

All Walks of Life: Placemaking for Age-Inclusive Public Life in Bergsjön



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Master Thesis 2026

Chalmers School of Architecture

Department of Architecture & Civil

Engineering

Examiner: Marco Adelfio

Supervisor: Jessica Lundin



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Architecture and Planning Beyond Sustainability (MPDSD)

Society, Justice and Space

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Author Background



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Thesis Motivation

I've always been interested in how everyday spaces shape the way people live, especially as they grow older. This interest is also close to home, shaped by watching my grandparents grow older. For me, architecture is not only about buildings but about the small, ordinary places that people interact with every day. These spaces can either support or limit independence, comfort, and social life. This project comes from my curiosity about how design can help older adults continue to feel included, active, and at ease. I'm particularly motivated by the idea of urban spaces designed with everyone in mind. Through this project, I want to explore how small, thoughtful changes developed together with communities can make a difference. I believe that even modest, tactile interventions can contribute to more just and inclusive environments.

Acknowledgment

This thesis is built on conversations, and conversations are built on trust. I am grateful to everyone who gave both.

To the older residents of Bergsjön who let me sit beside them with my questions - *thank you*. This work belongs to you as much as it does to me.

To Bergsjön Kulturhuset, Svenska kyrkan and Familjebostäder i Göteborg -*thank you* for opening your doors, for making time inside your schedules, and for trusting the work of a student.

To the activity coordinators, Robin Thorén and Boel Lundgren and to the friends who held the language for me - who saw what I was trying to do before I could quite say it - *thank you*.

To my supervisor, Jessica Lundin *thank you* for the questions that made me start over, and for the patience to wait while I did. To my examiner Marco Adelfio- *thank you* for all the feedback and support.

To my family and friends, you carried me through the months when I could not carry myself. Forever grateful.

Abstract

What if cities recognised older residents not only as people in need of care, but also as participants in the everyday forms of public life? The project explores ageing as both a social and spatial process something experienced through movement, routines, and encounters in the city. In this sense, age-inclusive cities are not only about accessibility standards or services, but also about creating environments where older adults can comfortably remain present in everyday public life and feel less isolated. The study considers what makes it meaningful or feasible for an older person to go outside whether it's the chance to socialise, or simply the presence of a comfortable place to pause.

Rather than beginning with predefined design solutions, the project draws from the everyday experiences of older residents. Conversations, mapping exercises, and informal interviews gradually reveal routines and some of the small things that shape daily life in the neighbourhood.

Building on these insights, participatory methods were used to explore the kinds of outdoor spaces older residents would like to see nearby. This opened up discussion around shared priorities and reflect on the kinds of spatial conditions that support movement, rest, and sociability along daily routes.

The findings from this process lead to a series of small-scale spatial proposals placed within the spaces that elders identified. Rather than proposing a universal solution, the project explores an alternative design approach that values the experiences of older individuals as a valuable source of spatial understanding. Instead of delivering a finished outcome, the proposal aims to practise urban design that takes informal outdoor life in old age as something essential rather than optional, and thereby contributing to efforts aimed at developing more age-inclusive public spaces.

Key words: Age-inclusive; participatory design; public spaces

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Reading instruction

The thesis is divided into six chapters. It begins with Positioning, which introduces the aim and purpose of the project, the research question, methods, and delimitations. This is followed by Framework, where the thesis is placed within age-inclusive public spaces, environmental gerontology, age integration, intergenerational public life, placemaking, and case studies. The third part, Local Context, presents ageing in Gothenburg and local initiatives in Bergsjön. Part four, Process, describes the approach, participatory methods, outcomes, site selection, and design criteria. The fifth part, Design Proposal, presents the interventions. This is followed by Reflection, where the discussion and conclusion are brought together. The thesis ends with References and an Appendix.

GLOSSARY

- **Age-friendly city** / A city that actively supports older adults to remain independent, healthy, and socially connected.
- **Age-inclusive** / Designed to function for people across all age groups
- **Age segregation** / The separation of different age groups into distinct environments, institutions, and zones
- **Ageism** / Prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination directed toward individuals on the basis of age
- **Co-design** / A participatory approach to design in which the people who will use a space or product are actively involved in shaping it
- **Environmental gerontology** / A field of research that examines the relationship between ageing and the physical and social environments in which people live.
- **Intergenerational space** / A spatial condition in which people of different ages can occupy the same environment at the same time, in their own ways
- **Older adults** / In this thesis, older adults refers to residents aged 65 and above.
- **Person–environment fit** / A concept from environmental gerontology describing the relationship between an individual's functional capacities and the demands of their surrounding environment
- **Placemaking** / A process of shaping public space through the knowledge, experiences, and priorities of the people who use it.
- **Public space** / All places publicly owned or of public use, accessible and enjoyable by all
- **Right to the city** / A concept arguing that all urban residents have the right not only to access city spaces but to inhabit them to feel that they belong in them.
- **Third place** / Informal gathering spaces outside the home and workplace that sustain community life

Problem Statement

Gothenburg, like many cities across Europe, is experiencing an ageing population and rapid urbanisation at the same time. More older people are living here, yet the public spaces meant to serve everyone don't always reflect that shift. There are policies working toward this the WHO's Age-Friendly Cities agenda, for example, recognises how important outdoor spaces are for older people's wellbeing. But somewhere between writing those policies and actually building things, the bigger vision tends to get simplified. What arrives on the ground is often a checklist, Though these concerns matter, but it has a risk overlooking older people as active participants in public life and use public space in everyday ways that contribute to the social life.

A space can meet every requirement and still feel unwelcoming. These small details are what actually shape whether people feel welcome. And they're often the things that get missed in the planning process.

A lot of what's available to older residents tends to happen indoors. Senior centres, organised activities, scheduled programmes, though valuable, they also pull older people away from the ordinary rhythm of public life. So though older adults are very much part of the city, they're less visible in streets, parks, and squares. Over time, these spaces start to feel like they belong to a younger crowd not because anyone intended that, but simply because the design never quite invited everyone to stay.

That gradual absence affects the whole city, not just older residents. Some of the most meaningful moments in public space happen accidentally, different generations ending up near each other, sharing a square without any particular plan. A child watching an older person read on a bench, neighbours from different stages of life crossing paths on a familiar street. That kind of everyday connection is hard to organise and easy to lose. When public space stops making room for older people, those quiet moments of shared city life start to disappear too.

This research focuses on Bergsjön, Gothenburg, as a site for examining how older residents actually experience and inhabit their local public spaces. It pays attention to the small, everyday conditions that shape whether a space genuinely feels welcoming and asks what it might take for public space to feel like it truly belongs to everyone, across generations.

Aim

The goal of the thesis is to use participatory, experience-based method for creating age-inclusive public areas that allow elderly' daily routines, priorities, and informal outdoor activities to create small-scale spatial interventions in Bergsjön. The project aims to demonstrate how urban design can go beyond minimum accessibility requirements to support older adults' continued presence in daily public life by using theoretical perspectives from along with practice-based examples of age-friendly co-design.

Thesis Question

How can age-inclusive placemaking reshape public spaces in Bergsjön to better support older adults' everyday life?

Designing to support people across all age groups

Shaping public space through the knowledge and experiences of the people who use it

Research Objectives

- Investigate how theoretical perspectives on ageing, environmental gerontology, spatial justice can inform age-inclusive placemaking in public spaces in Bergsjön.
- Explore older adults' everyday urban life in Bergsjön by observing their routines, reasons for going outside, and experiences of movement, rest, and sociability. Identify spatial and social conditions that support or limit older residents' comfort and participation in local public spaces.
- Engage older residents through participatory methods such as mapping, interviews, and informal conversations to capture lived experiences and values.
- Develop a speculative design proposal for selected public spaces in Bergsjön that reflects older residents' experiences and needs, using participatory and user-centred placemaking tools such as model-making and co-design.
- Reflect on the role and effectiveness of age-inclusive placemaking approaches in both the design process and the spatial outcomes, drawing on participant feedback, alignment with identified needs and how age-inclusive placemaking can inform future urban design practice.

Methodology

This thesis draws on several overlapping methods rather than following a strict process. The process is iterative, with lessons learned from one phase progressively influencing the next. It blends research by design, where concepts are developed through drawing, mapping, and speculative spatial plans, with research for design, which is conducted by reading theory, policies, and reference projects. The approach is qualitative, participatory (Pain & Kindon, 2007), and context based, centred to Bergsjön in Gothenburg.

Fieldwork begins with conversations with older residents. These take the kind of semi-structured interviews and casual conversations that touch on subjects including everyday routines, reasons for going outside, and moments when public space feels comfortable or quietly isolating. The research uses participatory mapping to link these experiences to the actual environment. During mapping sessions, participants follow their regular routes and social gathering places. The mapping activities then help to create a collective image of the neighborhood, revealing patterns and overlooked places that matter in everyday life. Building on this material, the project moves into a participatory modelling workshop. A small group of elderly construct simple models of outdoor spaces they would like to use. It becomes a tool for conversation in ways of exploring spatial ideas that might otherwise stay abstract. This draws on co-design concepts (Ehn, 2008; Sanders & Stappers, 2008), where shifting from designing "for" to designing "with" people.

The material gathered through these methods-interview notes, annotated maps, photographs, workshop findings, is used to identify common themes. From these insights emerge a series of small design interventions located along sites identified by participants. They are not intended as finished designs. Instead, they act as "what-if" explorationstesting how small spatial adjustments might shift the experience of moving through the neighbourhood. In that sense, design becomes both a research tool and a way of reflecting on how cities might make a little more room for older residents in everyday public life,

Delimitations

This thesis focuses on the neighbourhood of Bergsjön in Gothenburg and does not represent the experiences of all older residents in the city. The participant group is relatively small, shaped by the time frame of a master's thesis, so the findings can be understood as situated insights rather than general conclusions. The study involves older adults who were able to participate in interviews, conversations, and workshops. People living in institutional care or those who rarely leave their homes are not included, as exploring those experiences would require different approach. The study focuses on outdoor public areas where daily interactions take place, such as streets, tiny squares, and neighborhood parks. Transportation networks, house interiors, and other general planning policies are not thoroughly examined. Similarly, rather than offering ready-to-build solutions, the design outcomes continue to be speculative, investigating alternatives. This study does not cover issues like cost, maintenance, and governance. The work's observations should be interpreted as context-specific. The thesis offers a partial but grounded perspective on how public space and aging interact in daily neighborhood life, rather than providing universal solutions.

The research relates to the social dimension of sustainable development, particularly UN Sustainable Development Goals 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) and 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). By focusing on older adults' experiences of public space, the study highlights how inclusive environments can support wellbeing, participation, and social connection.

The project suggests that sustainability is not only about environmental performance but also about creating spaces where people can comfortably spend time, meet others, and remain visible in public life as they age. In this way, age-inclusive design becomes a practical way of thinking about sustainability at the scale of daily urban life

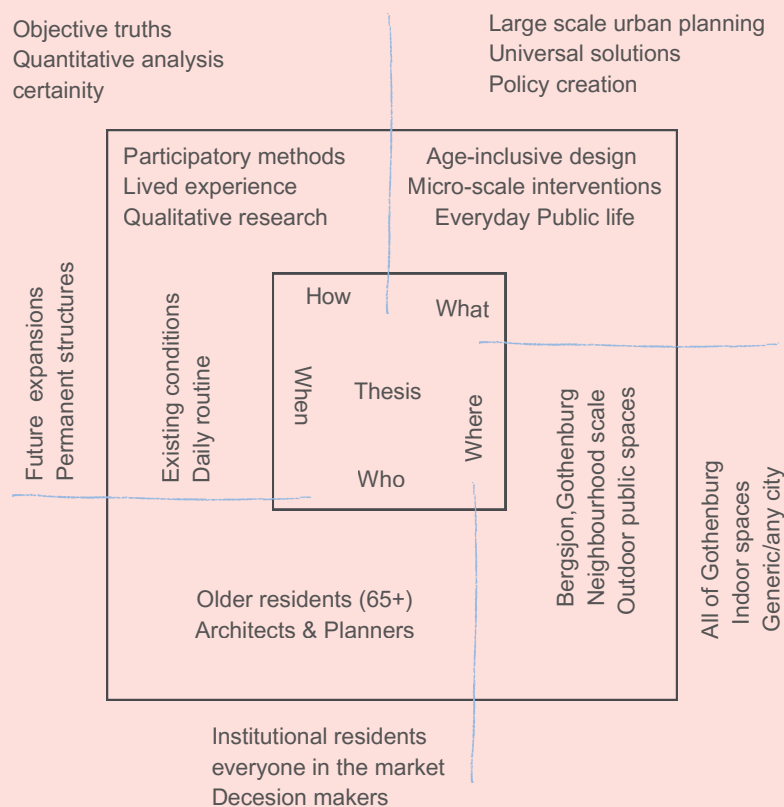


Figure1 - Delimitation diagram

FRAMEWORK

Age-Inclusive Public Spaces

What makes a space feel like it includes you? Lefebvre (1996) described this through the concept of the right to the city, that all urban residents should have the ability not only to access city spaces but to inhabit them, to feel at home in them, to participate in shaping what they look and feel like. Harvey (2008) extends this further, framing the right to the city as a collective right not just the right of individuals to access urban space, but the right of communities to shape the urban processes that determine how space is made and for whom. From this perspective, age-inclusive design is not only a spatial question. It is a question of who gets to participate in decisions about the built environment, and whose knowledge of daily life is taken seriously when those decisions are made.

The World Health Organization's Age-Friendly Cities framework was developed to help cities respond to exactly this challenge creating environments that support active ageing and enable older adults to continue participating in social, civic, and everyday life as they grow older (World Health Organization, 2007). The framework identifies eight domains that shape how age-friendly a city is, among which outdoor spaces and public environments are particularly relevant to this thesis. The WHO tells that well-designed public spaces parks, streets, squares should be accessible, safe, and socially engaging, allowing older adults to move freely, rest, interact, and remain visible in public life.

Importantly, the framework does not limit age-friendliness to physical design alone. It emphasises that older adults should be actively involved in planning and decision-making.

In this thesis, age-inclusive public space is understood through both of these lenses as a design condition and as a matter of spatial justice. The goal is not to create separate spaces for older adults, but to ensure that shared public environments genuinely support continued presence across age groups. So that being outside, in daily life, remains a real option.



Figure2: Elderly in a park

Environmental Gerontology

What does it mean to grow older in a place? Not just to live there, but to keep moving through it without hesitation, to depend on it without overthinking, to recognise it almost instinctively. Environmental gerontology starts from a simple idea, but one that becomes more layered the longer you think about it: ageing is not only biological. It is relational. It happens in the ongoing interaction between a person and the environments they inhabit (Lawton & Nahemow, 1973). Over time, familiar spaces begin to feel different. Not suddenly, but gradually. A route that once felt effortless becomes something you quietly assess. Lawton and Nahemow describe this as person- environment fit. As capacities change, well-being depends on how well the environment responds. When it doesn't,

people do not necessarily resist it they adapt. Eventually, parts of the neighbourhood fall out of everyday life, not because of a single barrier, but because small mismatches build up. Wahl and Weisman (2003) extend this by suggesting that environments shape identity as well as action. For someone who has lived in the same place for years, the neighbourhood carries memory. A connection to personal history is quietly disrupted (Rowles & Bernard, 2013). The question is not only whether Bergsjön's spaces are accessible, but whether they are liveable. Whether they support the everyday rhythms of moving, pausing, and simply being outside as one grows older.

Age Integration and Intergenerational Public Life

Age integration is people of different ages sharing the same spaces and participating in everyday life together (Hagestad & Uhlenberg, 2006). But when you look at how cities actually function, it becomes less obvious. Life is organised by age in subtle but persistent ways. Schools, workplaces, and care facilities separate generations, and public spaces often follow this pattern without explicitly intending to. Over time, spaces begin to serve whoever finds them easiest to use. The result is not total separation, but a kind of quiet distancing.

Different generations live near each other, but don't often overlap in daily life. Hagestad and Uhlenberg (2006) describe this as age segregation not planned, but emerging from environments that were never designed with everyone in mind. This matters because shared space does something that organised interaction often cannot. Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) show that even brief, repeated proximity between different groups can reduce social distance. When spaces no longer support staying, these moments become less frequent, and the city becomes more divided than it appears.

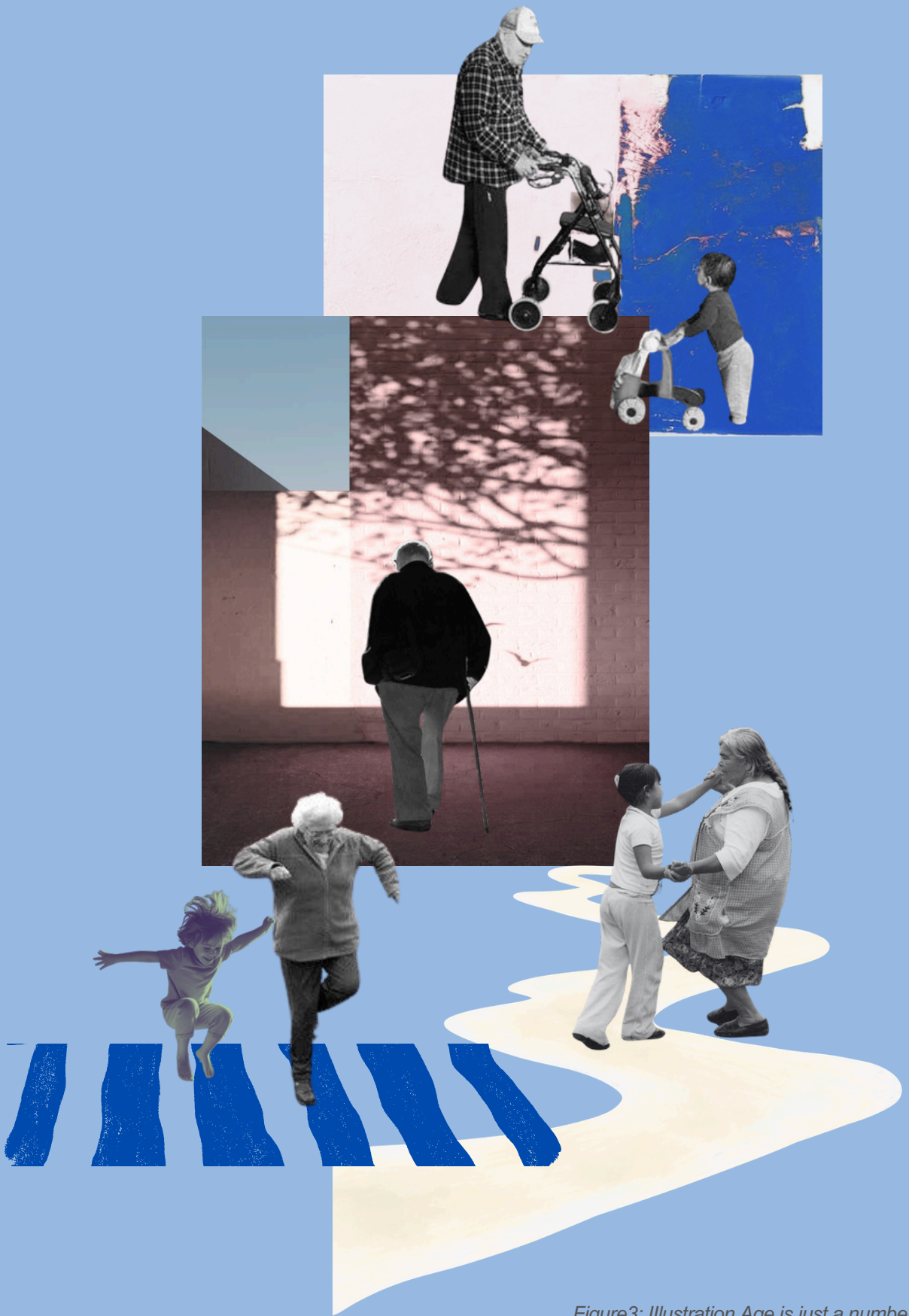


Figure3: Illustration Age is just a number

Why Intergenerational Space Matters

Public space is where age integration either happens or quietly disappears. What makes integration possible is not simply the presence of space but its quality. Gehl (2011) distinguishes between three kinds of activity: necessary activities things people do regardless of conditions; optional activities things people do when a space genuinely invites them; and social activities encounters that only emerge when the environment is comfortable and interesting enough to make people want to stay. Intergenerational encounter belongs to that last category. It cannot be scheduled or organised into existence. It happens when an older resident and a teenager end up near each other at a tram stop, or when someone sits on a bench near a playground with no particular reason. These small, accidental moments matter more than we might think but they only happen in spaces worth staying in.

Buffel and Phillipson (2016) discuss this further. Age-friendly cities should not simply be about making spaces accessible for older people they should be about making spaces where older people are visible participants in everyday public life, alongside everyone else. That shift changes quite a lot it moves the question from how do we accommodate older residents? to how do we design a city where different generations are simply present together? which is a much more interesting question.

Triangulation - Creating Conditions for Encounter

Even in a well-designed space, interaction between strangers doesn't just happen. People tend to stay within familiar social groups. An older resident and a teenager sharing the same space may never actually engage. This is where the idea of triangulation becomes important. W.H. Whyte (1980) introduced this concept to explain how an external element, like an object, a sound or something interesting, can create a small connection between people who did not plan to meet. What makes triangulation interesting is that it doesn't force interaction. It simply makes it possible. this principle informs interventions such an object facing the path, visible to anyone passing, that might give a child and an older resident something to notice together without either of them having set out to meet the other.

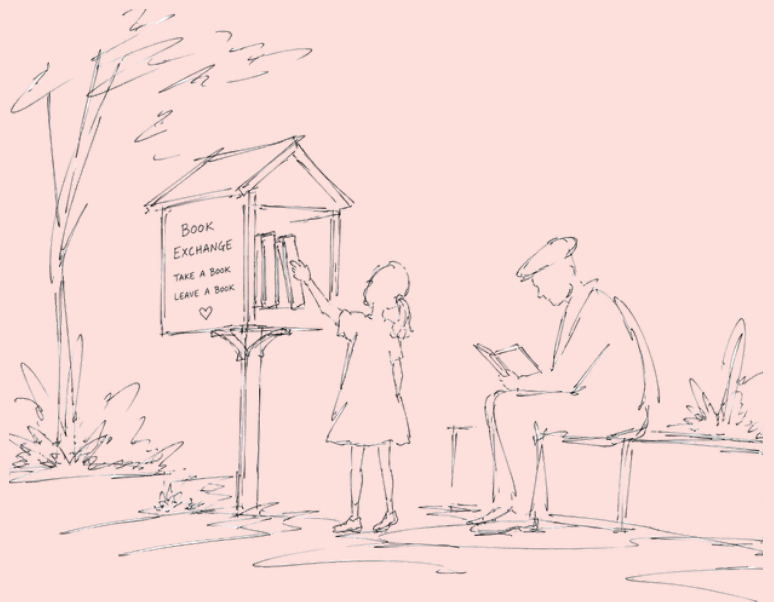


Figure4: Book exchange- 'external element'

Placemaking

What makes a space feel alive is difficult to define. It's rarely about size or materials alone. More often, it comes down to whether the space reflects how people actually use it. Placemaking starts from this observation. It shifts the focus from delivering finished designs to shaping spaces through use, meaning, and everyday activity (Project for Public Spaces, 2000). Instead of asking what should be built, it asks what is already happening and what is missing. It relies on observation rather than assumption. Jacobs (1961) and Whyte (1980) both emphasised watching how people behave in space as a way of understanding what works. Gehl (2011) extended this by focusing on small-scale conditions that influence whether people choose to stay. And often, they are the difference between a place that feels used and one that feels empty.

Placemaking and Ageing For older adults

The difference between a usable space and an inviting one becomes more pronounced. Older residents often have a detailed understanding of their environment that standard processes don't capture. This kind of knowledge comes from everyday experience, and it matters. Sanders and Stappers (2008) describe a move from designing for people to designing with them. In the context of ageing, this feels essential. The fieldwork in Bergsjön conversations, mapping, co-design was an attempt to work with that lived knowledge rather than treat it as secondary.

In this thesis, placemaking is both a way of thinking and a way of working. It reframes the question from whether a space meets standards to whether it feels welcoming. Methodologically, it shaped how the research was carried out. The conversations and workshops were not just data collection. They were a way of understanding how people experience space and letting that understanding guide design decisions. Ehn (2008) describes design as a form of collective thinking. That idea is reflected here. The proposals are not presented as finished solutions, but as responses to what residents described and observed. They are intentionally small, specific, and open-ended.

CASE STUDY

Park Fiction, Hamburg, Germany

Park Fiction is a community-led public space project located in the St. Pauli district of Hamburg, Germany. The project began as a response to the city's plan to sell the waterfront site for private commercial development. In reaction, local residents, activists, artists, and community groups came together to propose a different future for the space through a participatory planning process.

The process included workshops, discussions, exhibitions, film screenings, and other interactive activities that allowed residents to share ideas and imagine the park collectively. Participatory tools such as community maps, a garden library, action kits, and a public hotline were used to involve people in ways that felt approachable and open. The approach remained informal and exploratory, allowing the direction of the project to evolve over time.

Park Fiction highlights social interaction, shared ownership, and the idea that urban spaces can be shaped by the people who use them. The project eventually prevented the planned commercial development, and after several years, the park was completed in 2005. It has since been referenced in discussions around the "Right to the City" and public participation in Hamburg.

For this thesis, Park Fiction is considered as a reference for participatory urban design and community-driven placemaking. It shows how collective processes and shared imagination can influence the making of public spaces and contribute to more socially grounded urban environments.



Figure 5



Figure 6

880 Cities

880 Cities is a non-profit organization that focuses on creating inclusive and people-oriented urban spaces for all generations. The idea behind the project is that if a city functions well for an 8-year-old and an 80-year-old, it can become a better environment for everyone. Their work promotes walkability, accessibility, public health, and social interaction through human-centered urban design strategies.

The organization often works with temporary interventions, participatory workshops, and tactical urbanism to understand how communities interact with public space. Their projects encourage residents to actively shape their surroundings and strengthen neighborhood identity through everyday social activities. By prioritizing comfort, safety, and accessibility, 880 Cities demonstrates how small urban interventions can improve the quality of public life and create stronger community relationships.

In this thesis 880 Cities is relevant as it highlights the importance of designing inclusive public environments that encourage interaction between different age groups and support social wellbeing within the urban context.

Superkilen, Copenhagen

Superkilen is a public urban park located in the Nørrebro district of Copenhagen, designed to celebrate the multicultural identity of the surrounding neighborhood. The project integrates public spaces, recreational areas, and urban infrastructure into a highly active social environment that reflects the diversity of the local community.

The park includes objects, furniture, and installations collected from different countries represented by the residents of the area. Through the use of strong colors, open public zones, and flexible activity spaces, Superkilen creates an environment that encourages interaction between different cultural groups and age categories. The project transforms everyday urban space into a platform for cultural representation and social coexistence.

Superkilen serves as a reference for creating inclusive and socially engaging public spaces that strengthen cultural identity and encourage interaction among diverse communities within the urban



Figure7: 8 80 Cities- Age-friendly communities.



Figure8: Superkilen, Copenhagen

Site Introduction - Bergsjön

Gothenburg, like the rest of Sweden, is experiencing demographic ageing. Gothenburg joined the WHO Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities and Communities in 2015, recognising that the city is growing rapidly and that an age-friendly perspective on urban planning is critical to helping older people remain independent and active in society.

Bergsjön is a district in eastern Gothenburg its defining physical characteristic is its terrain. It was built as part of Sweden's Million Programme -the nationwide initiative, running from 1965 to 1975, that set out to solve a housing crisis. The goal was to build a million new affordable housing. Eastern Bergsjön's construction began in 1965 and the western part followed in 1967 (Göteborgs Stad).The district uses post-war modernist planning ideals separated land uses, abundant green space, traffic separation and strong reliance on public transport.

The district's spatial structure is separated by land uses residential areas sit apart from shops, health centres, and services, often requiring residents to navigate significant changes in elevation to reach them. Green space is abundant with parks, forests, green corridors running through the district but it is green space shaped by topography, not always easy to move through. Public transport nodes, the tram and bus stops serve as the primary mobility hubs



Figure9: Gothenburg city map

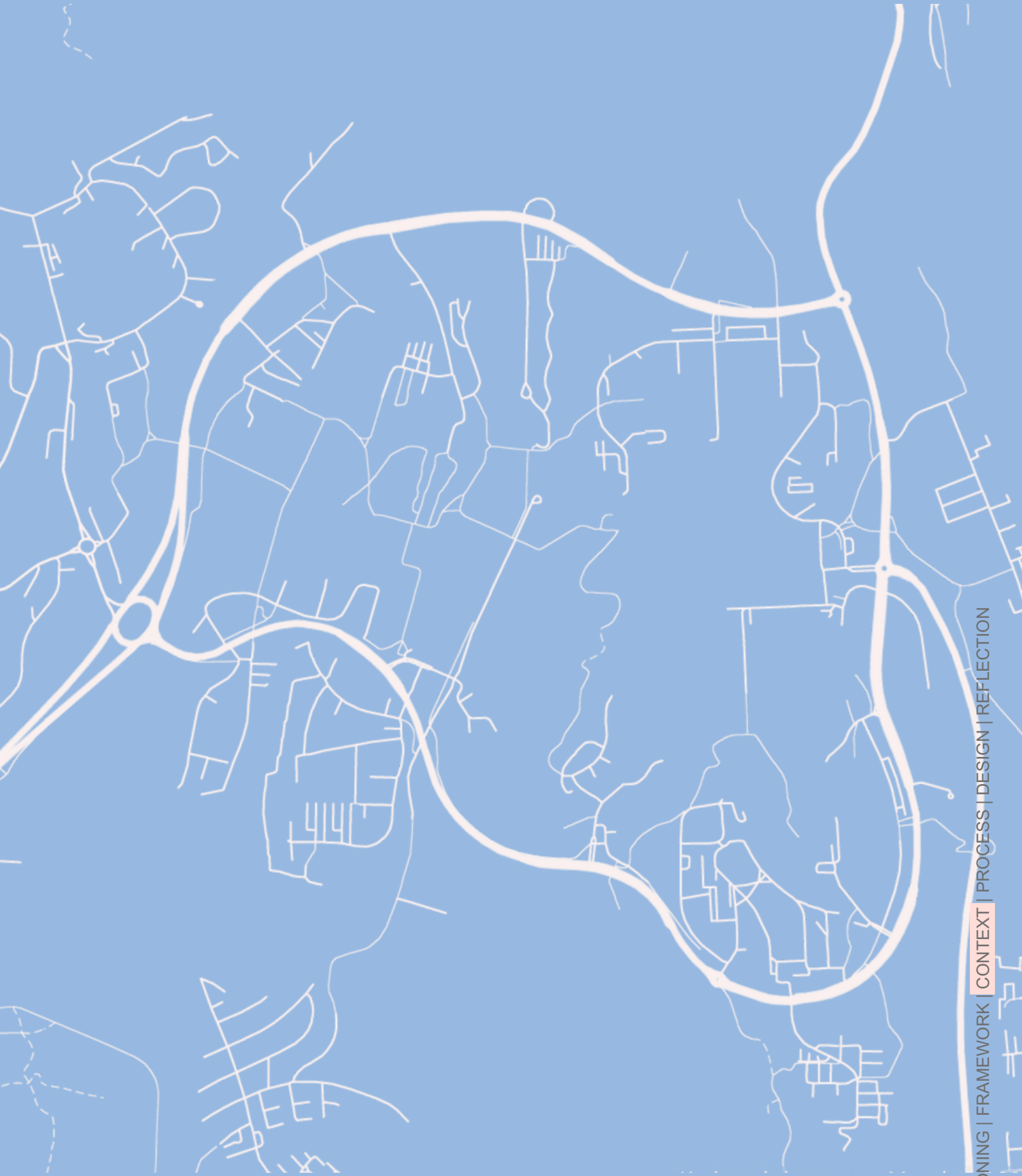


Figure10: Bergsjon city map

LOCAL CONTEXT

Local Initiatives and Everyday Social Spaces

Gothenburg city, where the site is located, offers various kinds of support for older adults of all ages (Göteborgs Stads). This includes help given at the help and care administration, and events that support health. These are usually organized at the local community meeting centers. All activities are listed in a calendar on the website, such as music, games, exercise and language learning

In Bergsjön, a number of local initiatives and everyday places already play a role in supporting social life for older residents. These spaces are not always formally planned as “age-friendly environments,” yet they often become important points of encounter, routine, and familiarity within the neighbourhood

One example is the Göteborgs Stad age-friendly initiatives, which organise weekly indoor activities for older residents at the local Kulturhuset. These gatherings typically include social activities, small events, or information sessions. While the initiative aims to support seniors across the city, participants often come from different neighbourhoods, meaning that the activity functions more as a citywide meeting point than a specifically local social space for Bergsjön residents.



Figure11: Bergsjön city map

Map local context

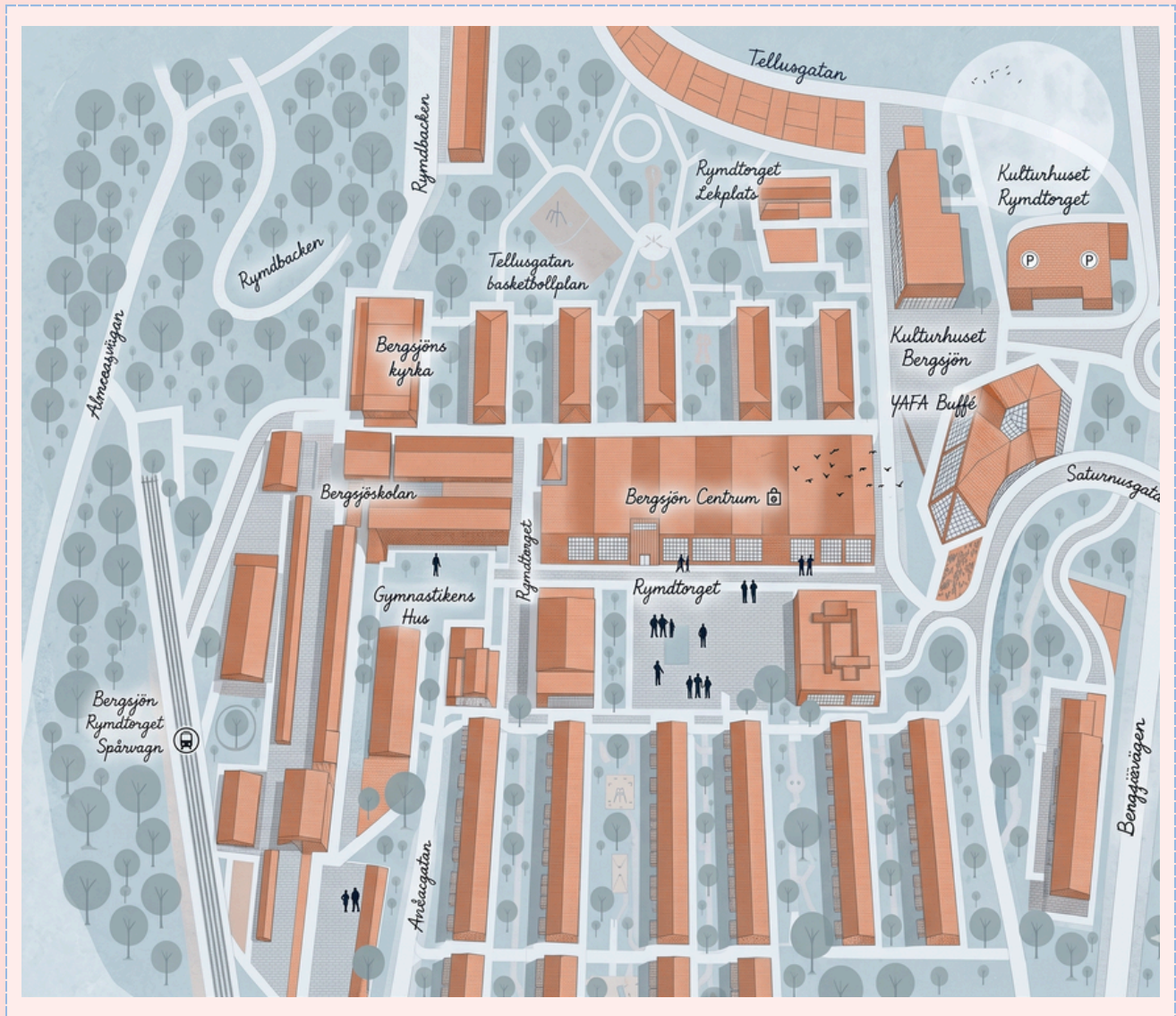


Figure12: Zoom-in Illustration of Rymdtorget

LOCAL CONTEXT

Beyond organised programmes, everyday places such as **local grocery stores** also play an important social role. The ICA Rymdtorget supermarket is one such example. Older residents frequently visit the store not only to shop but also to spend time in the seating area within the shopping centre. After shopping, some choose to sit for a while, observe activity around them, or briefly interact. These small moments of presence and observation contribute quietly to the social life of the area.

Religious spaces also function as informal meeting points. The local **Svenska kyrkan** church in Bergsjön hosts gatherings where older residents come together for conversation, shared meals, or community activities. For some participants, the church provides a familiar and supportive setting where social interaction happens more naturally.

Housing organisations also play a role in shaping social opportunities. The municipal housing company **Familjebostäder i Göteborg** provides housing for older residents who live largely independently. Within the Rymdporten building, occasional indoor activities such as weekly games are organised. However, participation tends to remain small, often involving the same five or six residents. This may reflect limited awareness of the events or simply the challenge of sustaining regular participation in small neighbourhood programmes.

At a broader scale, the **Bergsjön 2031** initiative represents an ongoing effort to guide long-term development in the area. The programme focuses on improving living conditions, strengthening community life, and supporting sustainable neighbourhood development.

Taken together, these places and initiatives form a local social landscape for older residents in Bergsjön. Some are formal programmes organised by institutions, while others emerge more informally through everyday destinations-shopping, attending church, or meeting neighbours. Understanding this network of actors and spaces helps reveal how social life currently unfolds in the neighbourhood, and where opportunities might exist to strengthen everyday interaction in public space.



Figure13: Illustration Social spots

PROCESS 'FormFollowsFeeling'

4 Co-design workshop



2 Interviews & Conversations

1 Field observations 2 Interviews & Conversations 3 Participatory mapping



Figure14: Illustration Methods used

3 Participatory mapping



1 Field observations



4 Co-design workshop 5 Identifying themes 6 Speculative Design

5 Identifying themes

Participatory Methodology

Introduction

The process began with identifying the local actors who shape everyday life for elderly residents in the area. Three emerged as central: Bergsjön Kulturhuset, which organises weekly activities for elderly residents; the church at Rymdtorget, which hosts informal gatherings throughout the week; and Rymporten, also located at Rymdtorget, which provides activities for residents of the adjoining elderly housing. Once these actors were identified, the next step was to design an approach that could engage residents directly while respecting how they already use these spaces. Coordinating a formal workshop at the Kulturhuset took time, so in parallel I pursued lighter, more flexible methods - interviews and mapping exercises that could be carried out. This combination made it possible to build an understanding of the context and surface gaps in everyday experience before the formal workshop took place.

Interviews

Since activities at the church and at Rymporten are pre-planned and attendance patterns differ at each, a structured group session was not feasible at either location.

At the church, elderly residents drop in at different times of day sometimes with friends, sometimes alone, so I held short individual conversations with those willing to talk.

At Rymporten (part of Bergsjön Centrum) Familjebostäder organises activities for the elderly, they follow a fixed weekly game format, attended largely by the same small group of elderly, with little flexibility in timing. There I was given a brief slot during the activity to introduce myself and have a short conversation with participants, and I also interviewed the person in charge of the activities, who offered valuable insight into the elderly housing context and how activities are organised and attended.

To work around the language barrier, I prepared a questionnaire (refer appendix for the questionnaire) in Swedish so that the same set of questions could be put to each participant consistently and answered with ease. The questions covered their everyday destinations, what motivates them to leave the house, what makes it difficult to do so, and what they would like to see in their neighbourhood. Asking the same questions across participants made it possible to compare responses and identify recurring themes

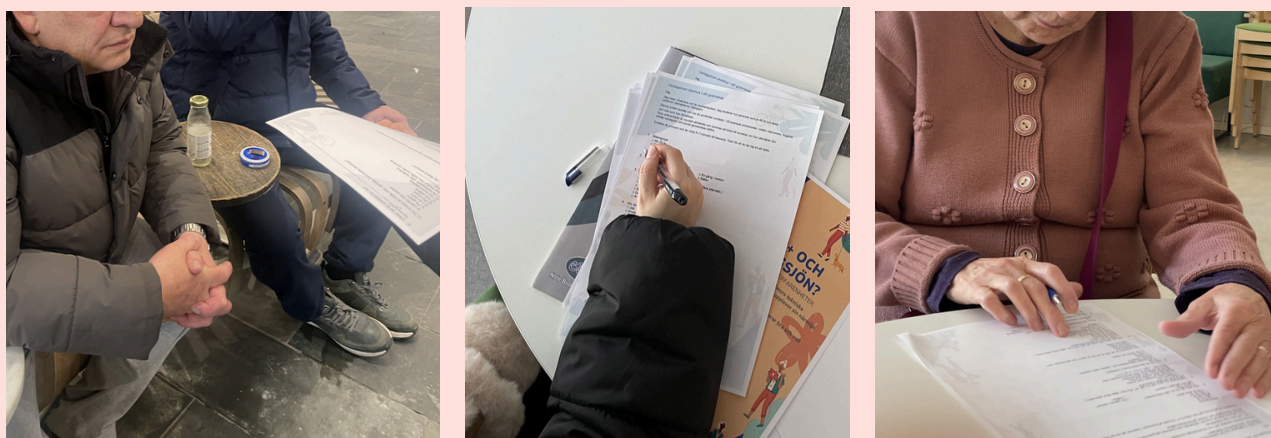


Figure15: Interviews

Mapping

Alongside the interviews, mapping was used as a spatial counterpart to the verbal questions. Participants were asked to indicate the places they regularly visit, the routes they typically take, the spaces they actively avoid, and the spaces they enjoy. They were also asked where they would make changes and why. This method made it possible to anchor their experiences to specific locations in the neighbourhood and to begin tracing patterns of use and avoidance that words alone could not always capture.

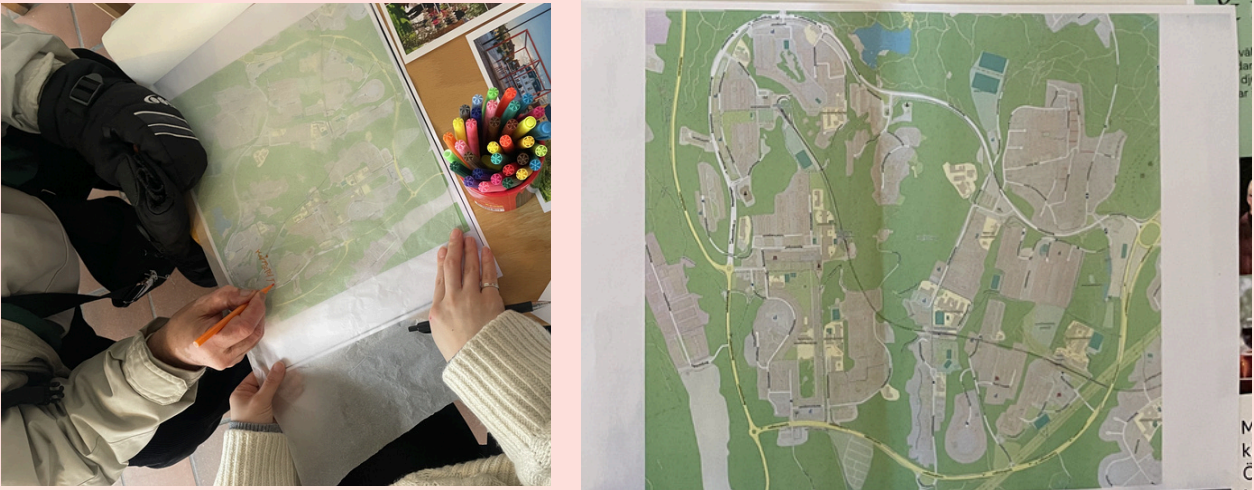


Figure16: Mapping

Visual Preference

During the interviews, it became clear that some participants found it difficult to verbally explain their preferences or answer abstract questions about public space. The visual preference method therefore helped make the conversation easier and more intuitive. Instead of describing spaces in words, participants could point to or mark the images that resonated with them. Printed images of various public spaces were shown, and participants were asked which ones appealed to them and which did not, along with their reasons. Having something concrete to react to allowed them to imagine and articulate qualities they valued or rejected in public space. This method was particularly useful in drawing out preferences related to atmosphere, scale, and feelings of safety or comfort.



Figure17: Visual preference

Workshop

The final stage was a participatory workshop held at Bergsjön Kulturhuset, organised in collaboration with Göteborg Stad's elderly initiatives team. The workshop took place immediately after one of their regular events, where five participants agreed to stay and take part. The aim was to identify design expectations and the kinds of places that would encourage elderly residents to spend more time outdoors. Model making was used as the central activity: using printed images, magazines, and small physical elements, participants created simple spatial models on a shared board, cutting and arranging images into collages and using sticks to mark spatial features. This hands-on format allowed them to actively contribute to the design process and articulate their ideas for seating areas, gathering spaces, and other small interventions that could support everyday public life. Each participant then explained the model they had made and identified possible sites in the neighbourhood where their proposal could be located. Beyond the spatial proposals themselves, the workshop also opened up wider conversations that the earlier interviews had only touched on about loneliness, about what it feels like to grow old in the neighbourhood, memories and stories of past and about the social dimensions of public space that go beyond physical design. These reflections added an important emotional and social layer to the findings and shaped how the spatial proposals were later interpreted.



Figure18: Workshop

Conclusion

Across the interviews, mapping, visual preference exercises, and workshop, a wide range of perspectives, preferences, and spatial concerns were collected from three different settings, each with its own social character. The findings from each method and location were then brought together and analysed side by side. Themes that recurred across participants, methods, and sites were treated as common ground, and these shared concerns formed the basis for the design directions that follow.

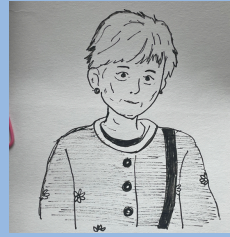


Figure19: Illustration

WHAT THE ELDERS SAY

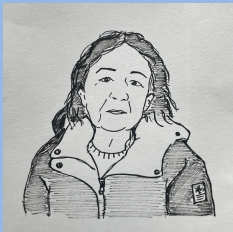
Everyday life becomes more of a huge difference. It's not that easy to get into something else, to replace the person or people you've lost. It's not just saying hi, here I come. and then people should just let you in and think you're a nice person because that's not certain.

-Britt, 75 yrs



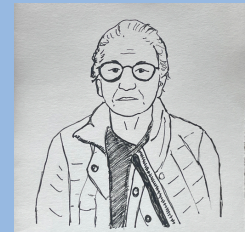
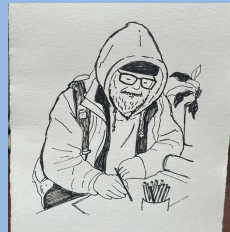
God, how boring we really are!

-Kristina, 81 Yrs



And the hills just appear now. They weren't there before, when I was young. And the distances are more noticeable; I think that's what years do.

I walk a lot. And there is so much for the kids to do not much for us old .



It's not that you have nothing to do. It's empty but you know, ah it's empty. I miss my cat too. If you've experienced something, it's an emptiness. You have no one to tell it to. when I come out, I have a lot I want to tell. It's not easy to get into any other thing.

-Gunnel 85 yrs

"When I'm with only people my age, I get depressed."

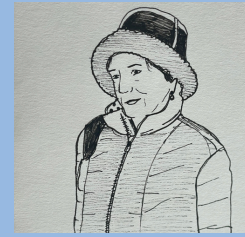
I want activities for all ages. Something like Qigong or tai chi in the summer. And by the way, all the activities that offer I'm really tired because they only offer seniors. In my culture, we hang out with whole families and then we have all ages. And when I'm with only people my age, I get depressed. I find it boring.

I had a dog before, I used to walk here a lot. But now I need to have this place with some benches. Some place to have coffee or some hot buns.

It should be mixed for all ages.

There are many immigrants who live here, and many families with children who have a youthful background that we can get together and go for a walk after kindergarten or after school and learn the names of all the wild flowers and forest plants and birds. But it should be mixed for all ages and preferably many children. It will be great fun because we will learn quite a lot from each other.

- Mariyam 71 Yrs



I come to meet my friend, we meet at the centrum everyday, there are a lot of people coming to shop it's then good to see.



A place to have coffee!

I come to this church often. It's an important place for many. We have friends here and we sit after the service and talk. We try to help each other when we have coffee but it would be nice to hangout somewhere else other than here, like a place to have coffee and oatmeal cookie.

-Inga Hena

Everything is said online today. Not all older people go online. It's strange, isn't it.

When something happened, they advertise it in the newspapers or in some other way like posters. I haven't seen that now. I live in family housing, we get internet internally. But on the other hand, we have a staircase and then they don't put a note there but they write on the internet that they are going to have a meeting somewhere. For those who don't look at the internet, there are a lot of people who don't know anything. They're missing out. What's happening now is that the local newspapers have disappeared.

-Siv 80 yrs

Its not very attractive so I don't go there.

There are bad benches where I live on Teleskogatán. They are unpainted and bare and uninviting. I miss a park where there are polished painted benches. I miss that my housing association hasn't set out any seats for us.

-Cecilia, 68 Yrs

Finalising Idea

The design proposals in this thesis did not come from a fixed typology. Instead, they developed gradually through the participatory process with older residents in Bergsjön.

What participants described was very similar across all the methods. Rather than asking for large new developments or completely new facilities, older residents pointed out smaller and more specific things that were missing from the spaces they already used every day. Five main themes appeared repeatedly across the interviews, mapping sessions, and workshop:

- The need for more seating in identified places
- More greenery and natural elements
- Informal social spaces, such as a café or places to sit and talk with others
- Outdoor spaces that felt pleasant, attractive, and well cared for
- Spaces where different age groups could be together without organised activities

These themes did not lead to one single design solution. Instead, they suggested a group of small spatial qualities that could improve existing spaces without completely changing them.

Choosing the Site -Teleskopgatan

The site was identified through the participatory process.

During the mapping sessions, participants were asked to mark their daily routes, the places where they usually stopped, and the locations they avoided or found difficult to use. Teleskopgatan appeared repeatedly. The area already contains a small park space. However, the benches are old, damaged, and mostly unused. Older residents explained that it is usually crowded in the summer but lacks maintenance and comfort. They often pass through the area on their way and do not use it, usually spending time at Rymdtorget for recreation. Instead of proposing a completely new intervention, the proposal for Teleskopgatan explores activation of the park with small spatial changes that could help transform an underused existing space into one where older residents, and others, may want to pause and spend time.

Key Takeaway

Absence is a sign

Older people's absence from outdoor space is not a lack of interest. It is a response to how streets and places are designed.

Comfort enables presence

For ageing bodies, comfort is a precondition for social life, not a luxury.

Designing for ageing helps many

If a place works for slower walkers and fragile bodies, it usually works better for all. Age-inclusive streets are family, disability- and climate-friendly streets.

Elders are experts

Older residents understand everyday routes, They read the neighbourhood through years of lived experience.

Participation needs continuity

Listening walks and workshops are only the first step. Trust grows when ideas reappear as visible changes on site.

Beyond programme-led ageing

Not everyone wants scheduled activities in centres. Public space must allow spontaneous, self-organised things to happen.

This question emerged in conversations with older residents in Bergsjön. It exposes a contradiction at the heart of current ageing-in-place policies while municipalities encourage elders to remain active and independent, sometimes the neighbourhood quietly pushes them inside. Many participants described “absence of no particular public space that would attract us to spend time outdoors”, so naturally indoors is not a outcome of age but a spatial response to environments that feel inadequate. What I noticed is that most activities aimed at older people- gatherings, cultural programmes take place in enclosed, scheduled settings. Which lead to the question of the idea that later life belongs in meeting rooms and activity halls rather than on streets, squares and forest edges. The question therefore challenges architects and planners to see indoor-centred ageing not as a preference, but as a symptom of public spaces that fail to recognise elders as everyday urban users.

Outcome

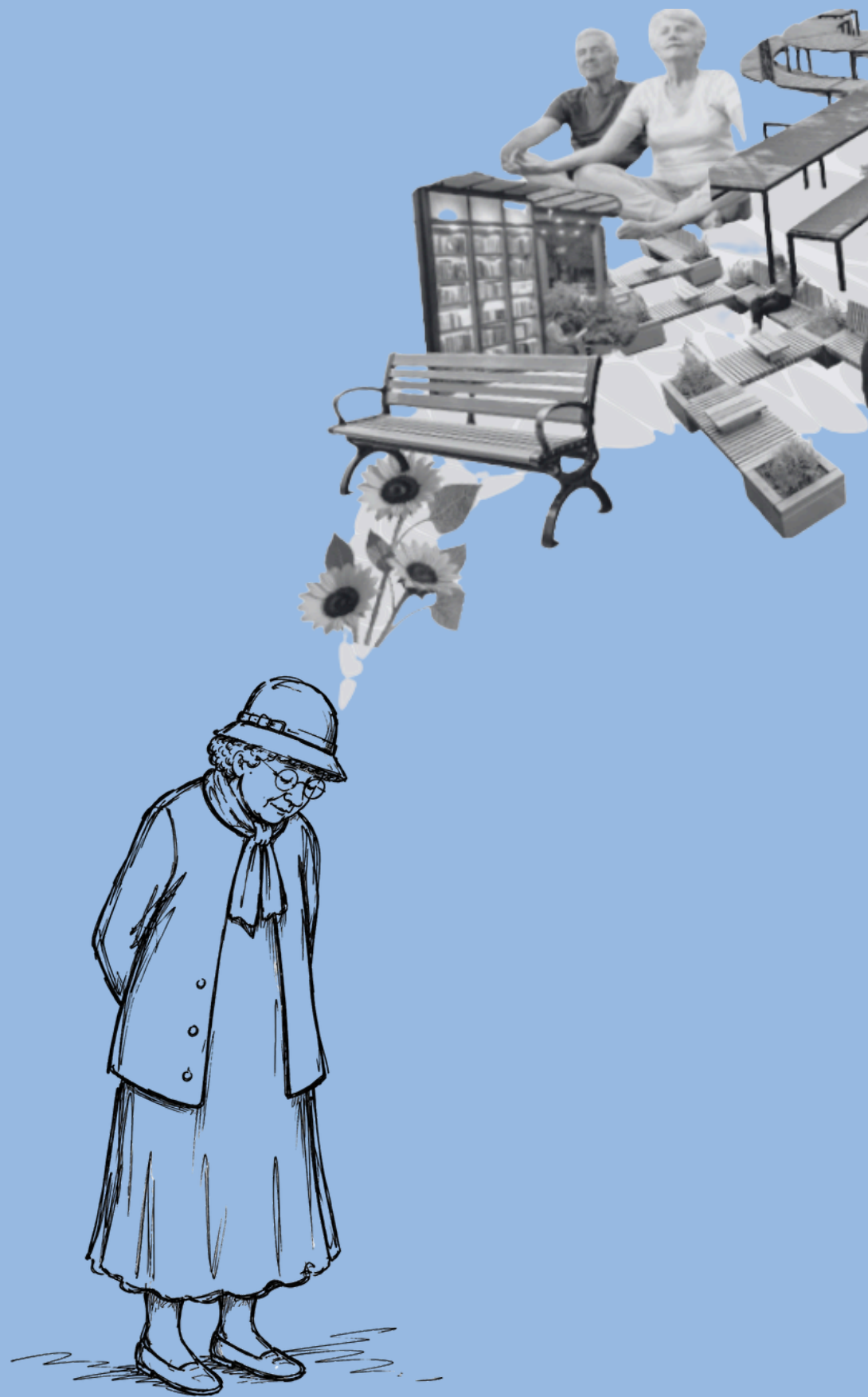


Figure20: Illustration workshop outcomes



Design outcome: activating the existing park at Teleskopgatan for intergenerational use. The proposals that emerged from this process are small, specific, and directly connected to what older residents described during the fieldwork. A space conceived exclusively for older adults could risk the very separation this project seeks to address. The design outcome is therefore not a designated space for a particular age group. It is a space designed with sufficient specificity that it supports the presence of older adults and in doing so, becomes an environment where different generations occupy the same space at the same time, for their own reasons, without any programme or organised activity.



Figure21: Sketch 'shared space'

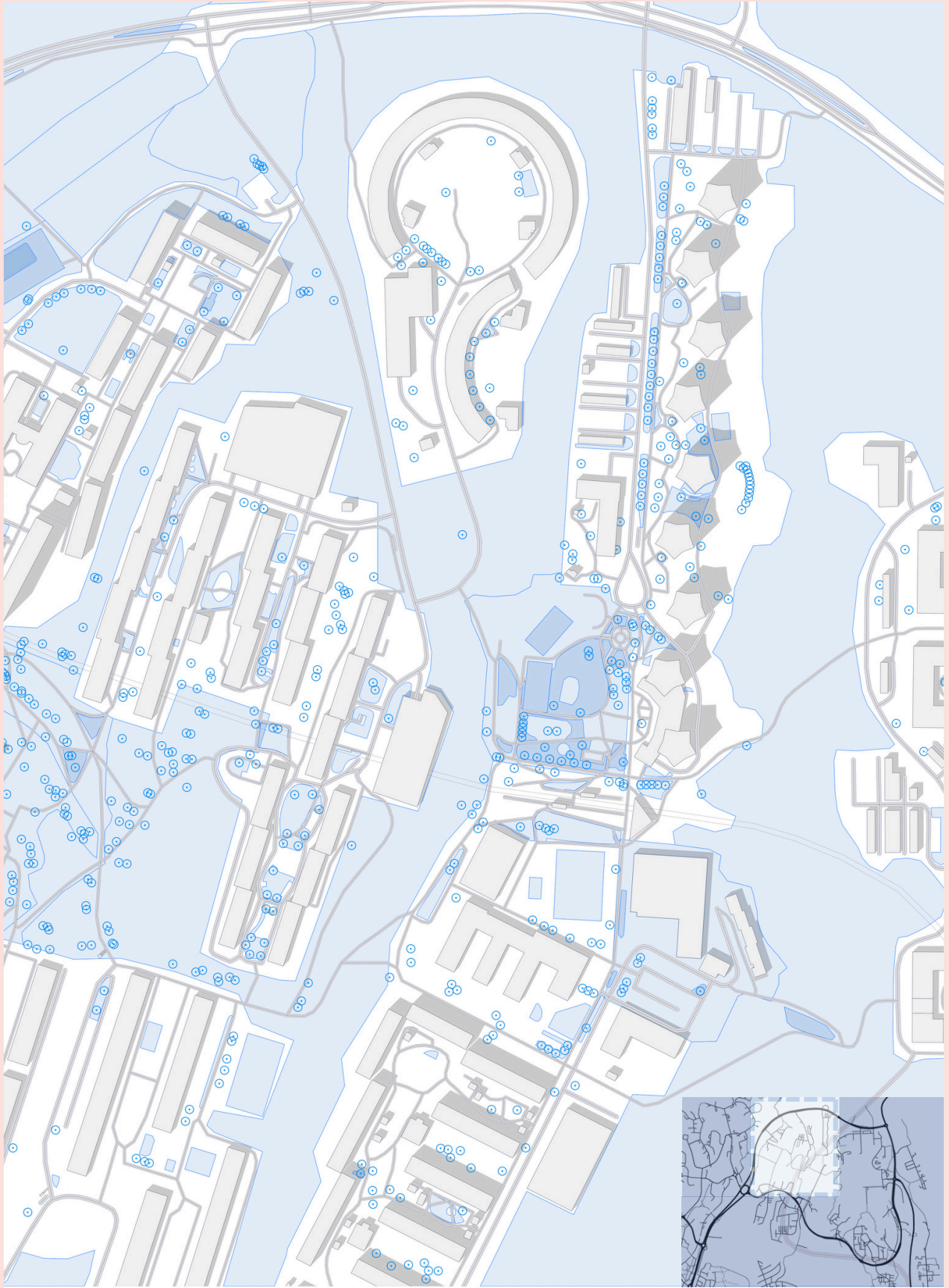


Figure22: Teleskopgaten Map

THE SITE

Teleskopgatan is a residential area and tram stop located in western part of Bergsjön in, Gothenburg. The site is situated within a transitional zone between an urban environment and a green area.

The surroundings include several everyday public functions and community spaces, such as: Residential apartment buildings, the Teleskopgatan tram stop pedestrian pathways, park space, a local service shop near the tram stop nearby schools and playground and sports facilities in the surrounding area.



Figure23: Site Surrounding

A key reason for its selection is the presence of existing facilities that can be integrated into the design proposal and reinterpreted with age friendly elements. These include seating areas beneath a roof, and a boulebana. There is also adjacent to sports facilities and pre school, offering opportunities to support activities that encourage interaction between different age groups, particularly between children and the elderly.

Additionally, the western portion of the site features varied terrain elevations, presenting both a design challenge and an opportunity to develop a unique, context-sensitive intervention.



Figure24: Park Zoom In



Figure25:Existing elements in the park



Figure25:Existing elements in the park

Criteria & Principles Defining the Design Outcome

The criteria that guide the design proposals were developed through a combination of the theoretical framework used in the early stages of the thesis together with the participatory methods carried out in Bergsjön. From this combined process, four connected criteria emerged.

Engagement

Engagement focuses on what people do in a space once they come there including activities, social interaction, and how flexible the space is for different kinds of use. This idea is connected to the framework of intergenerational space, which sees the presence of different age groups together in public space as an important quality on its own. During the workshop, many conversations touched on loneliness and the importance of simply being around other people, even without organised activities or events. Because of this, engagement became an important criterion by itself, rather than just part of destinations or activities.

Comfort

These are physical conditions that make it easier and more pleasant for people to spend time outdoors such as seating, shade, safety. This idea is connected to environmental gerontology, which understands the relationship between the body and its surroundings as especially important in later life. During participatory methods elderly often described pleasant spaces as places that felt comfortable. In this sense, it becomes a basic condition that allows older residents to use and remain in public space comfortably.

Features of the Environment

This focus on the qualities that make people want to stay longer in a space the things that make a place feel attractive and worth spending time in. This idea is influenced by the framework that sensory and atmospheric qualities such as greenery, calmness, and beauty can strongly affect how older people experience a place. In the workshop participants showed that a sense of care and maintenance, and overall aesthetic quality were important. And it can be understood through the experiences and preferences of the people who actually use the space.

Destinations

These are the places that give people a reason to move towards it such as gathering spaces, activity areas, or small social spots.

What counted as a destination for older residents in Bergsjön was identified through the workshops. Participants pointed towards specific qualities they valued, such as a small cafe, or a garden space.



Figure26: Criteria for design



Figure27: Criteria for design principles

Proposed Interventions

These proposals did not begin with design. They began with what older residents in Bergsjön described, mapped, and pointed to during the participatory process. Each intervention is an attempt to translate that knowledge into a place small, grounded, and located where people said it was needed.

The proposed interventions form a single design system rather than a collection of isolated objects. Their shared purpose is captured by the project's guiding idea, the Garden of Relations: a park that produces everyday encounters across age groups. When elderly residents, children, parents and visitors move through overlapping daily routines in the same landscape, familiarity, visibility and mutual care follow.

How the interventions were derived

The design was reasoned in three steps. First, identifying existing elements mapped what the park already offers : a gazebo (A), a playground (B), two children's play areas (C, D), a picnic table (E) and a fenced garden (F). Second, these gaps were translated into social qualities the park should perform rest, a destination, conversation, intergenerational bonding and care, and greenery with shelter. Each proposed intervention was tagged to the specific role it plays (the pictograms beside each item), so that form follows a social function. Third, the interventions were distributed as a connected network, positioned along existing paths and desire lines so that routines naturally overlap and the formerly isolated elements are stitched into one continuous social field.

The six interventions

1. Playful Void Deck Wall.

A playful, semi-open wall that turns a quiet edge beside the play area into a sheltered place to sit, watch and meet bringing comfort and greenery to a spot people already pass.

2. Kiosk.

A small café of the kind residents asked for, giving the park a destination and a reason to linger; its everyday activity also keeps the space watched over and alive.

3. Books & Benches.

A continuous, curving bench with a book exchange that invites people to stop, read and sit beside one another, the quiet engagement of simply being around others.

4. Flexible Pavilion.

A circular pavilion whose spaces can be used in many ways through the year.

5. Canopy Seating.

A shaded, sheltered seat around a planted tree, a comfortable pause point for slower, calmer moments.

6. Community Garden.

The garden space residents pointed to: raised beds and a shared plot where tending something together builds routine and contact across generations.

A flexible Pavillion

Of the six, the Flexible Pavilion holds the most. A single curving, perforated wall makes a set of smaller niches for sitting together, quiet reading, conversation, climbing, resting and looking out around an open centre. The same structure can change through the year, hosting meditation, an exhibition, a community gathering, a winter installation, music or an outdoor cinema, so that one small space keeps giving different age groups a reason to return across the seasons.

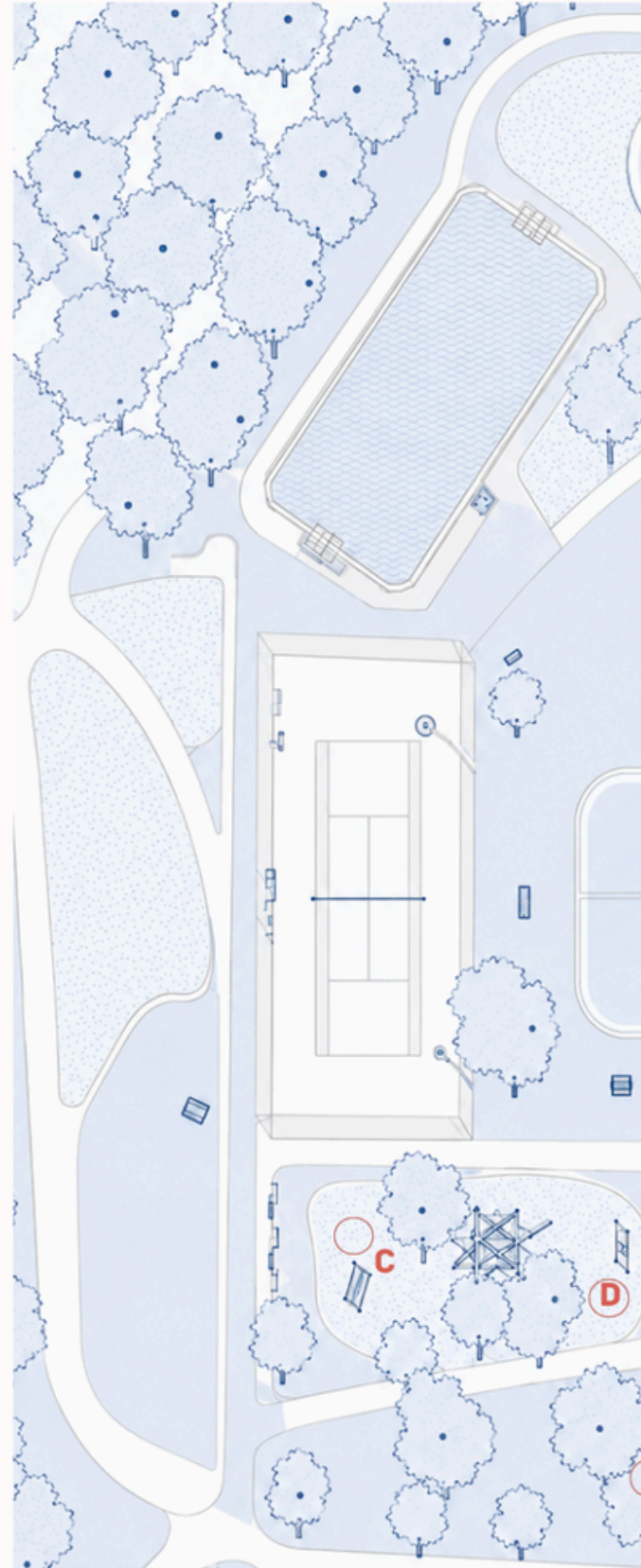
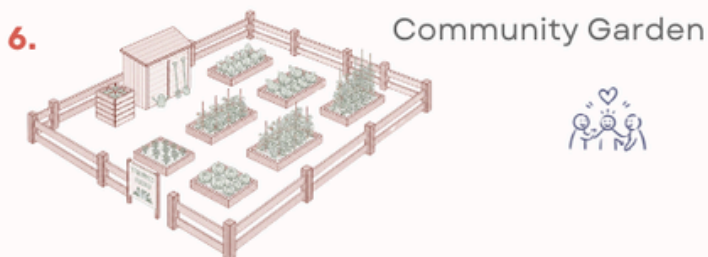
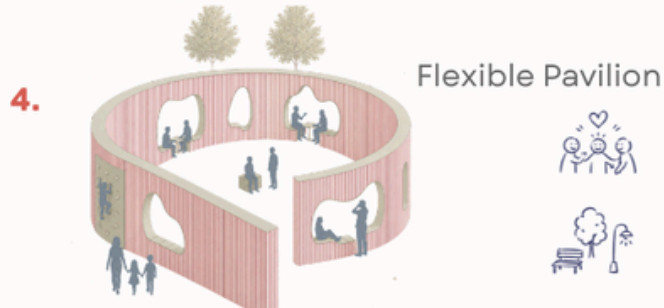
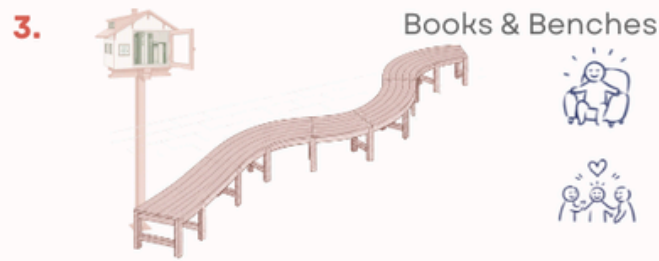
A garden of relations

Placed together along the park's paths, the interventions are meant to encourage interactions across age groups through informal, shared environments. Older residents, children, parents and visitors occupy the same landscape through overlapping daily routines, creating familiarity, visibility and mutual care. Small encounters become the foundation of belonging. Louder, more active uses sit within sight of quieter ones, so that different ages and tempos stay visible to one another without competing for the same space. Visibility supports a sense of care; nearness makes everyday contact possible. The proposals also keep and reinterpret what the park already offers, rather than starting from a blank site.

Small, and on purpose

The proposals are deliberately small. This is partly the scale a thesis allows, but it is also the point: a set of spatial ideas grounded in what older residents actually described, and placed where they said they were needed. They are not a finished solution but a way of thinking a starting point for making this park, and others like it, feel made for everyone who grows old in it.

PROPOSED INTERVENTIONS



Teleskopgatan park

Adaptive Use Scenarios



FLEXIBLE PAVILLION

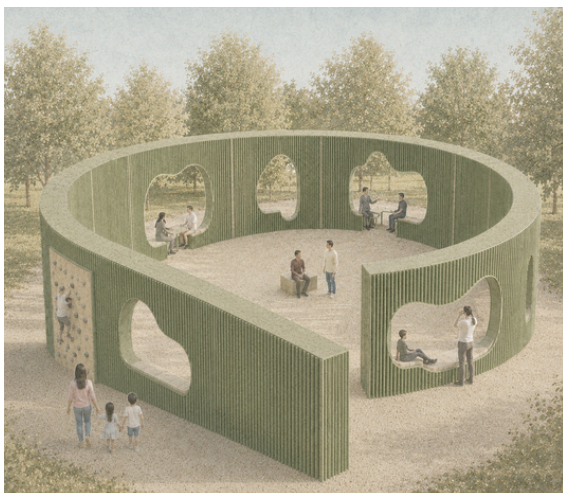
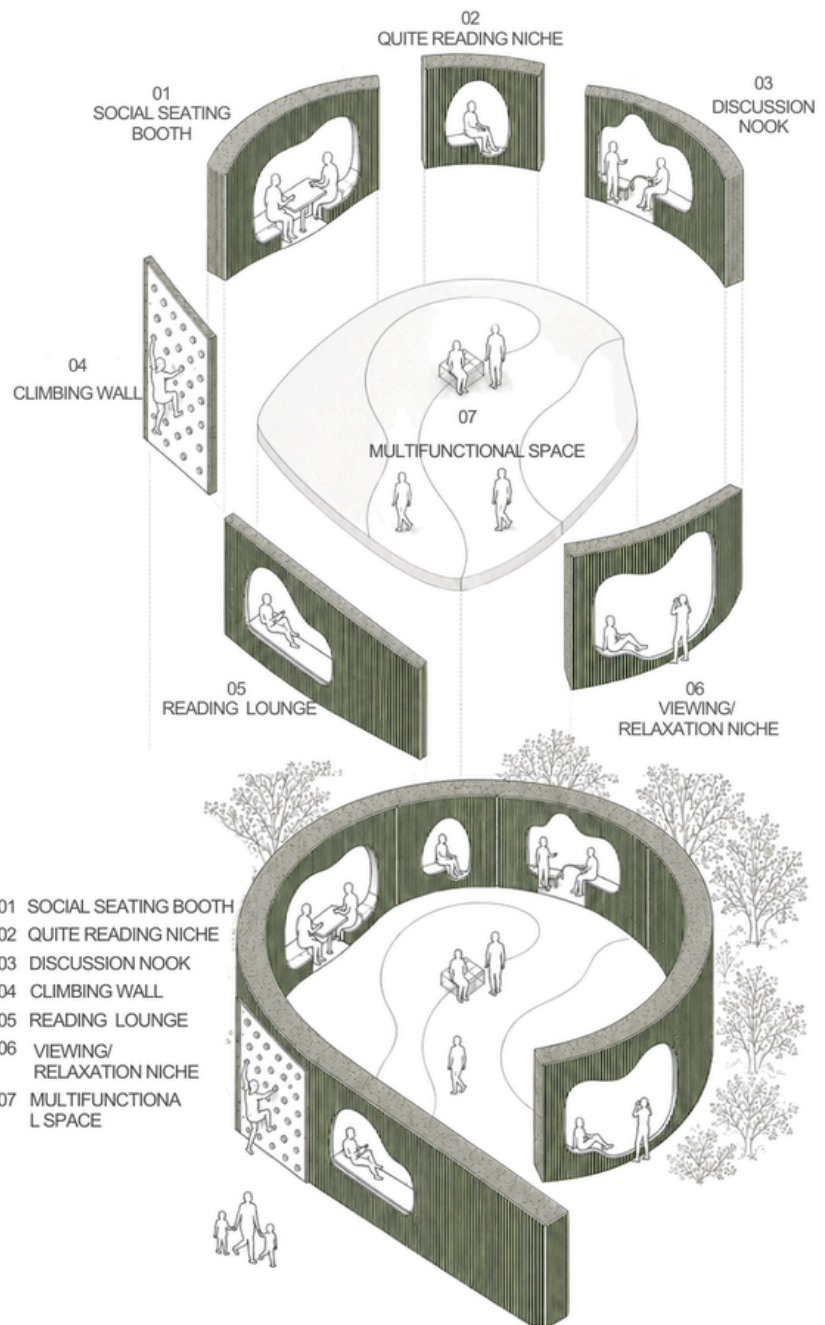


Figure29: Circular Pavillion



Figure30: Views

Garden of relations

Everyday Encounters

The garden encourages interactions across age groups through informal shared environments. Elderly residents, children, parents, and visitors occupy the same landscape through overlapping daily routines, creating familiarity, visibility, and mutual care. Small encounters become the foundation of belonging.





Figure31: Spatial relations

DISCUSSION

What this thesis did not address:

It is worth being honest about where this thesis stops. The work throughout has stayed close to the qualitative, to what older residents described, mapped, and pointed in Bergsjön. That felt like the right place to begin. The spatial knowledge older people carry is undervalued in most design processes, and taking it seriously was the whole point. But staying with that dimension meant leaving another one largely untouched: the physical conditions that decide whether a space is usable for an ageing body, and the seasonal conditions that decide whether it is usable at all.

Three things stand out- the bench itself, the light, and the season.

This thesis can say where a bench should go and what it should face. It cannot yet say what that bench should be. Seating for older adults needs to sit higher than a standard park bench somewhere around 480–520mm and it needs armrests, not as a comfort feature but as a functional one, giving the leverage to rise without help (Iwarsson & Ståhl, 2003). Resting intervals along a route matter as much as the route. Surface quality matters, an even, well-marked path is the difference between a walk and a risk. None of the proposals here have been tested against these criteria, and the closer any of them moves toward being built, the more that gap matters.

Light is the second. Older eyes lose sensitivity to contrast, which makes the usual outdoor lighting, disorienting rather than simply dim. Even, low-glare light does more for an ageing body than brighter light unevenly placed. The residents said as much in their own way: "Better lighting on the paths." The proposals respond to that instinct but do not specify it, and lighting is not the kind of thing that can be left to instinct once something is built.

The season is the third, and it may be the largest, because in a Nordic winter it undoes much of what works the rest of the year. Bergsjön is not one place across the year. It is several. The bench that faces the afternoon sun in June sits under snow or ice in December, when the light is gone by half past three and the planting is bare. Ice, and the fear of falling on it, are among the strongest reasons older people stop going out at all. A pause point that works in August is, in February, a place no one reaches. The proposals were imagined for the good day. They have not been asked whether they hold up when the weather turns against them.

There is something underneath all three. Ergonomic standards, lighting specifications, snow-clearance schedules these are produced by researchers, regulators, and maintenance departments. Lived spatial knowledge is produced by the people who move through it every day. This thesis has argued for the value of the second. Not instead of the first, but alongside it. The most honest design process would hold both in tension: lived knowledge to shape what gets designed, and technical and seasonal expertise to shape how it gets built and whether it survives the winter. Moving from a proposal to something real would mean bringing ergonomic expertise, lighting design, accessibility evaluation, and an honest reckoning with the seasons into direct conversation with the participatory findings gathered here. This thesis has done the first and points to the other two as the work that comes next.

REFLECTION

The decision to begin with people rather than with design felt right from the start, but it was not always easy to hold onto. There were moments when I wanted to move faster, and have a final outcome in mind before the next step. Since the process of getting permissions and finding the right contact took time, the participatory process taught me to slow down. To wait. To trust that it will eventually lead somewhere meaningful.

Working with participatory methods as a student researcher, in a neighbourhood that was not mine, in a language that was not my first, taught me a great deal about the limits of research. I could not always fully understand what was being said. I could not always read the silences between words. I depended on trust, the trust of elderly who were willing to sit with me and answer my questions, and the trust of coordinators and friends who helped me translate these words.

The visual activities worked well because they gave people something concrete to respond to. Abstract questions about public space can be difficult sometimes. Having a map to point to, or an image to react to, made the conversation more engaging. The workshop, though small, opened up conversations I had not expected about loneliness, about loss, about what it feels like growing old and the stories from their younger days.

The proposals that emerged from this process are small. This was intentional, but it also reflects a limitation. A thesis of this scale, with this timeframe, could not deliver a fully resolved solution. What it could offer was a way of thinking a set of spatial ideas grounded in what elderly actually described, placed in locations they actually identified.

This thesis has limitations that are worth naming honestly. The participant group was small. The findings are specific to Bergsjön and cannot be generalised across Gothenburg or other cities. People living in institutional care, or those who rarely leave their homes, were not reached by this research and their experiences may be quite different. The design proposals do not address questions of implementation, cost, governance, or long-term maintenance.

REFLECTION

The language barrier sometimes made me feel like a audience in my own research, but grateful to all the friends that helped me along the way. All conversations were conducted in Swedish, transcribed and translated into English by me. I have tried to capture as much possible what people said and meant. AI-assisted writing tools were used to help me with grammer and sentence structuring to express more clearly in English throughout this thesis. The thoughts, analysis, fieldwork, and design decisions are my own.

Despite these limitations, I believe this thesis contributes something meaningful. Not a finished solution, but a way of working. A demonstration that older residents have precise and valuable knowledge about the spaces they use every day, that does not always reach planning processes, but that should.

Looking Forward

This project ends where many others begin with a set of proposals that have not yet been built, and a process that has not yet been continued. The most honest conclusion I can offer is that the work of making public space genuinely age-inclusive is not something a single thesis can complete. It requires ongoing conversation, sustained attention, and the willingness to keep listening long after the research has formally ended.

What I hope this thesis leaves behind is not a design, but a question worth continuing to ask. What would it take for every older resident in Bergsjön and in cities like it to step outside each morning and feel, without hesitation, that *the street ahead was made for them too?*

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Vardagslivet utomhus i ditt grannskap

Hej,

Jag heter Chethana och är masterstudent. Jag studerar hur personer som är 60 år och äldre upplever utemiljöerna i Bergsjön.

Denna enkät handlar om hur du använder området – till exempel promenader, möten med andra, trygghet och vad som kan förbättras.

Dina erfarenheter är mycket värdefulla och kommer att bidra till kunskap om hur utemiljöer kan stödja vardagsliv och social gemenskap bättre.

Enkäten är anonym och tar cirka 5–7 minuter att besvara. Tack för att du tar dig tid att delta.

1. Åldersgrupp
 - 60–70 år
 - 70–80 år
 - 80–90 år
 - 90 år eller äldre
2. Hur ofta går du ut i ditt närområde?
 - Varje dag
 - Flera gånger i veckan
 - En gång i veckan
 - Sällan
3. Vad brukar du göra när du går ut? (Du kan välja flera alternativ.)
 - Få frisk luft eller motionera
 - Sitta och vila
 - Träffa eller samtala med andra
 - Handla eller uträtta ärenden
 - Besöka park eller grönområde
 - Gå till vårdbesök eller andra bokade tider
 - Annat: _____
4. Hur tar du dig oftast fram i området?
 - Går
 - Använder hjälpmedel (t.ex. rullator eller rullstol)
 - Åker kollektivt
 - Cyklar
 - Kör bil
 - Får skjuts av någon
5. Hur upplever du att det är att gå på gator och gångvägar här?
 - Mycket bra
 - Ganska bra
 - Ibland svårt
 - Mycket svårt
6. Vad kan göra det svårt att gå? (Du kan välja flera alternativ.)
 - Ojämna eller skadade trottoarer
 - Halt under vintern
 - Branta backar
 - För få bänkar
 - Bristande belysning
 - Snabb eller intensiv trafik
 - Svåra övergångsställen
 - För trångt eller mycket folk
 - Inget särskilt
 - Annat: _____
7. Finns det tillräckligt med platser att sitta och vila?
 - Ja
 - Några, men inte tillräckligt
 - Mycket få
 - Inga
8. Känner du dig trygg när du vistas utomhus i området?
 - Alltid
 - För det mesta
 - Ibland
 - Sällan



9. I vilken del av området bor du?

10. Var brukar du träffa eller samtala med andra utomhus?

- Utanför min bostad
- På gatan
- I en park
- På torget
- Vid affärer
- Vid busshållplats
- På mötesplats eller kulturhus
- Jag brukar inte träffa andra utomhus
- Annat: _____

11. Känner du dig ibland ensam?

- Ja
- Nej
- Ibland
- Vet ej

12. Upplever du att utemiljöerna hjälper dig att känna gemenskap med andra?

- Ja, i hög grad
- Till viss del
- Inte särskilt mycket
- Inte alls

13. Vilken gata, park eller plats använder du oftast?

14. Finns det platser du undviker?

- Ja
 - Nej
- Om ja, vilka platser och varför?

15. Finns det någon gata eller park som skulle kunna bli mycket mer användbar/attraktiv för er om den förbättrades?

16. Vilka mindre förändringar skulle göra att du använder platsen mer?

17. Vad saknas mest i utemiljöerna för personer över 60 år?

- Fler sittplatser
- Säkrare övergångsställen
- Bättre belysning
- Fler mötesplatser
- Inget särskilt saknas
- Annat: _____

18. Vad skulle få dig att gå ut oftare?

19. Hur upplever du det att bli äldre i detta område?

- Mycket bra
- Bra
- Varken bra eller dåligt
- Svårt
- Mycket svårt

20. Är det något mer du vill tillägga?



