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Older people's emotional connections with their physical urban environment

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ABSTRACT

Increasing urbanization of human society is a universal trend and one that is likely to affect global levels of health and well-being. Rapid expansion of urban living opens new opportunities for people, but also creates significant challenges. We do not always understand how people interact with and connect to their environment, how they experience it and what meaning they attach to certain aspects of it. However, this knowledge can be essential for better understanding of the impact these aspects of the environment can have on their mental health and well-being. In this photo essay, we explore older people's perceptions of their urban living environment in a highly densely populated urban area; the city of Amsterdam. Participants took photos of salient aspects of their living environment that as they believed influenced their mental health and well-being. Participants searched their living environment for tranquility, peace, beauty, memories and meaning. Listening to the experiences and stories of older adults makes us more aware of their emotional world in this time of global urbanization.

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Urbanization; urban environment; mental health



Increasing urbanization of human society is a universal trend and one that is likely to affect global levels of health and well-being (Moore *et al.* 2003, Ompad *et al.* 2007, Srivastava 2009, Ompad 2010, Bai *et al.* 2012, Szabo 2018). Enormous increase in the global urban population has been referred to as one of the indicators of the Great Acceleration, happening since the 1950s, and is one of the unprecedented developments of human geography (Costanza *et al.* 2007, McMichael 2013). Rapid expansion of urban living opens new opportunities for people, but at the same time creates significant challenges. People interact with urban environments in search of economic and social connections and in search of meaning. It stands to reason that a successful epidemiological enterprise devotes attention to the links between urban living and health. The question of how the urban environment influences health and well-being has been explored numerous times before, but evidence is not always conclusive (Galea *et al.* 2005, van Os *et al.* 2010, Rosso *et al.* 2011). We do not always understand how people interact with and connect to their environment, how they experience it and what meaning they attach to certain aspects of it. However, this knowledge can be essential for getting insights into emotional world of people and therewith understand better the impact these aspects of the environment can have on their mental health and well-being.

We explored older people's perceptions of their urban living environment in a highly densely populated urban area; the city of Amsterdam. A purposively

selected sample of 20 young-old participants (11 males and nine females, 55–70 years) took part in the study. It was conducted in the urban context of Amsterdam, in five different neighborhoods with various neighborhood SES (NSES). Five participants were from neighborhoods with low NSES and the other 15 from neighborhoods with high NSES.

They were asked to photograph salient aspects of their living environment; i.e. aspects that they believed influenced their mental health and well-being. We used photovoice and in-depth semi-structured interviews. Photovoice is a qualitative visual research method that refers to photographs taken by the participants themselves where these photos are used to explore and address their lived experiences (Wang and Redwood-Jones 2001, Hergenrather *et al.* 2009, Mahmood *et al.* 2012, Ronzi *et al.* 2016, Mysyuk and Huisman 2019).

Potential participants were invited to take part in the study by invitation letter and then were contacted by phone. If they were interested to participate, they received a participant package by post including an invitation letter, instructions for taking photos, informed consent forms and a photo journal. The participants were asked to fill in a photo journal describing each photo. General information on how to take photos was provided in the invitation letter. Non-directive instructions about taking the photos were provided without specifying what kind of photos participants should take; rather emphasizing that they should capture their living environment.

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Figure 1. Link to the city. Source: Authors.

Photographs, photo journals and transcripts of the interviews were analyzed using the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti which allows to retrieve not only textual data but also elements of visual data. The approach used for the analysis of data was primarily inductive, in which analytical concepts are derived and emerged from the data through a coding technique based on a grounded theory approach. This method of analysis allows exploring the ways in which respondents explain their own experiences and also permits unexpected topics, issues and thoughts to emerge.

The photos¹ and the stories attached to them reflected aspects of the environment that are not often observed or investigated in epidemiological research, even though participants believed that they were of great importance to mental health. Participants searched their living environment for tranquility, peace, beauty, memories and meaning. Even in a highly densely populated area like Amsterdam, they found plenty of these.

Participants sought ways to reflect their emotional connection to their city and narrate this to the researchers. A bridge was perceived as a link to the city (Figure 1), being a symbol of freedom and connection *‘This bridge is my link to the city, it makes me feel connected to it and being part of it ... it is very*

important for me (Mrs A)’. Crossing the bridge meant becoming part of the city, belonging to it. A bench in the park (Figure 2) triggered memories of a significant person who often was sitting on that bench *‘It was a favorite bench of my father ... he used to sit there all the time ... I like to sit here and all the memories are becoming alive’ (Mrs R)*. Green spaces were frequently related to connectivity with nature, reflecting the aesthetics of the environment. Parks and gardens were often experienced as a source of relaxation and peace



Figure 2. Favorite bench of my father. Source: Authors.

of mind showing how important they were for older adults (Figures 3 and 4) *'I like to walk in this park, it is so beautiful and peaceful here. I can just come and rest*

here (Mr A)'. Similar to green spaces, blue space brought relaxation and calmness, being almost like therapy when needed (Figure 5) 'Water is calming



Figure 3. Connecting to the nature. Source: Authors.

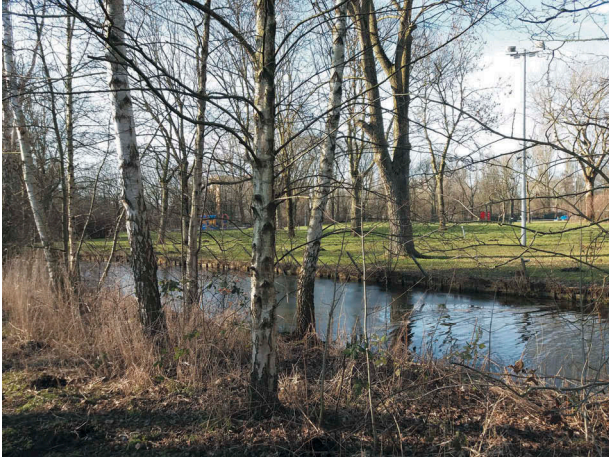


Figure 4. Peace in the park. Source: Authors.



Figure 5. Calmness of water. Source: Authors.



Figure 6. Rainbow in the neighborhood. Source: Authors.

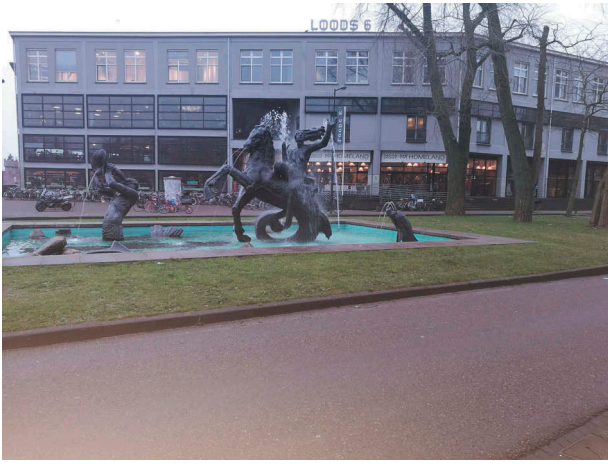


Figure 7. Modern and spacious. Source: Authors.



Figure 8. Lots of space and freedom. Source: Authors.

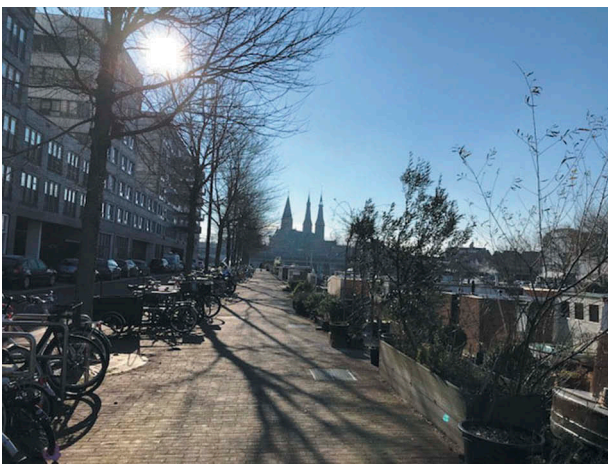


Figure 9. My lovely and beautiful living environment. Source: Authors.

me down, sometimes it even has therapeutic effect on me' (Mr K). Playgrounds, street views, elements of architecture were not only illustrating the sense of beauty that older adults tried to capture, but also showed how much they valued space, modernity and freedom (Figures 6–10) 'I like to see these playgrounds, they are so spacious, beautiful, and quite modern ... when I look at them I feel free and independent (Mrs S)'.

The photos that were taken by the participants gave a distinct visual insight into the parts of urban living environment that are of a big significance for older adults. Listening to the experiences and stories of older adults makes us more aware of their emotional world in this time of global urbanization. A challenge of health research is to investigate the role of neighborhoods and living environments in people's need for tranquility, aesthetics and belonging, because these may be crucial for people's mental health.

Note

1. All images were taken by the participants and are reproduced with their permission.



Figure 10. View from the house. Source: Authors.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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