

Executive Summary

The global population is aging rapidly. Considering the magnitude of this ongoing demographic shift, it is critical to create and maintain community spaces that support the growing older adult population. Age-friendly planning aims to minimize the risks associated with aging while optimizing opportunities to improve well-being. The existing framework of age-friendly planning possesses several positive features such as emphasizing active aging and aging in place. However, there is a currently overlooked opportunity to utilize play to improve health, social cohesion, and longevity for older adults. Planners and even older adults themselves have been dismissive of the idea by assuming play is exclusive to children. Therefore, this report seeks to gain insights on older adult play from saturated older adult environments, such as age-restricted and age-friendly communities. These communities, with roots in the State of Florida as early as 1954, have emerged as an important place-based response to an aging population. In order to best understand the relationship between older adults and play spaces in an age-restricted community, a mixed method single case study analysis was conducted. This analysis was guided by the following three research objectives:

- (1) Assess older adult play spaces in a privately-owned environment through naturalistic observations.
- (2) Compare older adults' perceptions of and experiences with publicly and privately-owned play spaces through semi-structured interviews.
- (3) Develop recommendations to better incorporate play into age-friendly planning and design for public spaces.

A single case study analysis of Century Village East (CVE), an age-restricted community in Deerfield Beach, Florida, was completed to gain insight on the relationship between older adults and

play spaces. The first phase of this study analyzed older adult play behaviour using the Study of Older Adults and Play Spaces (SOAPS) tool at three play spaces in CVE: the pool, pickleball and tennis courts, and multi-use path. This naturalistic observation tool, adapted from children's play assessment, captured a range of variables pertaining to older adult play, such as play type, social interaction level, and physical activity level. In the second phase, semi-structured interviews with CVE seasonal residents were conducted to understand their experiences aging and playing in both public and private environments. Combining results from CVE resident interviews and observations using the SOAPS tool yielded three main themes. The first theme of active and playful aging in place highlighted the significance of access to activities, amenities, and social interactions as motivating factors for active and playful aging in place. In the second theme of older adult-oriented design, play spaces with interpretive flexibility and accessible urban design were found to attract the most diverse range of users, emphasizing the importance of offering structured yet versatile, cooperative, rule-based play. The final theme of publicly vs. privately-owned space suggests that private spaces, with their higher perceived sense of safety and increased access to opportunities, are viewed as more conducive to and supportive of play compared to their public counterparts.

Exploring current trends in older adult play in CVE, through SOAPS tool observations and resident interviews, led to the formation of six recommendations aimed to support older adult well-being as well as combat aging-associated issues in public spaces. The following suggestions seek to spark a dialogue and guide planners on the potential of play in age-friendly planning practice:

1. Appeal to more play types and play space users through interpretive flexibility.
2. Combine game and play space to increase opportunities for social interaction.
3. Incorporate inclusive and accessible urban design to increase the built environments' capacity for play.
4. Ensure meaningful engagement with older adults when creating or updating public spaces.

5. Incorporate the SOAPS tool to enhance the play potential of community spaces.
6. Consider demographic, socioeconomic, and geographic disparities to encourage the equitable distribution of older adult public play opportunities.

