Article

Urban Ageing, Gender and the Value of the Local Environment: The Experience of Older Women in a Central Neighbourhood of Madrid, Spain

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Abstract: Urban ageing is an emerging domain that mixes two challenges of current societies: the ageing of the population and the increasing urbanisation. While ageing in place has demonstrated numerous benefits, some social sectors question whether the city is the right environment for ageing, since cities are home to many of the social problems that characterise contemporary societies. Urban environments are widely described as rootless in most academic articles, with a focus on the impersonality, transience, and segmentation of links between city dwellers. However, this portrayal coexists with contrasting views of urban life that instead emphasise the importance of the local setting and other experiences of attachment to the place of residence. From the age and gender perspectives, in some urban areas, the neighbourhood plays a fundamental role in the lives of many older women, as a natural setting for interaction and an area conducive to collaborative relationships and practical and emotional support in times of need. This article analyses the role that the local space plays in the lives of older women, the value they attach to it and the meaning they attribute to neighbourhood relations in the local urban environment. In order to analyse this reality, the Universidad (Malasaña) neighbourhood, has been selected as a case study, a central area in Madrid (Spain) exposed to numerous processes of transformation, which shows the highest rate of residential mobility in the area. Despite this reality, in a context marked by new difficulties, the conclusion shows that elderly women have a strong attachment to their neighbourhood. This attachment is not necessarily characterised by deep friendships, but by the existence of a significant social network that responds in case of need.

Keywords: ageing in place; place attachment; older women; neighbourhood

1. Introduction

Urban ageing is an emerging domain that mixes two challenges of current societies: the ageing of the population and the increasing urbanisation. While ageing in place has demonstrated numerous benefits, the media and some sections of civil society question whether the urban realm is the right environment for it, considering that cities are not friendly spaces for the elderly [1].

In fact, cities are often scenery of segregation, inequality, fragmentation, and atomisation [2], in addition to the generation of enormous problems related to the environment, climate change, and urban health [2–4]. The contemporary city is often described in terms of rootlessness and liquidity focusing on the impersonality, transience, and segmentation of ties between urban dwellers [5,6]. While these problems cannot be denied, this portrayal coexists with other views of urban life that emphasize the importance of the local environment and the positive effects of rootedness in the place of residence. This latter angle is advantageous to understanding ageing in place and its social benefits.

Although the demographic reality of ageing has been widely studied, the urban ageing dimension has not received the attention it deserves in this context [7,8]. Opening

up avenues of research in this field not only reinforces the importance of urban space in the quality of ageing, but also underpins key knowledge for implementing improvements with regard to the issue. The current in ageing in place studies is to advocate the beneficial effects of older people remaining in a familiar setting for as long as possible, based on the notion that an accessible, familiar, and safe environment can reinforce independence and improve well-being at this stage [9–13]. As Herbert notes, connections formed between people and places are associated with quality and well-being in later life [14]. However, for this to be possible, it is important to foster an integrative spatial configuration since the physical and spatial context influences people throughout their life course [15–17], but in old age, it is even more important than ever and comes to determine how we age and how we respond to illness [12,18]. Several studies have shown how frail, elderly people are able to remain independent due to the benefits of living in a familiar environment, while depression and anxiety are more prevalent in the absence of settings that encourage socialisation, such as public spaces, parks, and gardens [19]. The sum of all these factors gives rise to new and very different ways of experiencing old age, linked to the desire for autonomy and permanence in a familiar social environment [11,20].

It is thus recognised that ageing is a heterogeneous process as the well-being of the elderly depends on multiple factors [21,22], among which not only their lifestyles, but also their spatial relationships are important. In fact, the public space and the environment outside the home play an important role in the independence of the elderly, allowing them to age in the way they choose [12,13]. Furthermore, from a policy perspective and at the international level, the importance of ensuring an enabling and supportive environment to achieve the highest possible level of health and well-being for the elderly has begun to receive much attention, such as in the Madrid International Plan of Action on Aging and in the Political Declaration adopted at the Second World Assembly on Aging in April 2002 [21]. Recently, age was a key aspect of the Sustainable Development Goals, and urban ageing received specific consideration, whereby target 11.7 states that, by 2030, cities should provide universal access to safe, inclusive, green, and public spaces, with a focus on vulnerable populations and specifically including older people. This international commitment is a major step forward because it shows that policymakers are finally being encouraged to address the importance of the local environment for the quality of ageing [23].

These approaches necessarily imply that cities must be prepared to respond to the needs of a growing number of older people in order to provide a good quality of life. These are requirements that, to date, Spanish cities have failed to meet [24,25].

When coming to gender, it has been proved that conceptions, experiences, and uses of space are different for men and women [26], with the consequent differentiated impact on knowledge, behaviour, and lifestyles [27]. Urban studies that look at gender differences have a long academic history revealing how the design and planning of cities have systematically ignored women's urban trajectories, needs, and itineraries [26,28–32] on the basis of an analytical perspective that not only contributed to the perception of females as exceptions or residuals in relation to males but was also an epistemological obstacle to understanding the global logic of women's behaviour [33].

The gender perspective is particularly useful for understanding the new dimensions of the importance of ageing in place and for looking at how interactions unfold in the local space where people carry out their daily activities, relate with others, and come to consolidate identities linked to their neighbourhoods. The neighbourhood can facilitate meetings, social relations, and the reception of support, physical or emotional [12]. In this sense, ageing in place is related to the sense of identity both through independence and autonomy and through the roles of relationship and solidarity in the places where people live [34]. Despite the certain consensus on the loss of community relations at the local level, some neighbourhoods still maintain them, and their residents attach significant value to these, particularly those who have lived there for a long time, as tends to be the case with older women who have a life expectancy longer than that of men. As Gómez and Álvarez [35] point out, the predominance of individualistic tendencies that favour

disunity sometimes leads to a failure to appreciate the value of relational networks and the importance that community discourse and practices attain in certain contexts. Along these lines, Blokland and Nast [36] note that despite all the changes experienced in terms of the dissolution of ties, the significance of the local community has not been lost.

It is, therefore, necessary to pay attention to the relationships that people build in their neighbourhoods and to the material and symbolic links they forge with the environment in which they live. Certain circumstances can help to strengthen these relationships, to create a certain atmosphere of comfort [36,37], and to initiate or consolidate lines of exchange based on the establishment of weak, low-intensity ties which, despite their fragility, contribute to social cohesion due to their capacity to create 'bridging' social capital between distant groups [37,38]. Even so, the knowledge that is forged over time, when obligations generate more intense ties with the area of residence, is an especially key aspect in the case of older women [14,23].

On the other hand, when these spaces are subject to processes of change, as is the case with gentrification, there is a significant disruption of the everyday coordinates of the elderly. The problems and consequences associated with gentrification processes have been directly or indirectly addressed in academic studies for decades. However, despite their major relevance, the gentrification perspective tends to neglect the everyday interactions and small-scale changes that constitute and shape the experience of living in a neighbourhood [39].

This article reflects on the role that the local urban space plays in the lives of older women, taking into account the importance of ageing in the place where they spend their lives, not only from the point of view of physical health and the recognition of its relevance in terms of the Sustainable Development Goals, but also from people's relational needs and the links associated with the place of residence [34]. For this purpose, empirical material is used that was collected in the Universidad (Malasaña) neighbourhood of Madrid between 2015 and 2017, an urban area in transition in which the processes of gentrification and touristification have defined new vital realities for older women but which also allows us to apprehend the strength of the links generated through years of living in this local area.

The research is based on the following premises:

1. Most Spanish population prefer to grow old independently, in an environment that is known and, whenever possible, in their own homes [11].
2. As referred to before, the urban dimension of ageing has received less attention than other related aspects.
3. Even though women are living longer than men and their place of attachment has been considered higher [14,40]. This dimension in the context of ageing from a gender perspective has received little attention.

The article is therefore in line with the current stream of research on how the process of growing old is experienced in the local urban environment by women and the importance of attachment to space in old age.

The paper is organized as follows. After this introduction, Section 2 explains the materials and methods used in the analysis. Section 3 presents the results and findings, and Section 4 discusses them. Finally, Section 5 wraps up with the conclusions, limitations, and the main lines of future work.

2. Methodology: A Qualitative Analysis in Madrid, Spain

2.1. The Framework

This research is comprised of a wide-ranging project on place attachment based on two inner neighbourhoods belonging to two cities within Europe: Kumpula in Helsinki (Finland) and Universidad in Madrid (Spain) which was mainly developed between 2015 and 2017. Elements of major interest converge in the Spanish local urban space analysed. In contrast to the attachment to the area among older women who have spent most of their lives in the neighbourhood, there is a great deal of mobility on the part of newer, younger residents, together with the usual tensions that accompany local processes of urban change

and the presence of women in a country with a very high level of life expectancy. While the referred project allowed us to investigate different aspects of the feeling of belonging to the local area, both the focus on the specific perspective of older women and the influence of neighbourhood changes on their experience of ageing in place remained unexplored.

Accordingly, the aim of this article is to analyse how attachment to place is constructed and reinforced in the process of ageing in an urban setting from a gender perspective. To better understand the interrelations between the ageing in place construction, place attachment, and formation and consolidation of ties in inner-city areas in the case of a big city like Madrid, a case-study approach was selected. It allows for a detailed analysis of the 'holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events', such as neighbourhood transformation [41] as well as considers how external factors and events influenced the construction of place attachment while ageing. Besides this approach enabled us to explore a complex set of experiences in detail and to recount the role of life events and neighbourhood change over time, specifically in urban areas in transition [42].

Madrid is the capital and biggest city of Spain (3,286,662 inhabitants in 2022), and therefore the one with the largest number of elderly people (666,599 people are over 65 years old). This city has 21 districts which are further subdivided into 131 neighbourhoods. The districts are territorial divisions of the municipality, equipped with decentralised management bodies to facilitate the governance of such a big city. These districts are very different from an urban perspective (as a result of different construction stages) but also in terms of wealth and quality of life [25].

As in other historic cities, central areas are exposed to numerous processes of transformation that generate tensions and conflicts. The Centro district [Id.1 in Figure 1] is immersed in a process of gentrification and touristification and has the highest net migration rate[1]. in Madrid City [see Table 1, column "net migration"] which means that it has a high population turnover, with an inflow of 109.06 and an outflow of a population of 40.36. Within Distrito Centro (Id.1 in Figure 1), the Universidad neighbourhood [Figure 2] is considered in this research as an illustrative cultural case [43,44] of the challenges faced by women in the process of ageing in place.
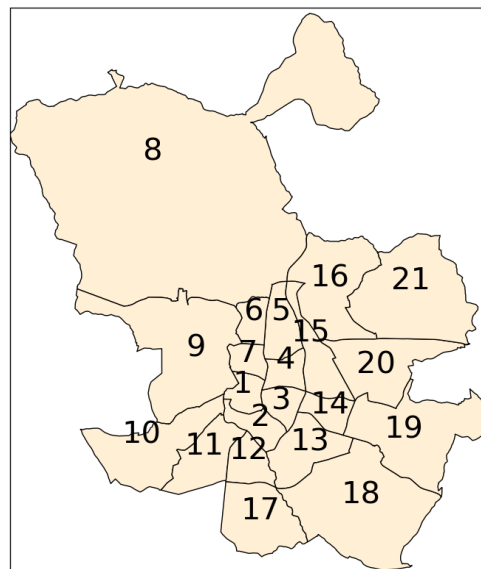
Figure 1. Map of the 21 districts division of the city of Madrid. The correspondence between the Id number and the name of the district can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. * Migration growth in 2020. Rates per 1000 inhabitants. Total population, elderly population, percentage of elderly population over total population, percentage of elderly women over elderly population, net migration, per district, Madrid. Source: Madrid City Council, 2020 and 2022.

	Total Population [1]	Elderly Population [2]	% of Elderly Over [1]	% of Elderly Women Over [2]	Net Migration *
01. Centro	139,682	21,914	15.7	60.3	30.0
02. Arganzuela	152,638	31,212	20.4	60.7	0.6
03. Retiro	117,672	31,268	26.6	61.5	0.8
04. Salamanca	145,457	34,895	24.0	62.8	13.4
05. Chamartín	144,371	34,286	23.7	62.1	2.2
06. Tetuán	157,433	30,366	19.3	63.2	8.2
07. Chamberí	137,287	33,522	24.4	64.0	7.5
08. Fuencarral-El Pardo	246,281	52,925	21.5	58.9	5.6
09. Moncloa-Aravaca	120,360	26,685	22.2	60.5	2.3
10. Latina	237,048	57,637	24.3	60.6	1.5
11. Carabanchel	25,5514	47,869	18.7	61.4	3.5
12. Usera	140,808	23,503	16.7	61.3	4.2
13. Puente de Vallecas	235,638	41,860	17.8	60.6	2.9
14. Moratalaz	92,390	24,370	26.4	61.5	7.5
15. Ciudad Lineal	213,905	49,225	23.0	62.1	1.4
16. Hortaleza	195,017	36,491	18.7	58.9	2.1
17. Villaverde	153,829	25,662	16.7	60.1	2.4
18. Villa de Vallecas	114,817	14,990	13.1	58.7	5.7
19. Vicálvaro	79,328	10,805	13.6	58.3	5.8
20. San Blas-Canillejas	158,783	28,027	17.7	60.5	1.1
21. Barajas	48,404	9087	18.8	57.2	5.8
Ciudad de Madrid	*3,286,662*	*666,599*	*20.3*	*61.0*	*2.8*
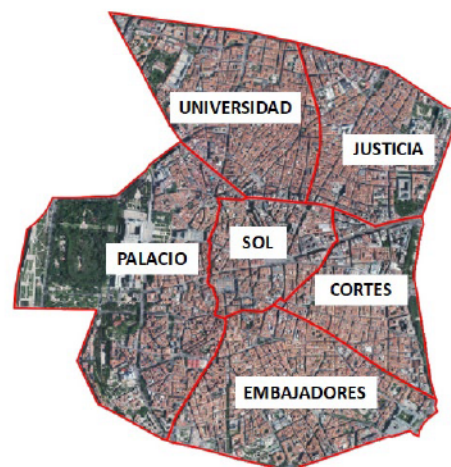
Figure 2. Division of the Distrito Centro into neighbourhoods and location of the University neighbourhood. Source: Author's adaptation of the map of the city council of madrid [45].

2.2. Methods and Data Collection

Qualitative case studies originate from the particular way of looking at the case under investigation as a whole: its context and its boundaries, with intensive analysis of the case or collective cases, and always under the conception of their idiosyncrasy and limited generalising ambition. This approach allows researchers to effectively understand how a social setting operates or functions given the extremely rich, detailed, and in-depth data which characterises the type of information gathered [46]. Within this framework and in order to capture elements of an experiential nature, the empirical approach was to use qualitative methods, mainly in-depth interviews [47] which are viewed as sub-units of the case study.

In the context of the overall project of which this research is part, 39 in-depth interviews (N = 39) were conducted with different profiles of residents in the neighbourhood, until the principle of discursive saturation was attained. An important part of these interviews (N = 18) was oriented towards gathering information about older women in the area, which opened the possibility of observing and tracing the concrete experiences of this segment of the population. As in the general project, the initial contact was made through snowball sampling.

In addition to the actors themselves (the elderly women), we considered of great relevance the inclusion of the testimony of three women below our age-scope, considering them as key informants (E11; E15, and E17). As pointed out by Valles [48] key informants are people who provide information directly relevant to the objectives of the study and who are selected because they occupy a unique position in the community, group, or institution [15: 213]. These key informants were residents in the area, women, and considered a trusted reference by the neighbours. They become an important source of information, helping to understand some of the dynamics in the area and, besides, serving as a trustworthy reference when starting more difficult interviews or treating some topics. So, for example, some elderly women interviewed were more prone to open up and share some opinions after knowing these three people were included and agreed to be part of the analysis. Regarding the profile of these key informants, one held the position of president of one of the most prestigious neighbourhood associations in the area. In a second case, the interviewee held a position of great responsibility in a music school that is deeply rooted in the area and highly valued by residents. In the third case, the key informant, in addition to having been born and lived all her life in the neighbourhood, was the owner of a well-known commercial establishment considered "traditional" that was highly appreciated by the elderly women in the area.

In the analysis of the experience of the elderly women, we selected the interviews based on two principles: that the interviewees were over 65 years of age or were approaching that age and had been living in the neighbourhood for more than 15 years. The anonymous information of the selected participants can be found in Table 2.

In all cases, the interview format was adapted to the comprehension and narrative competencies of each interviewee, with a combination of structured and semi-structured questions. These narrative competencies did not depend on the level of education, but on more individual, subjective characteristics. When necessary, we tried to follow the stimulus-response approach, reformulating the questions, pointing out recent events in the area, or connecting with the specific characteristics of the neighbourhood. This has been pointed out as the best way to approach the elderly [10], as allowed us to extract the maximum richness by adapting to the communicative style of each interviewee. To this end, the specific analysis of the universe of older women was complemented with the help of two neighbourhood centres: the Espacio Pozas (Red Cross), a social centre highly valued by the residents of the neighbourhood, and the Municipal Senior Citizens' Centre which were also the places where part of the interviews was carried out.

In the case of the key informants, it was always attempted to combine the collection of information relating to the more particular aspects of life and activities in the neighbour-

hood in each case, with the broader and more generalist view derived from the specific position of each of the three interviewees.

The interviews lasted between 1 and 3 h (average 1.5 h) and all of them were digitally recorded with the participants' consent.

Table 2. Qualitative interviews analysed.

Code	Age	Years Living in the Neighbourhood	Country of Origin (if Not Born in Spain)
E1	54	15	
E2	62	7	Dominican Republic
E3	68	68	
E4	62	33	
E5	65	22	
E6	77	54	
E7	70	5	Dominican Republic
E8	66	39	Colombia
E9	86	86	
E10	87	60	
E11	58	34 (Key informant)	
E12	63	16	
E13	58	33	
E14	85	16	
E15	53	Key informant	Venezuela
E16	59	30	
E17	53	53 (Key informant)	
E18	77	56	

2.3. Data Analysis

The qualitative analysis process consisted of different steps: first, transcriptions of the interviews were made, which allowed them to be put into context. During this process, the transcripts were checked against the fieldwork notes. Second, all interviews were coded and analysed using the analysis tool ATLAS.ti.

The data consist of a detailed amount of qualitative information to which ethnographic content analysis has been applied. This differs from classical content analysis in that it involves a redefinition of qualitative positions and emphasises the reflexive analysis of the documents produced after transcription, going beyond quantitative description in an attempt to delve deeper into the understanding of meanings [49]. The inclination towards content analysis, as opposed to discourse analysis, was a considered decision justified by the nuances of interviewing older people and the interests of the research, emphasising that the interpretative analysis carried out does not presuppose the need to unravel hidden structures, but rather aims to identify and categorise elements (themes, patterns, contents) and explore their connections, their regularity or rarity, and their genesis [27: 387] in line with the research context. The definition of the analysis categories can be seen in Table 3.

When considered necessary, some quantitative data was provided in order to illustrate particular findings. Sources were pointed in each case.

Table 3. Summary of the categories and subcategories obtained from the ethnographic content analysis of the responses of the older women interviewed.

Category 1: Knowledge of the environment.	Subcategory 1.1. The real name of the neighbourhood
	Subcategory 1.2. Links with the environment that transcend individual comfort
	Subcategory 1.3. The neighbourhood as a village
	Subcategory 1.4. Relationships between residents
Category 2: Experiences of the past in the neighbourhood	Subcategory 2.1. Problems and difficulties of the recent past
	Subcategory 2.2. The strength of neighbourhood relationships from decades past
Category 3: Obstacles arising from the transformation of the neighbourhood at present	Subcategory 3.1. Differential characteristics of the neighbourhood
	Subcategory 3.2. Physical impact of the transformation of the area
	Subcategory 3.3. Relational impact of the area's transformation
Category 4: Promotion of the social and associative network	Subcategory 4.1. Public spaces aimed to promote social interactions and associative networks

2.4. Ethical Aspects

Regarding the ethical aspects of the research, the subjects were assured that the information they shared would be anonymous, that their recordings would not be made available to others, and that the data would be published in such a way that they could not be identified.

3. Results

This section presents the qualitative analysis of the interviews. The first piece includes key information on the neighbourhood under study that serves as a contextual reference for the results. The analysis is articulated on the basis of the categories and subcategories previously defined as key significant elements (Table 3).

3.1. The Neighbourhood

The Universidad neighbourhood in the Centro district is an example of social change and diversity. It is a dense area, with 353 inhabitants per hectare, as opposed to 270 in the Centro district, and 55 people per hectare in the city of Madrid as a whole [45]. Around a quarter of the residents of Universidad (24.5%) are foreigners, a very similar percentage to that of the Centro district (25.8%) (Madrid City Council, 2022). With an abundant social fabric, the area is noted for its associative networks, which organise their own local festivals, run campaigns related to the public interest, and foster improvements to the area and for the residents, even articulating "neighbour-helping-neighbour" informal organisations (for example, time banks, a reciprocity-based work trading system in which hours are the currency).

Of artisan and working-class origins, the neighbourhood has experienced major social problems in the recent past, such as inadequate and unhealthy housing, deteriorated residential buildings, and, in the 1980s and 1990s, a boom in drug consumption and trafficking. More recently, in the first decade of this century, it began to experience a process of gentrification, and came to be viewed as an underground and bohemian neighbourhood, attracting artists and other creative groups [39,50]. Thus, it is now home to a mix of former residents—of modest socio-economic status—and more affluent, more highly educated newcomers (artists, students, and professionals). The incorporation of new residents and the conversion of the neighbourhood into a hub for nightlife and alternative leisure has led to a rapid increase in rent and property values[2], while the housing stock has undergone significant improvements, largely thanks to public investment in refurbishment. From a morphological point of view, the growth of the neighbourhood has been shaping a

compact structure, with an abundance of small commercial premises on the ground floors of buildings and streets that lead to squares, which are the most significant spaces in terms of socialising, leisure, strolling, and play [32].

As explained in the Methodology section, the analysis is articulated around three explanatory axes each of which is broken down into subcategories that exemplify the different aspects that the women highlighted in the interviews: (i) The importance of knowledge of the environment and the desire to remain in the known space; (ii) the construction of the neighbourhood as a confluence of several pasts; and (iii) in contrast to the desire to grow old in the place, the difficulties associated with change, neighbourhood rotation and appropriation of public space.

3.2. Knowledge of the Environment

The importance of familiarity with the space in which older women live is a recurring theme in the interviews. They want to continue living in the space to which they feel attached, a feeling that tends to increase the longer they live in the neighbourhood. In a way, they feel it is theirs, which manifests itself in different ways.

3.2.1. The Real Name of the Neighbourhood

The first manifestation of the importance of the neighbourhood's history is in how the interviewees refer to it by its traditional name. Even though since 1845 its official administrative name has been Universidad, it is popularly known as Malasaña, a name that especially spread from the 1980s onwards due to the so-called *movida madrileña* [3], which was very much focused around this area. However, its historical name, which is the one used by some of the interviewees, was "Barrio Maravillas", named after Las Maravillas Monastery, which housed a Virgin of the same name.

"Malasaña no, Maravillas... I don't know why, I don't like the name Malasaña" (E6, 77 years).

"I don't like the fact that they call it Malasaña. For me... Maravillas" (E8, 66 years).

3.2.2. Links with the Environment That Transcend Individual Comfort

The interviews show that the sense of neighbourhood is far removed from administrative delimitations and official nomenclature, and is instead constructed throughout the lifecycle, in relation to experiences. Most of the older women emphasise the comfort that the neighbourhood offers them, despite the difficulties accessing their own homes and other urban planning problems (absence of lifts and narrow pavements, as will be seen below). It is a symbolic comfort that is closely related to the space they are familiar with and the ties they have forged over time.

"I wouldn't change it for anything, this neighbourhood. Because I like it. It's a neighbourhood that I've always liked (E10, 87 years old).

"Look, I have a flat in another neighbourhood. It's nicer than this flat because this one is on the fourth floor without a lift. You get the idea, 90 steps. Well, I don't know. I go out, I think... the stones know me, I go out and... It's not that I'm bad in the head, no. It's just that I like the neighbourhood more than the other place. It's just that I like the neighbourhood more than anything else" (E9, 86 years old).

3.2.3. The Neighbourhood as a Village

The women translate the feeling of attachment to the neighbourhood in a very expressive way by referring to it as a village. In their minds, there is a strong parallelism between the relationships within this neighbourhood and the idealisms that are more typically associated with villages or smaller communities and never imagined in the central area of a large city:

"To me my neighbourhood, because it is my neighbourhood, seems like a village. I go down to the street, you greet people, you drink your coffee or have a beer, you greet someone

on one side or someone on the other side, someone says: "Let's see if you can help me with this", or "Hey, what do you know about this?" In other words, it's very family-like, very family-like. (...) if you go somewhere twice to have a coffee, the third time they ask: "How are you?" I mean, it seems to me... a luxury. A luxury, because if you go three days without being seen somewhere, the fifth time they ask you: "Did something happen to you?" And I think that's very important because that's human relations (...) (E11, 58 years old).

"I'm very happy with the neighbourhood, I love it (...) It doesn't feel like a neighbourhood, it feels like a village" (E13, 58 years old).

3.2.4. Relationships between Residents

In the same sense, the interviewees constantly refer to the interweaving of local links and ties between residents, to the feeling of being recognised and getting to know others when one goes out into the street through interactions that may not be very profound, but do have strong symbolism and an impact on everyday life:

"You go to the bakery and one day you don't, but on the tenth, eh, well already, whether you like it or not, well you establish a relationship with the person who's selling, or with the owner or... I don't know. Well, for example, there in Espiritu Santo, I've been buying bread there for a hundred years, so... with the owner, the people who work there, well, you create a tie. Not a friendship like that, but "how are you?", in other words, normal things, I think" (E1, 54 years old).

Beyond the apparent laxity that seems to characterise these social relations, they can become powerful support networks in case of need. Neighbourhood solidarity manifests itself in very different ways:

"In fact, now that I've had a knee problem, three people who didn't know me at all offered me crutches on the way to the three shops: three people who didn't know me at all. Being from the neighbourhood (. . .) It's a very... special place. Yes, I went to the churreria[4] (. . .) and there was an old lady who said "Oh, well, I've got some [crutches]" (. . .) And then I went to the market and again [a stranger offered her crutches], and at the drugstore as well. So, people are very supportive in that sense" (E1, 54 years old).

"I was living with my brother. My brother had mental issues. My brother burnt down my flat... my brother. And everybody helped me.... Everybody helped me. They brought me food; they went to collect my clothes to wash them. Everybody helped me (she emphasises). Up to here. The depression I had, they found out about it here [senior citizens' centre] and they brought me here and my depression went away. Because everyone helped me... So, I tell you that there are very kind-hearted people here. Everyone helped me, everyone, my neighbours... everyone helped me, I'm serious. And you can see that it was a tough problem, but for me, I didn't have any problem being alone or anything, not at all. And I'm telling you, even the "queers" living above gave us clothes and everything to dress up in (she emphasises), that's all I'm saying. Everyone turned out in force! Because I was left with nothing, of course" (E13, 58 years old).

This solidarity and support in cases of need do not necessarily mean that the neighbourhood is the scene of intense friendships among older women, but rather that informal, everyday processes seem to predominate, sometimes leading to friendship but generally of a laxer and elastic nature [51]. However, practices clearly associated with trust can be detected, with older women frequently exchanging flat keys, which implies the psychological security that someone will be able to get in should there be an emergency:

"My neighbour Paquita has them [home keys], yes, and now I have hers" (E9, 86 years old).

These behaviours would corroborate the importance of the general climate of trust which, from Jacobs' (1961) perspective, characterises coexistence in the city and which is made up

of "many and very light contacts established on its pavements", most of them apparently trivial, but whose result is "a sense of public identity between people, a network and fabric of mutual (public) respect and trust, and also a guarantee of mutual assistance in case the neighbourhood needs it, the neighbourhood in general or one particular local resident".

3.3. Experiences of the Past in the Neighbourhood

The strength of past experiences helps to understand the feelings that the interviewees express about their involvement in the neighbourhood. The relationships and attitudes of the older women are the result of previous experiences and derive from trajectories that are linked to the neighbourhood's own history. As we will see below, they are experiences of opposite nature that nevertheless form an inseparable part of women's memories.

3.3.1. Problems and Difficulties of the Recent Past

The presence of important social problems such as drug trafficking and consumption emerged in the neighbourhood in the late 80s and early 90s. It was a time when drug use spread in the cities, manifesting itself in a large number of neighbourhoods and causing multiple problems of all kinds, including the death of many young people who were unable to overcome their addiction. The central location of the neighbourhood under study also favoured the presence of drug dealers and consumers. This problem is repeatedly mentioned in older women's accounts, as well as the strategies that sought to minimise its impact on the daily life of the local community, especially children:

> "Well, look, when I came here, things were a bit bad because there were a lot of drugs. It was a bit... to go out with the kids and stuff... the square was a bit difficult, because there was a lot of... a lot of drug dealing. At night you went out feeling very scared because they were on all the corners and all the poor people were lying around in the corners. Now that doesn't happen anymore. You used to be sleeping at night and you'd hear: "help!" because they'd mugged one guy, they'd mugged another. And that doesn't happen anymore... the neighbourhood has got much better now. When I came to live here it was a bit terrible, it was a bit... scary" (E13, 58 years old).

> "In the past it was a problem. It bothered us because they [drug addicts] used to climb up the stairs, into our building. They came in a lot, you know? And they [police and emergency health workers] took more than one out... they took one away half dead. Because they used to climb up to the top floor where I live, and of course, you could see that they were pricking themselves and... that's a time when I was quite... yes" (E3, 68 years old).

> "You see that you can't take them [the children] to the parks in the neighbourhood because they are full of syringes—that's the first thing my children learnt: you mustn't touch a syringe; if you see something red, don't touch it, because it's blood. In other words, very heavy situations... The junkie problem ended, it ended, but they were very dark times for this neighbourhood... A guy with a chainsaw chasing another guy (...) Well, there were quite a few stories... Drug dealing, drug trafficking. And a lot of people from this neighbourhood died [because of drugs], kids you knew..." (E11, 58 years old).

3.3.2. The Strength of Neighbourhood Relationships from Decades Past

The harsh images of the past are intertwined in the older women's memories with those of an earlier time when neighbourhood ties were considered much stronger and more entrenched than they are today, and when convivial relations within the neighbourhood communities were much more intense. The older women recall the custom, still present today in small Spanish villages, of taking the chairs out "al fresco" (in the cool) in summer at night to avoid the heat inside their flats and to interact with their neighbours.

> "As for neighbourliness, I can tell you, for example, in my building we were all... well, families before. And also, very close families, that's the truth, which is not the case now" (E3, 68 years old).

"I liked the way it used to be more than now. It was more familiar. I liked it better before (...). Because we were all, as they say, as if we were family. People stayed in the neighbourhoods longer" (E9, 86 years old).

"Even me, when I came to live there, my house was never locked at any time. You pulled a cord and opened the door and whoever needed something came in (...) there was a very good relationship. Even when you start to... when you're working, when you don't have anyone to leave [your kids] with in the afternoon and so on, they [neighbours] took care of them. And... There were a lot of relationships, not now because of the rotation of people" (E11, 58 years old).

This led to a strengthening of neighbourhood relations and a greater sense of community and trust, which seems to have suffered in recent times due to the continuous turnover of residents (tenants, who do not set foot in the neighbourhood and are less interested in sharing their daily lives) but also due to the reconceptualisation of public space by the municipal administration itself.

3.4. Obstacles Arising from the Transformation of the Neighbourhood at Present

As we have seen above, interviewees like the neighbourhood. They like it to the extent that they compare it to other areas of Madrid that may offer alternative amenities and advantages but lack the vibrancy and attractiveness of Universidad. However, the impact of the transformations experienced by the area ends up becoming obstacles of a different nature (physical and relational) to the permanence of the older residents.

3.4.1. Differential Characteristics of the Neighbourhood

Relatively frequently, the women interviewed draw contrasts between the vitality of their neighbourhood and other areas of Madrid that they feel are far removed from their daily customs and practices. From this perspective, they often compare the possibilities for interaction in their area with the restricted and limited nature that characterises other neighbourhoods of the city.

"Here you always saw people in the street. You always saw people. And I like meeting people. And not in a lonely neighbourhood where you can get scared" (E18, 77 years old).
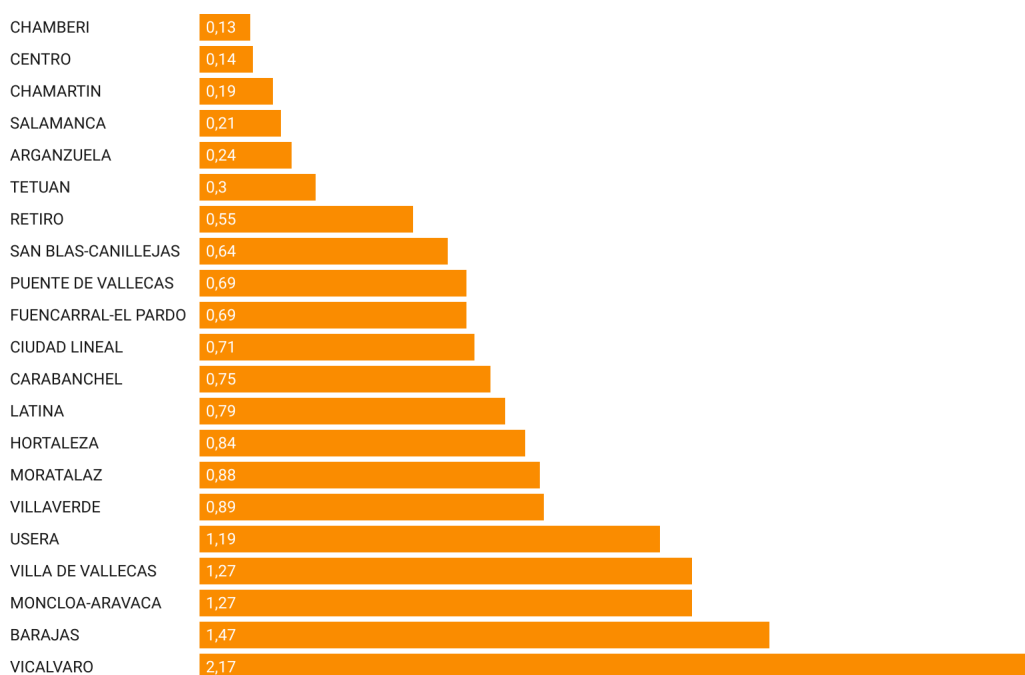
"It's... a neighbourhood like my neighbourhood was when I was little. Well, the people, um, they all know each other, they talk to each other from the windows. I talk to my neighbour from the window, she's an old lady.... It's a different life to the neighbourhoods now. I, for example, have gone to visit my old neighbourhood and (...) it's sad, you don't see anyone, everyone is stuck in their seat... in their own house. It's very sad, and here everyone is in the street, everyone is socialising, everyone is... do you understand? That... we all know each other" (E13, 58 years old).

3.4.2. Physical Impact of the Area's Transformation

It seems that in the face of the social vitality, municipal policies have encouraged the privatisation and invasion of public space, which tends to eliminate interactions that are not subject to economic exchange:

"Well, I don't know if it's because the Mayor has found it more convenient to permit outdoor bar terraces, because there are taxes that have to be paid. And then, the children have little space to play in" (E18, 77 years old).

In fact, the ratio between benches in the public space and outdoor terraces (private) of the Centro district is one of the lowest in the city in Madrid (Figure 3), which perverts the use of public space, occupying the available space for commercial and economic purposes. At this point, it is worth recalling the importance of the benches in relation to the local daily life trajectories of the older inhabitants of the neighbourhood.

District	Ratio
CHAMBERI	0,13
CENTRO	0,14
CHAMARTIN	0,19
SALAMANCA	0,21
ARGANZUELA	0,24
TETUAN	0,3
RETIRO	0,55
SAN BLAS-CANILLEJAS	0,64
PUENTE DE VALLECAS	0,69
FUENCARRAL-EL PARDO	0,69
CIUDAD LINEAL	0,71
CARABANCHEL	0,75
LATINA	0,79
HORTALEZA	0,84
MORATALAZ	0,88
VILLAVERDE	0,89
USERA	1,19
VILLA DE VALLECAS	1,27
MONCLOA-ARAVACA	1,27
BARAJAS	1,47
VICALVARO	2,17

Figure 3. Ratio of benches per terrace seat per district in Madrid, 2022. Source: Madrid City Council, 2022.

The perception of neglect by the municipal administration among local residents is particularly noticeable in terms of cleanliness and upkeep of the district. Being a central area with narrow streets, graffiti (and, in its less artistic manifestation, tagging) floods its walls, disfiguring the facades of traditional buildings and proving very costly to remove:

"Graffiti is horrible. They have ruined the streets. I'm telling you the truth. You see a street that has just been painted... There's the ice factory, which is now a residential building. What they paint it with...!" (E9, 86 years old).

"They really should have punished those who do it [graffiti]. It's a shame, because look, first of all, not respecting, because if you pay for your façade, it hurts your soul the next day when you find it... That's not respecting" (E13, 58 years old).

The neighbourhood grew throughout the 19th century and was consolidated in the 20th, and its density and physical structure play an important role in the lives of the interviewed women. Its squares are a fundamental space for socialising and coexistence, and are recognised as such [32], despite the fact that the urban furniture is often unsatisfactory, as we have seen concerning the benches, and sometimes seems to be designed to be inhospitable, thus dissuading people from using it:

"Squares are fundamental. And the squares and whatever is put in those squares, because it is not the same to provide a bench without a backrest, which isn't inviting to sit on, as it is to have a bench with a backrest, so you can get sun in winter and shade in summer" (E11, 58 years old).

On the other hand, in addition to the relatively frequent absence of lifts in buildings, there is also a lack of universal accessibility, with small pavements that are hard for more than one person to walk on at a time and prevent residents with mobility problems from getting around.

"At the same time, it is a difficult neighbourhood, because there are a lot of buildings without lifts, with sloping streets" (E15, 53 years old).

"The design, the layout of very narrow sidewalks. There are people who use wheelchairs, that's obvious and we can't deny it. And this neighbourhood, for disabled people... disabled

people and even mums with pushchairs, it has many barriers, it has many barriers" (E11, 58 years old).

"I don't like the streets being so narrow. I don't like them so narrow. Especially the pavement. In order for a person with a shopping trolley to pass, you have to stick very close to the wall, that's why there are a lot of arguments between people, a lot of them. Because there are people who have no patience (...) I don't like that, for them to be so narrow" (E16, 59 years old).

3.4.3. Relational Impact of the Area's Transformation

Beyond the problems mentioned above, the process of gentrification and touristification that the central area of Madrid in general and Universidad (Malasaña) in particular are experiencing represents a particularly alarming threat to the social lives of older women in the neighbourhood. In addition to the mobility resulting from the permanent rotation of tenants who live in the area for shorter and shorter periods of time, there is also the impact on local shops, a resource that older women identify with, but which is gradually disappearing. Small neighbourhood shops have not only covered the residents' needs but have also been a fundamental axis of social relations.

"We are 15 people in our building, and only 2 or 3 of us are permanent... They are students who are just passing through... during the year, the people in flats might change twice. So...". (E5, 65 years old).

"It's changed because now the flats are rented and that's it, they're different. Do you understand? Well, maybe they are foreigners who come and stay for a year or half a year. They leave. Others come. And so..." (E10, 87 years old).

"It makes me sad that the shops that used to be there are no longer there (...) It was like a family relationship" (E18, 77 years old).

"Shops have changed a lot. A few years ago, shops were... I had a shop next to my building, and well, it was like my mother and father. I would take my eldest to school and leave the little one with them when it was cold. I would say: "Go on, stay with him". There was also a churreria in Calle Escorial that also did the same for you. I'd say: "Go on, stay with the boy, I'm going to take the other one" and it might be raining, I'd call the shop assistant: "Hey, come upstairs for a moment, (...) I'm going to take the boy to school" and the girl would go upstairs. It was a grocer's store, but they closed down. I miss the shops a lot, because it was... trust... there's no more, there's no more (...). The shops are not like they used to be. And I do miss that a lot" (E13, 58 years old).

The accelerated process of change imposed by these recent dynamics has obvious consequences, from the difficulty obtaining everyday products (with the effects that longer distances and the need to travel have on older people and those with mobility difficulties) to the potential loss of neighbourhood identity. The occupation of these local shops by bars, restaurants, and specialised shops has altered the type of activity in the neighbourhood and does not meet the sociability needs of these older women residents.

3.5. Promotion of the Social and Associative Network

At the same time as they talk about the problems resulting from the transformation of the neighbourhood, the older women convey very positive feelings when they refer to some of the community centres that offer a wide range of activities and become real meeting, exchange, and socialisation spaces.

Public Spaces Aimed to Promote Social Interactions and Associative Network

Centres such as Espacio Pozas (a public centre managed by Red Cross) and the Municipal Centre for the Elderly are cited by the interviewees as opportunities to maintain and reinforce the community spirit by offering spaces for the elderly to forge relationships, in the same sense that Bosch-Farré et al. [34] point out as places that create community.

"This year I found this centre, which is wonderful (Espacio Pozas)" (E5, 65 years old).

"Yes, for example, Espacio Pozas seemed to me to be an extraordinary place to be able to relate to different cultures, and to share, that seems to me to be very, very, very important. And to admit that there are people who are different. I mean, I think that's very, very important" (E6, 77 years old).

The neighbourhood is changing and so are the forms of relationships, although certain venues are resisting where the importance of social relations for community well-being is emphasized.

4. Discussion

Based on the conception of ageing as a complex and heterogeneous process, the entire body of research currently encompassed under the concept of ageing in place, as we have been pointing out, coincides in defending the need for older people to continue in the area in which they reside, are familiar with, and feel recognised in, for as long as possible. If the physical environment affects people throughout their lives [15,16], its influence is even greater in old age, conditioning the ageing process and even the response to illness [18].

Most of the older women in the Universidad neighbourhood coincide in highlighting the harmony and affinity they feel towards the social environment in which they have spent a significant part of their lives. They generally value the characteristics of an urban fabric in which squares and public spaces are fundamental elements of everyday relationships. This, however, conflicts with the lack of an age perspective in the configuration of space, as can be seen, for example, in the aforementioned small size of sidewalks which, in addition to prioritising the use of private cars, hinders pedestrian use. This creates barriers not only for older people with mobility problems, but also for care in public spaces and social interactions. On the other hand, the lack of accessibility in residential buildings themselves and in the immediate surroundings, as already demonstrated in previous research [11,20,52,53], hinders not only social relations in old age, but also the development of everyday life itself.

Without idealising a past in which negative memories are interwoven with very positive ones, the older women seem to enjoy the loose configuration of neighbourly relations that evokes Granovetter's conceptualisation of weak ties [38] and connects with the atmosphere of local comfort described by Blokland and Nast [36]. However, these low-intensity relationships prove strong enough to provide support in times of need, when the circumstances demand it, in the sense that Torres [51] attributes to "elastic ties", which can be activated in certain situations.

The research shows, however, that the process of change to which the neighbourhood is currently being subjected—in terms of gentrification and touristification—has a decisive influence on the daily lives of older women, who are helpless witnesses to the transformation of their environment and their potential relationships.

Gentrification and touristification, as well as a greater inclination on the part of the municipal public administration to make the urban space economically profitable (by granting excessive space to bars and outdoor cafés, for example) reinforce the use of the area as a platform for night-time leisure, privatise the use of public space (thus displacing uses and users) and have repercussions on the cleanliness of the neighbourhood. However, the main threat to the local social fabric, according to the older women, comes from the high turnover of residents (who do not take root in the neighbourhood and who will be succeeded by new arrivals in a short period of time), as well as the gradual disappearance of local commerce, a key element in generating a sense of belonging and attachment to the area. The limited permanence in the neighbourhood of the new residents generates distance between them and the older women, although this segregation is in no way equivalent to intergenerational confrontation, according to the interviewees themselves.

Along the same lines, the change in the population has had an impact on the neighbourhood's small shops, which have shifted towards catering to the demands of gentrifiers and tourists, ignoring the daily needs of older residents (making it even harder for them to remain in the neighbourhood) and causing the relationships between residents and shop-

keepers, built up over time, to disappear. This affects not only the intensity of coexistence, which is transcendental when it comes to forging ties and building a neighbourhood, but also removes a potential resource for detecting loneliness or vulnerability. This shows that the transformation is not only physical and economic, but also cultural, relational, and symbolic [52].

In the light of international standards and commitments, these outcomes are relevant in the context of the role of age and especially urban ageing in achieving the SDGs, which require appropriate environments to ensure the health and well-being of older people. From this perspective, it is a priority for older people to feel a sense of ownership of the space in which they live to prevent them from becoming prisoners in their own homes [15] and experiencing old age as something negative. The potential lack of integration of older people in the urban space is therefore not the result of individual choice (theory of disengagement), or even the loss of physical capacity and motor skills but is largely a consequence of the inadequate configuration of that space to accommodate the different needs not only of use, but of users [20].

Appropriate measures, therefore, need to be implemented to minimise the impact of gentrification and resident turnover. This includes all the side effects that they entail in local environments such as the one investigated, in which attachment to the place and social relationships with fellow residents play a transcendental role [14] in the daily lives of the elderly, as opposed to the likelihood of experiencing exclusion that some authors link to the ageing process [53,54].

5. Conclusions

The increase in longevity and the growth of cities in Spain is leading us towards a very specific future: most of the elderly of the future will be urban. For older people, staying in a familiar place has many positive effects and can be the key to better health and greater social integration. It also satisfies a desire to remain part of a community that knows them and of which they feel part, and in which neighbourhood ties, a source of solidarity and sociability, are an essential aspect. However, for all these benefits to be possible, there need to be spaces that favour these neighbourly relations and foster intergenerational relations and the opportunity to generate ties with the new neighbours who are arriving in the neighbourhood.

The case study carried out in Universidad (Malasaña), a neighbourhood in central Madrid, reveals the importance of the local space and the relationships and experiences of the older women who live there, the strength of past collective experience in shaping the present and the trends that have been threatening to become established in the area for some time, with the consequent weakening of older women's social relationships, of their familiarity with the space and therefore, of their well-being and health.

Furthermore, and contrary to the idea put forward by certain sectors that the city is not a suitable place to grow old, the women interviewed show a strong attachment to their local space. They have been defending the construction of a neighbourhood and community over many years, which is not necessarily characterised by deep friendships, but by the existence of a social network that responds in case of need.

The research, however, includes a number of limitations. As explained above, case studies allow for an in-depth exploration of the object of research and provide detailed and nuanced information. On the downside, however, there is a limited generalisation of the results obtained. Even so, and with due caution, the findings could be extrapolated to other central areas of historic cities with a certain community tradition but currently under stress from gentrification processes in which there is a high rate of population turnover accompanied by the progressive disappearance of local commerce. In future research, the authors plan to carry out the empirical work necessary to update the research, focusing exclusively on older women. This will make it possible not only to check whether the trends detected in the period covered by this article have continued subsequently, but also the

effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the daily life and intensity of women's relationships in the neighbourhood.

In the future, it would be useful to extend this research by comparing Universidad (Malasaña) with other areas of Madrid or with neighbourhoods in other cities that are undergoing the same process. On the other hand, it should be noted that urban ageing from a women's perspective is a highly relevant area of research that still needs to be deepened and clarified in some aspects.

Notes

[1] This is the number of immigrants (people moving into the district) minus the number of emigrants (people moving out of the district) in the previous year, divided by the person-years lived by the population of the receiving district over that period.

[2] According to Madrid City Council, the price per square metre of second-hand housing was 5282 euros, with the city average being 3732 euros per square metre (Source: data bank, Madrid City Council. Viewed in May 2021).

[3] La Movida was a social, artistic, cultural, and transgressive movement, led by young people, in which music played a fundamental role. It paved the way towards ideological and sexual freedom, and drug consumption featured prominently. It happened during the Spanish transition to democracy after the death of the dictator Franco in 1975.

[4] Shop or stall selling churros: long fritters made with flour and water.

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