Designing CONNECTED AGING Experiences

A NEW LOOK AT GETTING OLD
A report by the Business Innovation Factory with support from

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
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It’s time we see age differently

When connected, the possibility space for older adults widens beyond the limited concept of aging in place to that of living a long life full of contribution, accomplishment and joy.
The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation seeks to improve the health and health care of all Americans. In June of 2013, the Business Innovation Factory, with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, began exploratory work to understand the social or connected experiences of independent older adults. The goal was to develop insights and a set of forward-thinking concepts for social participation—models that could increase the independence, well-being, and health of a society living longer.

Our cultural views on aging bound our responses to living longer before we’ve even begun to understand the longevity experience. We design for decline and the increasing need for monitoring and care of older adults. We plan for the crisis that will come with the “silver tsunami.” We politicize what resources and opportunities each generation is entitled to.

To design for the opportunity longevity presents, we need to understand how people are experiencing longer lives. We believe social connection and participation is an important part of this experience. With such a lens, we can widen the pool of possibility for older adults, and influence everything from a sense of well being and meaningful contribution, to independence, and ultimately, health.

Growing older becomes a growing problem to be solved. It encourages responses such as an over-reliance on assistive technologies designed to monitor those aging in place; mitigating the strain the aging population will place on civic infrastructure; or rallying for legislative changes that favor one age group over another. Seen through these lenses, we limit the possibilities and choices we have as we age. We limit our agency as we age.

Introduction

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Where and how do older adults connect? Using human-centered design methodologies, we engaged 33 elders living a connected life. What we learned from them firsthand has led us to design concepts for later years that connect people to each other, to place, and to community. This report summarizes what we learned and its implications for the design of connected aging experiences.
Over three months, we spent time observing unstructured social interactions in grocery stores, malls, libraries, pharmacies, transportation hubs, casinos, cafes, and bookstores. We visited formal programs like Meals on Wheels, Senior Centers, artist studios, and adult learning centers. We spent time with 33 elders, in their homes, at work, during volunteer or service sessions, and developed a picture of their connected lives. We were able to walk briefly in their shoes, listen to their stories, and see their world as they see it.

In addition to individual elders, we spoke with married couples, pairs of friends, and small groups. Some live in the town where they grew up, while others have relocated to places wholly new to them. Everyone is over 60 and living independently—defined as the ability to make decisions for oneself, including control over planning and conducting day-to-day activities. Everyone had a good range of connectedness, from the number of people they engage with, consistent frequency of interactions (daily or weekly), interesting cycles of interaction (annual get togethers), as well as good quality of interactions (those that provide a sense of connection versus a perfunctory transaction).

Our fieldwork spanned four states (CA, NC, RI, MA), both rural and urban areas, as well as diverse socio-economic groups. An elder-driven participatory design studio brought project participants directly into the design process, co-creating concept ideas within a set of pre-determined opportunity spaces. Insights and ideas (refined during the participatory design studio) are the foundation from which we generated experience principles and opportunities spaces. The insights and principles are woven throughout the document in the inspiring voice of the elders themselves, teaching us what’s needed to live a long, connected life.

Methods and Inspiration

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Human-centered design (HCD) is the practice of putting people and their experiences at the center of our design efforts. Qualitative, HCD shows us how people relate to and experience the world around them. With this understanding, we can anticipate what people want and need and design for experiences that surpass people’s expectations.
What if we created aging experiences that build on connection and a sense of purpose rather than on decline and the increasing need for monitoring and care?

What if we broaden the pool of possibility for accomplishment and contribution, creating aging experiences we’d all anticipate?
What would this future look like?

EXPERIENCE PRINCIPLE 01
IT’S AGE AGNOSTIC
Organizations and systems no longer view chronological age as an accurate gauge of behavior. Today, high school kids are developing breakthrough cancer screening methods or 3D printed, mind-controlled prosthetic limbs. Couples are becoming first-time parents well into their forties. Seventy-two year old women are roofing homes in need. One-hundred year olds are serving as life role models for friends a decade younger. To serve us, organizations no longer design for stereotypes. They meet us where we are in our life journey.

EXPERIENCE PRINCIPLE 02
IT’S DESIGNED AROUND THE LIVES PEOPLE WANT TO LIVE
There is no one “senior life” we plug into. Rather than delivering one-size fits all experiences, organizations recognize our diversity and work to support and design for it.

EXPERIENCE PRINCIPLE 03
IT PLACES ENGAGEMENT AT THE CORE
We connect through relationships, but also through place and purpose. Being older often gives us new freedom: freedom from expectations; freedom from obligations; and freedom to do what we want, not what’s expected of us. Given this freedom, organizations know they must create experiences and services that engage us, first and foremost.

EXPERIENCE PRINCIPLE 04
IT SUPPORTS PEOPLE AS THEY FACE CONTINUOUS CHANGE
We will navigate many changes, some gradual and others quite sudden. New models help us adapt to this shifting ground. We find ways to re-engage, build resilience, and experience stability in the midst of never-ending change.

EXPERIENCE PRINCIPLE 05
IT CREATES OPPORTUNITY FOR CONTINUED DEVELOPMENT
We grow through all our years, not just those before an arbitrary retirement age. New experiences and services promote a sense of discovery and learning. They challenge people. This often involves asking people to step out of their comfort zone and requires organizations to see the aging population differently.

EXPERIENCE PRINCIPLE 06
IT RECOGNIZES AND REWARDS ELDER AS CREATORS AND INNOVATORS
When we don’t see something we need, we are creating it ourselves. Rather than services designed for individual consumption, organizations provide resources that people can use to self-organize around topics or needs that interest them, incenting elders and supplying with the resources to create their own experiences.

EXPERIENCE PRINCIPLE 07
IT STRIVES TO BUILD DENSE LAYERS OF GRATIFICATION
We are savvy consumers of experiences. Organizations no longer oversimplify our needs. They deliver experiences that afford us with opportunities for mastery, learning by doing, flow, bonding/building tight relationships, fun and enjoyment, commitment to others, confidence building, and contribution beyond ourselves.
Opportunity spaces reframe design challenges in a generative, future-facing way. Each space defines an area where multiple ideas for new models and solution concepts can be developed. What follows are four opportunity spaces (and illustrative concepts within) that frame important ideas and experience attributes to consider when designing connected aging experiences. The opportunity spaces were developed in conjunction with elders engaged in the study and grounded by experience insights and principles.

**Insights and ideas** are the foundation from which we generated experience principles and opportunities spaces.

**Moments of Belonging**

How might we channel the innate human need to belong—a need that takes on greater significance as we get older—into experiences that create the feeling of belonging to a greater community?

**Platforms for Participation**

How might we move from service delivery models that focus on providing for older adults to a platform that welcomes their knowledge, expertise, and ideas and invites co-creation of experiences and placemaking?

**Connection during Transition**

How might we support a sense of connection during transitions as we navigate life’s difficult and disruptive circumstances?

**Seeing beyond Age**

How might we start a movement that tips society towards a new concept of age?
VOICES / STARTING CONVERSATIONS

Meeting new people in the course of living often requires a simple invitation. It takes just one person. When we keep to ourselves, we can lose a sense of who we are. But once conversation begins, it leads many places. We re-generate and share memories that connect us to each other and to things we used to do and love. We feel good about the contact. We see our capability in a whole new way.

Click image above to play video (video may take several seconds to load and play)
How might we channel the innate human need to belong—a need that takes on greater significance as we get older—into experiences that create the feeling of belonging to a greater community? Augmenting the daily activities and interactions of older adults with unexpected special moments or adding a sharing “layer” to something normally done alone can establish a social culture of inclusion.

Many of us spend a significant amount of time on our own. We have family members and friends, go out for activities, and might even have a love interest, but our independence is a major component of our life. As we venture out in our neighborhoods, our towns, and our cities, it feels good to be known and to feel we’re part of something. We welcome these moments, which enable a sense of inclusion and help us to turn even the most casual moments into meaningful, connected encounters. We must all—civic leaders, organizations that serve us, and ourselves—pay close attention to and design for how sociable the places we live in can be.
Social Connection Infrastructure

To address the demographic trends of population aging and urbanization, cities and towns around the world are developing plans to create age-friendly cities. The World Health Organization (WHO) has identified eight essential features that should be considered as cities and towns work towards this goal:

- **Buildings, and outdoor spaces**: Respect and social inclusion
- **Transportation**: Civic participation and employment
- **Housing**: Communication and information
- **Social participation**: Community support and health services

WHO guidelines for physical infrastructure focus on mobility (pavements, pedestrian crossings), accessibility (proximity to resources, ease of getting in and out of buildings), and safety issues. The guidelines for social participation place an emphasis on the range, accessibility, affordability, and promotion of structured events and activities. We see an opportunity for cities to create a social connection infrastructure that understands the value of sociability, and makes room for it as critical design criteria for age-friendly city planners, economic and technology developers, entrepreneurs, retailers, and other service industry vendors.

As one among the crowd, we can still experience something shared—an incredible feeling of togetherness. When this happens, events feel more significant. We feel like we belong. Creating positive memories, it inspires us to get out in the community to meet new people and try more things.

**The Built Environment**

In addition to making cities and towns safe and manageable to navigate, look at the built environment as a design opportunity to imbue everyday experiences with sociable moments or chances for social participation. Thinking about how physical spaces communicate an invitation to connect—to create a together moment while one is out alone—can create a sense of inclusion. Connecting physical spaces with personal technologies can augment interactions and make everyday interactions feel connected. Moments of surprise and humor are also ways to build sociability into everyday experiences, such as playful messaging in public spaces or where older adults are most likely to see it. Building makeshift qualities into public spaces communicates an open-endedness, which invites people to shape the space. Pop-up events and temporary installations in the community can create unstructured environments for contribution and a sense of being part of a special moment.

**Real World Examples**

Elementary school kids developed an idea for the Buddy Bench to help kids who feel lonely during recess. Sitting on the Buddy Bench signals a request for contact with others. The bench communicates its purpose and its invitation to connect. It’s not hard to imagine park benches designated for older adults seeking connection.

Using an open-ended event approach, Porch Fests around the country invite people in the community to host a musical performance on their porch. Each event takes on the local imprint of the people involved. Sidewalks and front lawns become pop-up meeting places. Neighbors meet neighbors. A casual encounter creates a feeling of being part of something special.

In the New York Subway Signs Experiment, riders Yoel Letter and Rose Saktor observed that conductors were required to demonstrate alertness at every stop by pointing at an official black and white sign posted on station walls. The pair created simple moments of belonging through humorous signs that showed an appreciation of the conductors as people.
Discussions about social technologies for older adults tend to focus on the specifics of software and device design. Viewed as too complex or designed for younger audiences, many recommend simpler interface designs layered on top of existing social networking sites or less complex devices that allow older adults to use social and mobile technologies. We see an opportunity to use technology to create enhanced connection opportunities for older adults, particularly those who have difficulty connecting socially or who experience mobility issues. In the same way the built environment can communicate an invitation to be known or interact, social technologies can provide an invitation as well. Taking advantage of wearable technologies, older adults can signal an invitation as they conduct daily tasks by wearing an indicator. This would foster instant recognition that they are open to connection. Using group communication technologies, older housebound adults can connect remotely to events, activities and more importantly to each other, enabling community among some of our most invisible citizens.

We no longer feel alone when others recognize we need an extra hand connecting. We no longer feel excluded when we’re invited to join activities or connect with each other no matter what level of ability we have to get out and about.
How can we transform transactional behavior into social support and lasting relationships? Every independent elder has a web of people they interact with daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly. This network extends beyond close social networks to include those who help fulfill everyday needs. For many, the interactions conducted with this wider circle (i.e., at the pharmacy, grocery store, or gas station) do not transcend transaction. However, some elders describe the meaningful impact of being known, recognized and supported by those in their neighborhood. We must understand the factors that influence a social support network and investigate how we might incentivize more of this behavior. One of the determining factors for levels of social connection is the presence of someone who acts as “social glue.” Outside of formal organizations or services, individuals often take personal responsibility to check-on neighbors or invite acquaintances out to events. These individuals have great influence on community engagement and moments of belonging. Inciting them and finding other “currencies” that older adults can use to belong and be an active member of the community provides powerful ways to socially connect.

Aging in place concepts often regard older adults as individuals, living in their own houses, and in relationships with family or professional caregivers. Different relationships form when we leverage the power of group membership. Traditionally thought of as a way to save money through economies of scale, group purchasing inherently involves people coming together. A neighborhood that buys solar panels together not only achieves a better price point, but engages in a social process as they band together. New opportunities emerge when we frame the aging population in this manner.

We incentivize individuals who are connectors—those who take personal responsibility to actively help others be social. Whether this action is done for a neighbor, fellow volunteer, friend, family member, or stranger, it will be recognized as an important service. The connector receives “frequent flier” points or alternative forms of local currency that can be redeemed at organizations. The grocery store or pharmacy offers a way to redeem points for discounts: promoting the well-being of citizens and incentivizing each of us to help others connect.

Peer-To-Peer Exchanges

Peer-to-peer exchanges provide a way for older adults and others to come together and contribute talent and time in exchange for everyday services. By creating a reciprocal exchange, this model values all that elders have to contribute, while incentivizing self-reliance within the local community. This model emphasizes shared access to goods and services over ownership and matches talent and skills with community needs. It also provides an opportunity to capture the value of social time (spending time with an older adults or having coffee with someone) as a means of exchange rather than focusing only on financial or service exchange.

REAL WORLD EXAMPLES

Currently accepted at over 400 businesses, Berkshares are a local currency developed for the Berkshire region of Massachusetts. A tool for building a local economy, Berkshares help merchants and citizens build stronger relationships by encouraging people to buy local-first, and establish relationships between local businesses and the people who frequent them.

Southwark Circle in the United Kingdom is a social-support network that brings members and certified helpers together in a peer-to-peer exchange system. Members can purchase helper time (such as grocery delivery). Help- ers can exchange credits for services provided by older adults and other community members (such as music lessons). Members and helpers are encouraged to meet socially as well.

The Village-to-Village Network is a grassroots neighborhood support network that uses group purchasing power to organize and deliver programs and services that village members decide they want and need.
Certain places within communities become de-facto social connection hubs. Malls across the nation are the home to a daily ritual of mall-walking, where elders congregate in the space (rain or shine) and form deep bonds. A local ceramics studio hosts a group of senior members who are pursuing their passions, while reaping the benefits of a community of peers. Even an individual who loves connecting one-on-one can open up a wide range of opportunities for people in their network. While moving through the world, we must recognize inclusive places and initiators of social connection.

We highlight social connection infrastructure in a community through a certification program, bringing into focus the hubs that exist today and encouraging more places to see their own potential. As cities face an increasing population of aging citizens, this allows the informal communities to be recognized and celebrated for their inclusive and impactful atmosphere, ultimately driving up participation. By fostering a social connection infrastructure, we influence the social fabric of a community and create more opportunities for elders.

Our spending power is well documented. We want to give our business to organizations that keep it local and care about their social impact. When we see a company is socially certified, we can trust it sees us a valued stakeholder in its business. We can feel good about the organization and its impact on our community.

A feeling of being connected to something bigger than yourself
A shared, participatory layer to an activity usually done alone
An elevation in disposition and sense of well-being
Real time interaction and connection through media and technology
Attentiveness to moments of belonging
New networks of people who wouldn’t ordinarily get to meet
An incentive to “get out and about”
Reduces the anxiety of the proposition of being alone

IMPETUS

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B Corp certification is catalyzing a change in the way business is conducted. Certification signifies a business is “purpose-driven and creates value for all its stakeholders, not just for shareholders.” Organizations who are certified are assessed on a variety of impact measures including how transparent they are, how well they meet environmental standards, what kinds of professional development they offer and how they instill a sense of community service in their employees.

REAL WORLD EXAMPLES
VOICES / FOSTERING COMMUNITY

Being part of a community gives us something irreplaceable. We can’t think of a time when we’ve felt this kind of connection: when others have encouraged us to explore something outside of our norm, when we’ve built confidence so easily, when we’ve lit up talking about what we do. When we’re part of a community, we feel safe. It’s about us in relationships, versus isolation. It’s starting a conversation about what we can do that’s for all of us.
More and more, we’re coming together on our own to enjoy the camaraderie of like-minded people and take care of things in our community. As seen in this image of Blight Busters, a self-organized community in Detroit, which is tearing down derelict properties and repurposing the space to fulfill self-determined community needs. (Photo: Charlie Wollborg)

How might we move from service delivery models that focus on providing for older adults to a platform that welcomes their knowledge, expertise, and ideas and invites co-creation of experiences and placemaking? Challenging structures that separate us, services that no longer resonate or can’t be sustained given the state of shrinking resources, and determining new ways to organize and grow local communities is the starting point.

In a culture of passive, personal consumption, experiences are designed by others for us and delivered to us on the producer’s terms. It’s not uncommon to be separated from the community into single-focus spaces designated just for us. It’s assumed we’ll connect when we’re in the same space, sharing a lecture, an activity, a trip, or a meal.

When we switch from the role of service recipient to that of an active co-creator of our own experiences, the rewards are enormous—a deep sense of belonging, a feeling of ownership, profound levels of engagement, and quality and depth of relationships. When organizations consider how existing assets can be kindled by the skills and ideas of its community members and applied to the local economy, connection between people and place is profound. The well-being of older adults and their neighborhoods increases simultaneously.
The Senior Center Reimagined

Senior and other public community centers are diverse in the level of services offered, facility quality, staffing and funding resources, volunteer opportunities, hours of operation, organizational structure, technology use, and ease of access. Fundamentally, they all operate as program delivery systems. Several programs are health or care-related, such as nutrition, fitness, case management, or adult day care programs. Others provide recreational or social opportunities such as fitness classes, bus trips, or group attendance at cultural events. Centers are beginning to develop a set of innovative, "vibrant" programs meant to engage a new generation of seniors, but many struggle to achieve high participation rates. There is no guarantee that social connection will take place between people due to proximity. We see a different path for senior center innovation that invites participation and changes the relationship between people and the organizations who serve them. The center becomes a place based on the ideas and desires of its members. It strives to connect seniors and local opportunities.

We respect what senior centers do, but find the brand off putting. It’s hard to see ourselves reflected in the place or its offerings. The people there seem old. The activities seem old. We want to continue doing the things we’ve always done. Who wants to be a service recipient? We want to be active in shaping the programs and services that are part and parcel of our neighborhood. We want to help create our community.

THE DISTRIBUTED MODEL

The Center expands beyond its walls and becomes a networked experience. It shifts from life as a single-focus destination to an embedded neighborhood delivery program. Older adults have more choice in what programs are available to them, as any number of community organizations can become a provider. Elders have greater access to programs as activities become more proximate when spread throughout a city or neighborhood. Rather than build new facilities, existing facilities are maximized by repurposing them for different activities at different times of the day. Elders regain their place as active and visible members of their communities.

2.1 the distributed model

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THE CO-LOCATION MODEL

The Center becomes a hub that brings resource strapped nonprofits and/or entrepreneurial startups together in one space. Co-location of programs give a leg up to small organizations and provide opportunities for intergenerational, intra-programmatic interactions. An open model approach allows for new connections to occur between groups, ultimately feeding new program ideas and relationships.
THE OPEN SPACE MODEL

The Center becomes a physical asset open to anyone in the community with an idea that benefits the community. Entrepreneurial in nature, the space has no formal program agenda but views itself as an incubator and support-system for the ideas and energy of the community of older adults. Initiatives hosted within the Center and the contributions of its members gradually grow its goals and activities over time.

REAL WORLD EXAMPLES

Kaboom, a national non-profit dedicated to saving play for America’s children, uses a community-build model to create kid-inspired playgrounds. Volunteers collaborate around a collective cause—the well-being of kids—and make an immediate and durable difference in lives and neighborhoods.

The Independent Project, an alternative public school within a school, is run by students. The teens are in charge of everything from the curriculum development to homework assignments. Students love the freedom, the ability to support different types of learners, the ability to pursue questions of interest, and the opportunities for collective and individual endeavor.

Design Museum Boston, a museum dedicated to educating the world about design, has no permanent address. Instead, it "turns the museum inside out" and creates its experience through a network of exhibits and programs hosted by other organizations. By breaking free of one physical space, Design Museum Boston turns the city into a museum and demonstrates the positive impact of design everywhere people go in the city.

The Purposeful Community Model

Purposeful communities provide an open-ended model that matches community skills, resources, and interest with community challenges. The goal of purposeful communities is to unleash the collective capabilities of people in the community, to engage people in meaningful collaboration, and ultimately, to help elders and the communities they are part of to learn how to self-organize. Purposeful communities replace the role of consumer with a variety of new roles: co-creator, maker, owner, investor, and provider. They replace individual consumption of programs with support of groups. Purposeful communities actively identify and inventory community capacity in the form of resources, assets, and human capital and then link this capacity to local needs. Elders with an abundance of creativity, time, energy, and initiative become an important community resource. The community offers dense layers of gratification and opportunity for growth and self-fulfillment.
The Neighborhood Bus

Organized bus trips take older adults and members of community organizations on neighborhood tours to observe firsthand what’s happening in various parts of towns and cities. Tours help connect elders and place, and help elders and community organizations identify where there’s need. Combined with the open space center model described above, self-organized groups would get access to resources that would help them co-create solutions to address community wants and needs.

We seek challenge. When we can help others, discover and solve real needs, learn by doing, commit to a group, and explore something out of the norm, we experience a kind of flow, friendship, mastery, confidence, and connection that we don’t find present elsewhere. Help us discover the people and resources that make up our communities.

Monthly Town Halls

A series of monthly town hall nights engage community passion and embedded expertise to explore and organically frame local challenges. Citizens become the chief architects and designers of their own community. Self-organizing groups and drives the mechanisms for developing partnerships and collaborations with willing institutions across public and private sectors. The periodic participation of purposeful visitors from across the country bring new information and ideas, propelling purposeful networks.

Where is there need? What sits idle? What resources are available to us to use? Where can like-minded people come together to discover our participation calling?

Real World Examples

The Women Roofers formed around a need for home repairs in their community. Providing new roofs for low-income, elderly, or disabled homeowners, service becomes an experience that gives back much more. It integrates learning and life, while creating a sense of confidence that spills over into other areas of life. Peer-to-peer teaching passes on knowledge and a supportive culture to newcomers.

The Golden Girls Network is a housing model and movement that allows homeowners to open their homes and invite others to participate in a shared living arrangement. Completely self-organized, as the network grows, they identify resources needed and regulations that need to be changed and work together to bring about these changes.

Highland Lake Cove Retreat and Learning Center is a retreat center and residential co-housing development that’s organized around the desire for ‘intentional community.’ Working with local civic leaders to redefine zoning policies supported an entirely new kind of neighborhood. Members come to learn sustainable building practices. People travel from across the country to access local expertise and learn how such a model works.
Implications

Platforms for participation is a powerful way to provide meaningful connection. It builds off of three experience principles: engagement, elders as innovators and dense layers of gratification. Inviting elders into the creation of their own experiences provides:

- A sense of ownership over process, placemaking, product development and community outcomes
- Higher levels of sustained engagement
- A deeper sense of belonging and purpose
- Opportunities to connect around a common purpose
- Opportunities to connect with like-minded peers
- Opportunities to use creativity, knowledge and expertise
- Experiences that yield dense layers of gratification including mastery, learning by doing, flow, bonding/building tight relationships, fun and enjoyment, commitment to others, confidence building, and contribution beyond ourselves.
It can be devastating to lose a spouse or family member. Unexpected financial difficulties, divorce, illness, or injury can blindside us. Even planned life changes can leave an emotional mark as we give up activities we love or leave places we’ve called home. It’s very tough when we feel like we’re facing it all on our own. Close connections that rally around us help us through.
As with all stages of life, we experience both expected and disruptive changes. Retirement is often planned, but the emotional experiences that result from the break with work life can be tough to manage. Divorce, the death of loved ones, illness, or injury can be overwhelming, requiring us to essentially start a new life.

We’re willing to do the work to find new ways to continue creating the lives we want, but little support is available. It takes a great deal of energy to “get over the hump” after a major disruption. There are no formal practices for facing a transition, so the process of adjusting to new life circumstances varies widely when facing both difficult and normal decision-making moments. We emerge from transitional periods with a sense of well-being when we feel supported in our personal evolution. Feeling connected to a new place or activity helps build resilience, as does connection to a broader notion that many people are managing and evolving within similar challenges.

How might we support a sense of connection during transitions as we navigate life’s difficult and disruptive circumstances? Creating models for reflection and celebration helps build a narrative around transition experiences, positively influencing self-perception and the motivation to persist.
More and more research in the fields of neuroscience, medicine, and positive psychology has shed light on how we can thrive in the face of challenging circumstances. Personal resilience can be increased through effective interventions. In one such example, social scientist, Gregory Walton, has proved the efficacy of re-framing a deeply challenging or traumatic experience through narrative reconstruction. 

This attributional retraining shifts the view from something happening to me to a perception that “I’m not alone, that there are others going through this.” Tested within the context of education, his study accomplishes this through a simple letter writing intervention, where the subject is asked to write a letter to the next generation of college freshmen, sharing their own difficulties and conveying how it gets better. Simply constructing the letter and defining the narrative has dramatic, lasting implications for the subject’s perception and capacity to manage stressors.

In addition to attributional retraining, many other interventions can stimulate reflection and influence new perspectives on change. Unfortunately, current organizations are not designed for reflection; older adults rely on close personal networks, with few programmatic options for support. Rather than leaving outcomes up to chance and individual resourcefulness, we have the opportunity to consciously design for a social experience of transitions. The experience itself may still be challenging, but we can help elders come together and feel a sense of connection in the hard work, leading to a more supported, positive experience.

Transitions present an opportunity to reflect and answer the question: how do we want to live? As things change, we want to find purpose and meaning, share our stories, and continue evolving. It can be deeply unstabilizing to have a dramatic break in identity, especially when we still have so much to give, but there’s great comfort in knowing we are all in a perpetual state of becoming.

3.1 Transitions present an opportunity to reflect and answer the question: how do we want to live? As things change, we want to find purpose and meaning, share our stories, and continue evolving. It can be deeply unstabilizing to have a dramatic break in identity, especially when we still have so much to give, but there’s great comfort in knowing we are all in a perpetual state of becoming.

To support the experience of elders in transition, we see the potential for multiple interventions and tools that build healthier, happier lives by including others. These opportunities, rich with connection, include:

**Storytelling Principles**
Using storytelling principles, create a narrative around personal transition and change. Include attributional retraining exercises, such as letter writing to future elders who will experience similar challenges.

**Gamification**
Help build individual resilience through gamification. Through play and a safe environment for experimentation, elders learn positive psychology techniques, feel supported in the hard work, and ultimately, thrive in transitions.

**Group Processes**
Rather than facing transitions in isolation, build new structures that promote group processes. “Transitions Anonymous” brings people together as they move through challenging circumstances.

**Purpose**
Combine forces to find purpose. Introduce the role of “idea planters,” a new community matchmaking resource who helps elders lead purposeful lives and find ways for identity continuation.

**REAL WORLD EXAMPLES**

The Mission Continues helps military personal continue a life of service in a civilian context. By tapping into their sense of identity and purpose, the organization helps secure permanent roles of public service that allows for meaningful work after the transition out of active duty.

Alcoholics Anonymous provides a safe context for community and support. As a structured gathering place, meetings allow for storytelling, open sharing and accountability to others. Most importantly, we are not alone.

Super Better uses gamification to help people recover from an illness and increase resilience—helping them stay curious, optimistic, and motivated even in the face of tough challenges.
Milestones and Markers

Throughout life, there are markers of important time periods and milestones for personal achievements. These milestones may be based on educational or professional experiences, such as college graduation, promotions, or career changes. Many significant markers are relational—marriage, parenthood, becoming a grandparent. In later years, as milestones diminish, elders face open-ended periods of time that are punctuated with markers of decline. An indefinite period seems endless without signifying events along the way, cycles provide a healthy and motivating sense of progress and completion. When disruptive life events become the only focus, we lose awareness of continued possibility. By reframing transitions as celebratory events, we can recast difficult periods in a new light, creating a sense of collective endeavor, exclusivity (being in transition as something special), and reflection. We create space for a celebration of learnings and outcomes.

3.2

We’re living so much longer and in this extended period still need ways to mark time and progress. As a default, transitions often become our milestones. We remember the places we’ve lived. The drastic moments when everything changed. But where are the opportunities to celebrate growth and development, continued learning, and the new perspectives we emerge with?

RETROSPECTIVE

Partnering with local venues—museums, libraries, cafes—elders in the community have an opportunity to create and curate their own signifying events. Much in the same fashion as a book opening or one-woman show, the event celebrates the unique voice and experience of an elder, while inviting a community audience through integration with public spaces. Rather than viewing transitions from the paradigm of decline and loss, this creates an opportunity for celebration and a place and time for sharing the wisdom and perspective that comes with navigating change.

REAL WORLD EXAMPLES

Artist’s retrospective are a record of personal and artistic evolution. They illustrate how an artist has arrived at the present moment, documenting growth over time. There is still more to come, but it marks the signifying event of a mature body of work.

Burbank Senior Arts Center is an affordable senior arts colony, models their program on the college experience, including a semester structure and graduation through levels. They recognize the value of culminating events for their programs as participants get to put their new skills in action. A writing class will end with a stage play, poetry slam or film. A painting class culminates with a gallery opening.
Implications

Adding a layer of connection transforms transitions from a solo journey to a together experience. It builds off of two experience principles: facing continuous change and opportunities for continued development.

- Past passions, memories, and even regrets can be positive transition influences.
- Rituals help stabilize in the midst of transitions
- Find ways to feel that your identity is continuing, not broken
- Set up positive expectations
- Identify the types of support needed
Our actual age is less and less an indicator of what we're capable of, and certainly no indicator of our interests or our potential. We think in terms of effective age. Beneath surface impressions lives the person inside. We need new language and representation to help us and others frame this period of our lives as one of value and relevance, as a time lived on our terms.
We all experience differences in how we’re perceived versus how we see ourselves internally. It’s hard to reconcile the person inside when there are no cultural representations that feel authentic. (Photo: ©Tom Hussey)

How might we start a movement that tips society towards a new concept of age? How might we incent older adults to take an active role in shaping new connected aging possibilities for themselves and their communities? Creating a new vocabulary helps people see what’s possible. Providing open learning exchanges invites elder changemakers to come together with peers and partners, creating a space where they can trade ideas and share inspirational practices.

We live in a world where the stereotypes of old age—either feeble, ugly, senile, ill, incompetent and irrelevant, or cute, quaint and kindly—make it difficult to see our authentic selves. Change is coming quickly. Life beyond 50 or 60 presents a lot of new territory. Many of us are designing connected aging experiences for ourselves and others already, but it’s work to discover each other and there are few opportunities or venues to exchange experiences and ideas.

When we share what we’re learning about how to live a longer life, we have the power to change perceptions and beliefs about age. When we exchange ideas, we cultivate the power to influence the policies and systems that affect our lives. When our needs aren’t being served, we have the power to act and create what we want.
REBRANDING CAMPAIGN

New language and visual vocabulary are developed to represent older adults the multi dimensions of age, rather than simple, uninspiring, or negative stereotypes.

REAL WORLD EXAMPLES

Not long ago, the idea of men playing an active role in child rearing was far from the social norm. Bombarded with representations of and information targeted only to women, men found it challenging to legitimize their role. Web sites and social initiatives promoting fatherhood change the way we see the men in this role.

The Dove® Campaign for Real Beauty began a worldwide discussion to redefine beauty after learning that only 2% of women globally would "describe themselves as beautiful." With a goal to make beauty a source of confidence, Dove has recently launched a Pro-Age versus Anti-Age campaign to challenge stereotypes and invite women to join the conversation.

WNYC’s Studio 360 (public radio’s “smart and surprising guide to what’s happening in pop culture and the arts”) hired Hyperakt to re-brand teachers. Leaving the usual “childish” visualizations behind, the studio developed a connect the dots theme allowing them to create a brand that celebrates teaching and learning in a way that inspires pride. The studio released the work under a Creative Commons license to allow teachers to display the brand in their classrooms.
The digital learning platform creates an open community that brings older adults together to change the way we see age, designing and disseminating ideas for new connected aging experiences. The site brand works to elevate and celebrate older adults - to present them authentically. A movement building campaign provides a grassroots mechanism for a critical mass of people to become a part of the perception change effort. Over time, a complete site would offer features and functions that increase the level and type of contribution older adults can make. A fully realized site might embody the following feature set:

1. **Featured Changemaker Stories**
   Front and center on the homepage, curated changemaker videos present the stories of elders living connected aging experiences across the country. As role models, the featured elders represent a range of experiences that help us all see new possibilities for an aging society.

2. **Story Pages**
   Story pages include the featured video and invite community interaction (through a discussion area where members can post comments) and action (through supporting materials or tools which members can download and use).

3. **Member Profiles**
   Elders and partners who join the community create a personal profile page which represents them on the site but also records their own activity (authorship, contribution points earned for posting comments, evaluating ideas, etc) and provides a place to bookmark videos and tools of interest to them.

4. **Q + A**
   Another means of sparking community interaction, the question and answer section allows members to post questions and receive answers and ideas from the community itself. By liking responses, members can contribute points and feel more engaged in the community.

5. **Toolkits**
   Members have access to a range of toolkits which they can take, share and use in their own communities. Member profiles provide ways to record how the tools are being used.

6. **Workspaces**
   Workspaces allow members to invite members to join in projects. The workspaces provide a way for the team to collaborate remotely.

7. **Movement Building Campaigns**
   Ongoing movement building campaigns invite broader membership. Simple contributions such as signing a pledge or sharing a picture of a connected aging experience help others see they’re part of a wider community.
Implications

Seeing beyond age is a critical component in helping to support emergent social norms that will come from the experiences of adults living longer. Developing language and new visual vocabulary to describe this period of our lives:

- Helps legitimize new roles and creates new cultural perceptions of age
- Provides language that elders can use to represent themselves authentically
- Helps create community

REAL WORLD EXAMPLES

OpenIDEO is a global community that “draws upon the optimism, inspiration and ideas... of everyone” to solve problems in an open, collaborative way. Providing a process and a platform, members contribute in any number of ways and each point. Partners who sponsor projects ensure that ideas get realized. The whole community learns and is inspired to act.

It may seem odd to group older adults and entrepreneurs together, but both are free agents in many ways. Entrepreneurs, however, are phenomenal community builders. They combine face-to-face social events with digital platforms that inventory locally available resources and share out who is active in the community. They congregate in co-working spaces, and share office space. They support and learn from each other as they try to realize their ventures.
The four opportunity spaces illustrate the need for investment in both ongoing research into the connected aging experiences of independent older adults and projects where ideas can be prototyped and evaluated for their ability to increase social participation and the benefits such experiences provide.

**Investment** moves ideas off the whiteboard and into the real world where they can be tested and refined, and evaluated for their impact.

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Social Connection Infrastructure

AGE-FRIENDLY CITY EXPERIMENTS
From small prototypes created to test sociable public moments (e.g., buddy bench or social signage systems) to working with larger-scale experiments, such as self-designated neighborhoods, there are a variety of projects that could be used to develop models for changing the role of the built environment as a social connection infrastructure component. Develop prototypes and experiment storyboards for use in the recruitment of a multi-disciplinary team from urban design and civic innovation, behavioral psychology, and experience design fields. Working with a newly formed team, develop prototype tests. Document the impact and lessons learned from each experiment.

CONNECTED AGING HACKATHONS
Hackathons are intensive two-or-three day events where programmers typically come together and compete to develop working application prototypes that solve hackathon challenges. To address the challenge of creating social technology applications that translate the values of social connection into tangible, personal experiences, create an interdisciplinary hackathon program. Bring together creative problem solvers (designers, filmmakers, gamers, urban planners, storytellers, academics, business leaders, or anyone passionate about technology’s potential to create better social connection) to collaboratively develop social product and tool prototypes. Pilot and run one hackathon and then refine and create a multi-city hackathon tour. Develop partnerships to fund prize money or sponsorship to develop and test winning solutions.

PEER-TO-PEER EXCHANGE PROTOTYPE
Conduct research into a diverse range of existing peer-to-peer exchange systems to inspire and inform the design of an exchange approach. Develop a small set of experiments that can be prototyped and tested with older adults. Prototypes would include experimentation with different social currencies. Based on findings from these experiments, identify a community and pilot a peer-to-peer exchange program. Evaluate the exchange, disseminate lessons learned, and build toolkits to help others create their own peer-to-peer exchanges. Alternatively, invest in the replication of a successful exchange model.

CERTIFICATION PROGRAM PROTOTYPE
Research a diverse mix of existing assessment programs (e.g., new higher education competency-based learning assessments, b corp behind the scenes, stamp of approval programs like UL or Fair Trade USA) to inspire social connection impact criteria. Identify a small set of local organizations willing to co-develop criteria. Based on feedback, refine and iterate the criteria and create an assessment tool.
Platforms for Participation

SENIOR CENTER REIMAGINED
To shift from service delivery to a participatory experience, develop experiments with all three center models—the distributed model, the co-location model, and the open space model. Prototype and test each model to determine the optimal structures for participation. Conduct participatory design studios with older adults to create the model prototypes. Document development and partnership building processes. Build and distribute toolkits that allow older adults to replicate the new center models in their own communities.

RANDOM COLLISION TOWN HALLS
To help older adults connect the dots between neighborhoods, design, prototype, and test a monthly town hall experience. These gatherings provide an opportunity for people to come together, explore local community challenges, and connect in purposeful ways. Recruit for a diverse mix of collaborators (we call them unusual suspects) who will produce random collisions—challenges to local world-views, exposure to new ideas, and expertise. Provide resources for self-organized groups to use as they address local challenges or develop placemaking ideas. Document the mechanisms of self-organization and create toolkits for older adults to create town hall events in their own communities.

THE NEIGHBORHOOD BUS
We commonly stick within the boundaries and edges of the places we know. To help older adults get to know all the neighborhoods in their area, develop a neighborhood bus tour program which allows older adults interested in contributing beyond themselves to discover local resources, expertise, and needs. Document outcomes, along with the process and tools needed for a successful program. Create toolkits to help others develop the service in their own communities or build a plan for funding replication of the model.
Connection during Transitions

ATTRIBUTIONAL RETRAINING
BEHAVIORAL PROTOTYPE

Attributional retraining helps people reframe their perception of what they can accomplish as well as increase personal resiliency in the face of difficulty. Working with older adults who are struggling with a disruptive life event, create a behavioral prototype that uses attributional retraining to help them increase the necessary motivation and persistence to deal with the transition. Develop protocol for assessing attitude change and lasting impact of the intervention. Document the process and lessons learned.

TRANSITION GAME EXPERIENCE
PROTOTYPE

It’s hard to choose freely when transition periods are shadowed by worry and a sense of doing it alone. Games combine the power of story, a chance to include others, and a safe environment for experimentation into an experience which promotes learning through play. Create and test a game prototype which works to help older adults in transition cope with a difficult time. Develop a research protocol to test and verify the impact of the transitions game on elders.

TRANSITION EVENT
EXPERIENCE PROTOTYPE

Marking a completed transition with a signifying event provides a healthy and motivating sense of progress and completion. It also produces success stories that can inspire others. Create and test a transitions event prototype which works to help older adults bring an element of collective endeavor and celebration to difficult times. Partner with local community venues such as museums, libraries or cafes who provide space for the event. Include artists, designers, and storytellers to help older adults shape their story or exhibit. Develop companion web materials that document people’s transition “retrospectives” to share the experiences.
**Seeing beyond Age**

**REBRAND AGE COMMUNICATION PROGRAM**

Older adults are represented by uninspiring or derogatory visual imagery and language. Create a public service communication program that represents the multidimensional aspects of connected older adults, supporting and legitimizing new roles for elders.

The communication program would design and develop a new visual vocabulary and messaging to represent age, a set of ads and campaigns, branded communication materials, and guidelines for organizations serving aging populations.

**DIGITAL LEARNING PLATFORM**

Design and test conceptual prototypes of a full-featured digital learning platform that creates an online community of older adults who help us change the way we see age. The platform allows them to collaboratively develop and share ideas for new connected aging experiences. Conduct participatory design studios to engage elders in the creation of the conceptual prototype; to understand how best to engage them in the platform; to develop a full feature set, including movement building components; to develop ideas for curated content (e.g., case studies of connected aging experiences); and to learn ways to increase the likelihood of adoption.

Assemble a web development team to design the final user experience, content and engagement strategy, write code, launch, and run the web site.

**Further Research**

**ENGAGEMENT AND DISENGAGEMENT**

Many older adults struggle with disengagement and emotional disconnection from activities and relationships. Older adults must adapt to ever changing circumstances over a longer number of years. Often, this adaptation requires new levels of energy and drive to stay connected. We need to know more about what’s needed to sustain and support those older adults who must work out of necessity, lack sufficient financial resources, have minimal social ties, or begin to lose physical capabilities. This further research will allow us to understand how they can continue to maintain or increase their sense of connection, contribution, and fulfillment over the course of their later years.

Conduct a qualitative contrast research study that looks at the experiences of a set of older adults who exhibit high levels of engagement, despite accommodating continuous change, and the experiences of a set of isolated older adults. In the first group, focus on the discovery of intrinsic motivation factors and habits, understanding how they are developed and sustained. In the second group, look at the extrinsic factors and intrinsic responses that lead to disengagement. Create behavioral prototypes to test with isolated older adults to document effective experience models that increase social connection.
To live a connected life, we let go of what’s expected of us. We learn to be comfortable with who we are. We create space for ourselves so we can dig deeper into what’s important and remain open for what’s to come. We still have much to give. We take responsibility for creating the life we want to end up with.
Conclusion

There’s no question that when we use social connection and participation as our lens, the aging experiences we design connect us to each other, to the places we inhabit, and to the activities that keep us deeply engaged. The benefits are self-evident. To design such experiences, we have to step outside the care paradigm to see what’s truly possible. We have to stop thinking of “them” and understand what we design is for all of us—aging experiences that we genuinely anticipate and are excited to grow into.

We think about designing for older adults, but in reality, what we design applies to us all.
Acknowledgements

We would like to take a moment to recognize and thank the elders we engaged in the study for the lessons and insights they gave us. They are the “we” behind this body of work.

Rebecca, an 81-year-old widow who recently moved to Sausalito to live near her daughter, helped us understand the power of “together alone” experiences. Rebecca moved to the Castro neighborhood from Belgium two weeks before John F. Kennedy died and has been passionate about politics and activism ever since.

Dan, 84, has a long history of volunteering, including a Suicide Prevention hotline, S.C.O.R.E., and driving elders to doctor’s appointments. Dan taught us that shared experience—knowledge of a time or place or activity—makes connection feel good and is important to kickstarting new relationships.

Lino, 70, retired from his job and moved from Miami to be near his daughter and support her by providing child care after she delivered twins. Lino helped us understand how men lose many connections when work lives cease.

Jerry, a 70 year old retired small business owner, showed us how each of us can help another connect simply by reaching out to those around us. In one-on-one conversations, he helps many people rediscover what made them feel connected and how they can reclaim it.

Fran, 70, runs her own Interior Design business. She meets with clients in San Francisco during the week and gets together with friends and her book group on the weekends. Among other things, Fran reminded us that sometimes the simplest things promote connection, like walking the dog.

Jackie, 76, moved to the West Coast from New Jersey 20 years ago and hasn’t looked back. Her daughter was a role model for picking up stakes and moving cross-country. Jackie shared an important lesson that she’s mindfully come to—the life she wants to end up with is her responsibility to create.
Linda, a 66 year old yoga studio owner, uses barter exchange to enhance her professional and personal connections.

Carol, a 72 year old retired anthropology professor, has created new and novel connections as people from around the world reach out to her to discuss the book’s content.

Fred, 72, is a retired anthropology professor who continues to research and write, and recently returned from a tour promoting his new book on Christopher Columbus. His writing has created new and novel connections as people from around the world reach out to him to discuss the book’s content.

Rose, 65, and Fred, 69, have been married for over 30 years. Fred conveyed what it felt like when he could no longer sail competitively, and how reaching back to an activity from his past replaced the loss. French Horns with Fred has brought a whole new circle of people into his life. Rose reminded us that talking to strangers can be a rewarding experience and getting started can be a simple act of saying hello.

Lila, 91, is a former R. I. state senator who helped us see the importance of role models. She continues to be one herself with a new mentorship program for urban young women, and she learns from a 100 year old community neighbor. The two are planning a trip overseas this coming year.

Elaine, 65, is just starting to explore her new neighborhood after dealing with a health issue and a very rough divorce. Elaine taught us that laughter has healing properties and should be part of everyone’s day.

CJ, 67, showed us how creativity can help you be resilient in the face of great upheaval. After a year of tremendous loss where her daughter, a close friend, and her dog dying unexpectedly, CJ rented a tiny cabin across the country sight unseen where writing and thinking about creative ways to share the story of her ordeal helped her through.

Ruth, 69, has been active volunteering for LGBT groups and hospice programs. Ruth showed us how connection can help you come through a devastating event—the loss of a partner—with a sense of optimism and a will to explore.

Kerry, 63, has created a retreat center and residential co-housing development that’s built on the principles of an ‘intentional community.’ Recognizing that many structures in society are built for separation, Kerry and his community are working on the opposite—building structures that bring people together.

Ruth, 69, has been active volunteering for LGBT groups and hospice programs. Ruth showed us how connection can help you come through a devastating event—the loss of a partner—with a sense of optimism and a will to explore.

Mollie, 81, newly came into her own after her husband passed away, renting an apartment in Brooklyn and starting sculpture classes. Mollie showed us how experimentation with different groups and activities can lead to finding your tribe.

Marianne, Linda and Vicki are part of the Golden Girls Network, a self-organized ‘women living in community’ movement that uses a shared housing model. They taught us how a set of simple rules can ensure healthy relationships between housemates.

Rome, an elderblogger who refused to believe that the future of aging offers only the “sad and bleak” is “creating a remarkable record” of what it’s like to age. She taught us that she’s not a dirty word; it’s an experience to examine and report on authentically.
The report was created by Christine Costello, Design Director; Deb Meisel, Experience Designer; Emma Beede, Experience Designer; and Jeff Drury, Creative Director and Multimedia Storyteller of the Business Innovation Factory, with invaluable support from Wendy Yallowitz, Senior Program Officer, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. We would also like to acknowledge Tori Drew, Operations Director; Sam Kowalczyk, Graphic Designer; and Eli Stefanski, Chief Market Maker, Business Innovation Factory for their creative and organizational support.

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