. A key task must be addressing gender, social class, ethnic and other inequalities affecting the older population.



In the Global North, the age-friendly brand has been adopted in various guises in many (mainly) white communities, but is much less evident amongst black and minority ethnic groups. However, it is precisely the latter that experience the most disadvantaged and least age-friendly communities. It will be difficult to take age-friendly policies

seriously unless there is closer engagement with those neighbourhoods and groups of older people abandoned in the face of urban change.

Acknowledging social and ethnic diversity is thus an important issue for the age-friendly movement to address. The implications are wide-ranging, including responding to different cultural interpretations of what 'age-friendliness' might mean; shaping policies around the needs of particular groups with contrasting migration histories and life course experiences; recognising distinctive forms of inequality experienced by particular ethnic groups (notably in areas such as health, income, and housing); and understanding the impact of racism on communities and the challenge this presents.

The second issue concerns building collaborations with the range of movements campaigning to improve urban environments. The growth of age-friendly work has been led (e.g. in the UK) mainly by departments within local government. In other countries (e.g. the USA), non-governmental organisations have been more influential.

Although these different approaches have contributed to a significant expansion in projects, the range of partnerships with non-age-related organisations has been limited, especially those, for example, leading urban regeneration schemes, developers, and the business sector more generally.

Encouraging links between different urban programmes and partners could help to expand the range and quality of age-friendly interventions. For example, ideas from the 'smart' and 'sustainable' cities movement around developing alternatives to cars in cities, increasing energy efficiency, and reducing pollution, should also be viewed as central to making cities more 'age-friendly'. Engagement with this type of work has the potential to produce both further resources for the movement as well as adding to the sustainability of existing projects.

Third, attention must be given to devising interventions at a neighbourhood level, given the policy emphasis on community-based care. Some organisational developments which have emerged outside the age-friendly movement merit attention – notably, the Village model and Naturally-Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCS) in the USA.

Villages are membership-based associations, created and managed by older people, which provide supportive services and social activities. NORCS represent partnerships between statutory and voluntary bodies to enhance services for older people living in geographically defined areas with relatively high densities of older adults. Both approaches stress the advantages of older people working together to solve many of the

issues they face individually – whether accessing reliable home repair services, organising food co-operatives, helping with technology or getting financial advice.

Fourth, promoting the participation of older people has been a key theme in the development of the age-friendly movement. Various approaches have been adopted to assess the 'age-friendliness' of communities, ranging from consulting older residents (distributing surveys, conducting focus groups) to involving them in photo-voice activities, working groups or steering committees.

Whilst such approaches encourage older people's input, they have been less successful in making older people *central* to the development of age-friendly activity. 'Co-research' has been presented as a way forward in this regard – that is, research conducted 'with' or 'by' older adults rather than 'to', 'about' or 'for' them as research subjects.

This approach provides an opportunity for older people to take a leading role in research, and contribute to the process of social change in various ways. Co-research could become an important tool for involving older people directly in the process of urban development, as well as in developing new approaches to supporting people within the community.

Finally, to what extent can the challenge of population ageing and urbanisation be used to resolve some of the major issues facing society? Age-friendly initiatives could drive forward new ideas relating to improving urban environments (e.g. highlighting the impact of pollution); developing new forms of community organisation and solidarity (e.g. food and energy co-operatives); supporting inter-generational cohesion (e.g. older people working with younger people in schools and other organisations).

The argument of is that doing 'age-friendly' work also means recognising and challenging the wider inequalities and injustices which affect city life. Standing apart from these will inevitably weaken both the age-friendly movement and many other campaigns for improving the lives of all of those living in cities.

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Age-Friendly Cities and Communities: A Global Perspective is edited by [Tine Buffel](#), [Sophie Handler](#) and [Chris Phillipson](#) and published by Bristol: Policy Press

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FOOD

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“The British have no food culture” – but London’s multicultural suburbs do

By [Sara Doctors](#)



Bagels, of the sort one might find in Ilford. (These are actually at Katz's Delicatessen on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Image: Getty.

Last month, Angela Hartnett went on [Desert Island Discs](#) and said that the British don't have a food culture: there are just some people who have money and can afford to pay for good food.

Hartnett is a deity in the culinary pantheon, and is unusual in that she is both a shining star and an eminently sensible person. A woman of such no-nonsense credentials that she laughed in the pock-marked face of Gordon Ramsey, and lived to tell the tale. She takes none of this cheffy, foodie willy-wangling seriously, because it is, after all, “just a plate of carrots”.

So I found her comment fascinating, and shaming. It *feels* true. I feel it as I walk up Islington's Chapel Market on a Sunday, from the farmers' market end to the daily market end. I felt it when I squealed with delight when my partner told me we were

getting a Whole Foods at the end of the road, and when I moaned with disappointment when it turned out he was kidding. (We were, in fact, getting a joinery and an HSS Hire.)

I feel it when one of my neighbours at our housing co-op has to sign for my veg box or wine discovery crate, or when the Ocado van pulls up. I feel it when I drop off my food bank donations by the till at Waitrose or, worse, when I get an Uber to take it round in person. In Islington. *Islington*. Say it twice, for there are indeed two Islington.

But it also feels totally untrue. Who is the “we” here? Who are the British of whom we speak? What is this beige buffet of Britishness, class-ist, philistine, pale and bland as white bread?

I find all this talk of class alienating, because I – and I am inherent to any we I can participate in – was raised in a vibrant and class-fluid food culture. I’m sure it combined many diverse aspects of class, wealth and virtue signals, but it did so in such a mishmash that you could not hope to decode it, even with a copy of Debretts and minor public school education. I speak, of course, of the ancestral homeland, the Old Country.

Ilford.



Ilford: unexpectedly foodie. Image: Geograph.co.uk.

Ilford is a London suburb on the Essex/East End border, which, like a reverse Mecca or a shit Jerusalem, unites travellers from across the world in the fervent desire to get the hell out, go mad, or kill everyone. And, like Jerusalem, it has its Jewish, Muslim, and

Christian quarters, with further fractions etched out by Hindu, Sikh and Chinese diasporas, waves and tides of 20th century immigration ebbing and lapping on the shores of the Cranbrook Road. It became home to the refugees of innumerable wars and disaster areas: Ugandan Indians, Kurds, Rwandans, Bosnians, Serbs and Croats. And the economic migrants, Nigerians, Polish, Hungarian. It was an Ithaca: a place you had hoped would be journey's end, but was in fact a bit of a disappointment. A rest rather than a new beginning. A bad motherland, to which we are all ambivalently attached.

Say what you like about Ilford, but it is a place where you've been able to find tahini, turmeric and jackfruit since decimalisation. Most of these items, you could buy at any hour of the day or night, and be served by a tiny child who had been left to mind the shop whilst the adults were at second jobs or night school, at the mosque or synagogue, or in prison. Purchase and consumption of these items signified nothing, except the taste of home.

And it really didn't matter whose home. On festivals we would exchange samosas or jalebi or pierogi or hammantashen or honey cake with our neighbours and drink masala chai three doors down. There is a whole world of dumplings, and a season for each one. We consumed a lot of chicken: fried pieces in boxes, or in a soup lovingly simmered for the precise amount of time to extract the maximum amount of guilt.

On a Sunday mornings you can wander along Barkingside High Street, which is by any normal metric an utter shithole, and join a queue for fresh Sri Lankan curries or Jewish bagels or Italian gelato. There is an egg-free cake shop, British, Halal, Kosher and African butchers and fishmongers. There are four Jewish delis and bakeries, ranging from the glatt to the glitzy. There is no shortage of grilled meat, kebabs, chicken shops, noodle bars. Vast banqueting suites accommodate large celebration meals, and local cooks cater for weddings of some thousand guests, often in marquees in suburban back gardens.

You could accuse us having no culture in Ilford – the cinema long ago became a bingo hall which became a mega-mosque which became flats – but you cannot say we have no food culture.

That said, and without wanting to sound racist against, y'know, white people, I do kind of agree that the British *in general* have no food culture. I can go to the house of any of

my Indian, Spanish, Russian, Polish, Israeli, Nigerian, West Indian, or Scandinavian friends, safe in the knowledge and mutual understanding that I am going to be fed. And time and again I have been baffled and outraged by friends (only ever the white, British ones; and the whiter and more British they are the more likely this is to happen) turning up at my house, *having already eaten*, as if I wasn't going to feed them like foie gras geese from the moment they arrived to the second they left.

Food is my culture. I feel a twitch on the end of each strand of my DNA, like the taste of madeleines on a thousand foreign tongues. I feel it in my bones and the bones of my ancestors as they dissolve into distant soil: come, sit, eat.



A London curry house in action. Image: Getty.

In *Pygmalion*, Professor Henry Higgins boasts that he can pinpoint where a person is from by listening to the way they talk. "I can place any man within six miles. I can place him within two miles in London. Sometimes within two streets." I once had a linguistics tutor pull the same trick on me. It was creepy.

But I would defy him to do the same thing now. Talk to a young Londoner. The ubiquity of Multicultural London English is a great leveller. On the top deck of the bus, you can't tell the schools apart. And whilst there is a huge gulf between rich and poor, and the extremes of both in this capital are truly horrifying, there is a Multicultural London way of speaking.

There is a Multicultural London way of eating, too. In the centre of town, and in the places where being Minority Ethnic is not a minority position, there is a London

Multicultural Food Culture which is divorced from class. An immigrant, diasporic, food culture. A sense of the importance and significance of food and meals and flavours. An appreciation of our own and your neighbours' diverse food heritage. A love of the marketplace and the communal table. An ear for languages where *foreign* is the same word as *guest* and *friend*. The importance, virtue, culture, and significance of hospitality.

Also, to be honest, some asshole's going to sprinkle sumac and pomegranate seeds on your kebab wherever you are, from Ilford to Islington. What you are prepared to pay for it, in what environs, and with what brand of soap in the bogs, is another story. And this is where the conversation goes full circle: if you have no food culture, but you do have money, you can afford to buy one in, from the Connaught or Ottolenghi or Whole Foods or Deliveroo or Blue Apron or the DietChef.

Maybe I'm guilty of over-romanticising the immigrant food experience. The food of poverty, the bread of affliction, the cheap cuts of meat, the over-reliance of sweet treats, the economic and social impoverishment of generations of immigrant women slaving over hot stoves to feed the family on a pittance whilst the neighbours turn up their noses. We should talk of the dietary diseases more prevalent amongst People of Colour and second generation immigrants. We should talk of the chicken shops around the school gates. We should talk about the amounts of money spent on marketing crap food at kids and the totally other amounts of money being spent on school meals, home economics lessons, growing spaces, playgrounds. We should talk about those food banks.

My partner is from white, British working class stock. They do things differently there. I now too turn up Having Already Eaten, because I learnt the hard way: line your stomach, or you'll end up singing/falling over/throwing a chair/throwing up/getting naked by 3pm at a Romford wake because you assumed that lunch would be served. It's only five miles from Ilford and Romford, but it may as well be 500 or 5000.

I don't know what they make of me and my food. Foreign muck? Posh nosh? Do I give off wafts of a different culture entirely, like the tell-tale scent of frying onions and or slow-cooked sabbath cholent? Like the banquet of curry smells from next door when all their kids are home from university, the eye-watering wince of vinegar being boiled for pickles, or the uric tang of a hot pho pot bubbling away two doors down or the

unseasonal barbecue from the house behind, a familiar-unfamiliar meat, like mutton or goat?

Throw the windows of your semi in Ilford open on a spring morning and you'll get waves of bacon, chai, cholla bread. And the sounds of TVs in a dozen languages, and music in a dozen different keys, and Sikh builders shouting at Polish builders, and the soft shoe shuffle of the Lubovitchers and the revving engines of the rudeboys before we all go home for Sunday lunch.

Sunday lunch: maybe that's something we can all agree on. That you should have a Sunday lunch with your mum or your auntie or your nan and whoever else is around. You gather at table, at your folks' house or the Toby Carvery or your uncle's restaurant, with a mountain of roast beef or bags full of bagels and plastic containers from the deli or six different curries and chutneys, with the old folks telling the same story for the hundredth time, and the ageless bickering of siblings and the screaming of babies. Maybe we can agree on the Great British Sunday Lunch, whatever the menu, as our shared food culture.

Leave room for pudding.

Sara Doctors writes about food and culture, and tweets as [@UnusualSara](#). A version of his article first appeared on her [blog](#).

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