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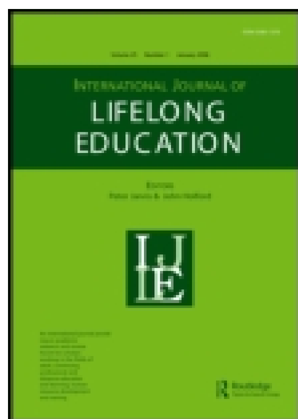

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Theorising the relationship between older people and their immediate social living environment

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Theorising the relationship between older people and their immediate social living environment

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This article presents a theoretical framework for exploring the dynamics between older people and their immediate social living environment. After introducing a gerontological perspective that goes beyond *microfication*, a literature review presents findings from studies that have explored the role of place and locality for older people. Next, this contribution seeks to broaden the conceptual field by introducing key dimensions of the relationship between older people and their social environment. A critical investigation of underlying assumptions and constructions of older people within certain research traditions that address the social environment is presented. In conclusion, the role of the

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social environment is underlined as a dynamic, multi-dimensional, historically and spatially contextualized process that both shapes and is shaped by the experiences and practices of older people.

Introduction: ageing in context

Over the past two centuries, a demographic transition has taken place: the population has been ageing due to the ongoing decline in fertility coupled with an increasing longevity. Virtually all countries will face population ageing, albeit with varying intensity and in different time frames (United Nations 2002). Individuals who live under different environmental conditions develop and 'age differently' (cf. Baars *et al.* 2006: 3). Age is a feature not just of individuals, but also of social organization and cultural context. Consequently, ageing can only be understood within the context of the social environment. This was an early theme in critical gerontology, with a variety of researchers exploring the *socially constructed nature of later life*. According to this perspective, age-related outcomes are not seen as mere consequences of natural, organismic ageing, but of a complex interplay between social structural, cultural and interactional processes. The social context encompasses not only situational events and opportunities for integration, but also structural constraints that limit one's range of possible (inter)actions and choices (Baars *et al.* 2006).

Environmental gerontology has always been involved in conceptualizing and framing ageing research by incorporating physical and social 'context'.[1] The development of this sub-discipline cannot be recounted without acknowledging Powell Lawton's contribution to the understanding of why some residential contexts better fit the needs and abilities of their older residents than others. The ecological theory of ageing (Lawton and Nahemow 1973) explains that the ability to complete a task is a result of congruence between what the environment demands (environmental press) and the capabilities of the person (competence). In response to Lawton's call for greater theoretical development in this area, the volume of essays edited by Wahl *et al.* (2004) and further reviewed by Phillips (2005) extends the ecological model proposed by Lawton and Nahemow (1973); see for example the Social-Physical Place over Time concept by Wahl and Lang (2004). The theoretical questions debated in this body of literature contain various environmental issues pertinent to ageing on the macro, meso and micro levels (for a brief overview, see Phillipson 2007). Another closely related body of work that moves beyond 'microfication' (Hagestad and Dannefer 2001) is geographical gerontology (Andrews *et al.* 2007). In their book *Ageing and Place*, Andrews and Phillips (2005) note that in recent years, the concern with environment-, space- and place-related issues has become widespread in gerontology. This 'spatial turn' in ageing research has given new impetus to several empirical projects dealing with older people's relationship with the physical and social contexts that shape everyday life.

Given the context outlined above, the purpose of this article is to further explore theoretically the dynamics between older people and their immediate social living environment. A growing number of studies focus on the impact of the neighbourhood upon quality of life and wellbeing in old age (for example Bowling and Stafford 2007, Young *et al.* 2004, Gilleard *et al.* 2007). However, the

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expansion of empirical research on older people's relationship with their neighbourhood has to a large extent developed independently of theory building. The rapidly growing gerontological literature on environmental issues, for instance, currently lacks a clear taxonomy of the dimensions of the immediate social environment.[2] In response to Wahl and colleagues' (2004) call for multidirectional bridge-building between environmental gerontology and other scholarly areas, this article explores dimensions of the 'social environment' from different perspectives, and considers each in the context of ageing. Furthermore, we provide a critical investigation of these perspectives and elaborate some of these by exploring the missing links with community and citizenship studies. Empirical results and illustrations from the Belgian Ageing Studies (Verté *et al.* 2007), a large-scale project on aspects of quality of life among over 35,000 elders, are employed to illustrate and contextualize these perspectives.

In this way, we seek to provide some bedrock dimensions that can be included in any adequate theory on the interaction between older people living self-reliantly and their neighbourhood. This theme will be developed as follows: first, the essay offers a review of studies examining the role of place and locality for older people; second, several angles from which the social environment can be studied are addressed; and third the role of older people as actors in the social environment is discussed against the background of a relational and inclusive view of citizenship and learning. In conclusion, we underline the consequences of employing an interactive conceptual model of the social environment which integrates the potential public roles of older people in society.

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1. The neighbourhood matters: a gerontological perspective

The premise of most neighbourhood studies is that 'place [still] matters' (Golant 2003: 638) to people. In particular for older people; it has been stated that their relationship with place has become even more important, given that many have resided in the same neighbourhood for long periods (Phillipson *et al.* 1999, Phillipson 2007). Consequently, the significance of neighbourhood context in later life is a research area of increasing interest. The literature provides at least five reasons that neighbourhoods are likely to play a greater role in shaping quality of life and well-being of older than younger adults. In this section, we review the major lines of approach, each of which provides different insights into the role of place and locality for older people.

Time spent in the neighbourhood

The first reason is the length of time that older people spend in their neighbourhoods (Blokland 2003, Scharf *et al.* 2003, Krause 2004, Phillipson and Scharf 2004, Phillipson 2007). From a life-course perspective, Blokland (2003) shows that use patterns and daily activities in the neighbourhood are largely dependent upon the social role associated with a person's stage of life. In particular, children aged 4 to 12, mothers with children and older people tend to use their neighbourhoods more intensively. Since many older people are no longer employed outside their home, they are likely to spend more time in their

neighbourhoods. Consequently, Krause (2004: 230) argues that research on older people's relationship with the local environs is important because 'if neighbourhoods affect physical and mental health, then these effects should be especially evident among the people who spend the most time in them'.

Attachment to place

Research on 'attachment to place' represents a second reason that the significance of the neighbourhood may be more pronounced in late life (Krause 2004). A person's attachment to the local area seems to increase with age. Although there is still no agreement regarding the name of the concept or the methodological operationalization, 'in general, place attachment is defined as an affective bond or link between people and specific places' (Hidalgo and Hernández 2001: 274). A recent study among the over-50s in the UK (Gilleard *et al.* 2007) shows that age and ageing in place are both associated with increased feelings of attachment to one's area. These relationships are remarkably unaffected by the area's socio-economic status. Furthermore, the feeling of belonging is associated with a sense of well-being, independent of how long the person over 50 has aged in place.

Krause (2004) reflects on why attachment to place may become especially important as people grow older. According to Krause, Erikson's (1959) well-known concept of 'resolving the crisis of integrity versus despair' at the final stage of lifespan development offers a plausible explanation. This stage of life is a time of introspection; when people enter late life, they look back and reassess their past experiences with an eye toward weaving their life stories into a more coherent whole. Cumulative memories associated with the neighbourhood may play an important role in the life-review process, providing one way to resolve the crisis of integrity versus despair. In line with this argument, Rowles (1978) views older people's attachment to place as a universal strategy to facilitate maintaining a sense of identity within a changing environment (Phillipson 2007). Moreover, living in a neighbourhood for an extended period may provide a sense of continuity, a feeling of control or independence (Fogel 1992).

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Ageing in place

'Attachment to place' is closely related to the concept of 'ageing in place'—a third reason why place matters in old age, usually referred to as the policy ideal of being able to remain at home while ageing (Cutchin 2003). Although often driven by financial concerns over the cost of residential and nursing homes, this emphasis on ageing in place has also been supported through an extensive academic literature on the preferences of elders themselves (Means 2007). Ageing at home seems to be the residential strategy most older people prefer, even when they are in need of care, have economic difficulties or live in inadequate houses or deprived areas (Gilleard *et al.* 2007, Verté *et al.* 2007).

In recent years, there has been a growing academic interest in the problematic nature of ageing in place for some groups, especially those in poor housing conditions (Means 2007). This is related to a fourth reason, elaborated by Phillipson (2007), why the neighbourhood is an important setting for geronto-

logical research. He explores residential- and locality-related aspects of social inequality, providing a distinctive account of global processes that generate new social divisions within the older population. Phillipson (2007) develops the argument that these global changes (e.g. emergence of transnational ties, new types of movement in old age) involve a much clearer division between the 'elected' and the 'excluded'; or those able to choose and identify with particular locations, and those who feel marginalized and alienated by changes in the communities in which they have 'aged in place'. Clearly, the neighbourhood dimension may represent a much more important aspect of exclusion for older people than is the case with other age groups.[3]

Local social networks: the residual neighbourhood

The concept of the 'residual neighbourhood' represents a fifth way of showing why place and locality play important roles in the ageing process. The residual neighbourhood (Logan and Spitze 1994: 457) reflects '[...] the hypothesis that neighbouring is an alternative form of socializing for people who do not have access to broader networks'. It is a well-replicated finding that ageing coincides with a decrease in action range, which is especially true for the very old (Peace *et al.* 2007). Proximity, interaction possibilities and meeting opportunities in the neighbourhood might become relatively more significant for those who are increasingly more oriented towards their immediate living environment.

Thomése and Van Tilburg (2000) found that 60% of the most important relationships in the personal network of older people in the Netherlands are located in the neighbourhood.[4] This finding is consistent with the Belgian Ageing Studies on the needs and living conditions of over 35,000 older people (Buffel *et al.* 2008b). Men and women aged 60 and over keep in touch most frequently with their children and grandchildren, followed by their neighbours, who appear to be a more important source of weekly contact than other network members such as friends, brothers, sisters and other family members. These findings call into question the 'community liberated' hypothesis (Wellman 1979) or the so-called general tendency towards spatially diffuse social networks, which have been 'freed' from the locality factor. We have argued that neighbourhood relations have distinct meanings for different groups in society and that it is necessary to *differentiate* not only between but also within social groups and stages of life (Buffel *et al.* 2008a). Similarly, Thomése and Van Tilburg (2000) point out that older adults *differ* in their dependency on their direct environment. Older people with fewer economic resources and elders with a decreased ADL capacity are notably more dependent on their neighbourhood; in addition, older people who feel a greater need for support not only appeal more often to their neighbours but also receive more support from the neighbourhood (Thomése 1998). It appears that declines in physical mobility may lead to a heightened need for continuity and belonging in one's immediate environment (Wahl and Lang 2004).

Baltes and Baltes's (1990) ageing theory regarding adaptive strategies such as 'Selective Optimization with Compensation' (SOC) may provide deeper insights into the above-mentioned processes. Following this theory, the concept of the 'residual neighbourhood' (Logan and Spitze 1994) refers to a strategy employed by older people trying to adapt to changeable contexts. 'Selection' can be an

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adaptive response to a decline in resources that threatens one's personal goals, such as feeling connected to others. This loss-based selection[5] may occur when distance becomes an unsupportable cost, resulting in increased importance of proximity and neighbouring relations. 'Optimization' may represent a refinement of or personal investment in neighbourhood ties with an eye towards achieving selected goals or maximizing gains. 'Compensation' involves minimizing losses by replacing them with other resources so that the person can continue to pursue the goal. Activating alternative relationships and making use of social support systems in the neighbourhood may be a way to cope with the loss of a spouse, children moving out, and so on.

2. Dimensions of the social environment in the context of ageing

A number of authors have reviewed the diverse ways in which the 'neighbourhood' is presently conceptualized and analytically employed (for example Blokland 2003, Krause 2004, Buffel *et al.* 2008a, De Visscher 2008). Some researchers conceive the neighbourhood as a limited space with great emphasis on the physical boundaries of the surrounding, whereas others focus on residents' subjective definitions of the neighbourhood. We have argued that the neighbourhood can best be understood as a 'relative concept', meaning that conceptions of the locality are relative to the historic, political and social context in which they are situated, referring to a dynamic, multi-layered and pluri-dimensional notion of the neighbourhood (cf. Buffel *et al.* 2008a). Therefore, writing about and researching the neighbourhood involves a multi-faceted understanding of the coming together of 'physical/material, social/cultural and psychological dimensions' (Peace *et al.* 2007: 209). Although environmental gerontology has mainly concentrated on the physical dimension of the environment, there is a growing interest in people's relationship with the social dimensions of their environment (Wahl and Lang 2004). The social/cultural dimension of the neighbourhood concerns the engagement of people with places—how spaces and places are used, organized and structured (Peace *et al.* 2007)—but also refers to aspects of social cohesion, interpersonal relationships and social inequalities (McNeill *et al.* 2006). Obviously, the social environment is a multidimensional construct in itself. The next section illuminates eight different but interconnected angles from which the social environment can be studied and considers each in the context of ageing.

Interpersonal relationships...

The extensive field of network studies and related concerns about loneliness amongst older people represent one perspective for researching the social environment. In social gerontology, there is substantial literature exploring the form, content and types of social networks. One of the most prominent theories of social relations is the Convoy Model (Kahn and Antonucci 1980, Fiori *et al.* 2008). This metaphor represents a dynamic view of social ties; individuals are thought to move through life with a 'convoy' of relationships that provides a protective base. The social convoy not only moves through time and space, but may exhibit both stability and discontinuity. The relationships that compose an

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individual's convoy are continuously subject to change, according to both individual and relationship development. Individuals often organize their relationships hierarchically, with family members and close friends most often drawn upon for support and help. Neighbours, acquaintances and other convoy members follow in importance. Different relationships in an individual's convoy may serve different functions, including the exchange of aid, affective support and affirmation or encouragement. The structure, function and quality of individuals' social convoys contribute significantly to well-being in old age.

Network research has expanded upon such themes, an area that emerged particularly through the work of Wenger, De Jong Gierveld, Knipscheer, Fokkema, Van Tilburg, Dijkstra and Thomése. A number of studies focus on the aspects of relationships (such as size and composition) that influence the extent to which one can count on practical and emotional support, which is beneficial for older people's well-being. For instance, networks that are more varied in composition are often assumed to provide more support, which in turn has a positive effect on older people's well-being. Such studies largely fit in what Schrameijer (1990) calls 'the social support paradigm'. Within this type of research, the focus is on (local) personal networks of people, which acquire meaning through the potential help and support they offer. Networks are not studied as relevant social relationships for social cohesion (see below, Forrest and Kearns 2001) or expressions of active citizenship and participation, but rather as help and support systems that are beneficial to older people.

...Beyond help and support

A second way to approach the social environment is found in studies that move beyond the social support paradigm by recognizing the societal contribution of older people. However, mainstream gerontology has paid little attention to older people's *agency* or the way they co-influence the social reality of which they are part (De Visscher 2008). As Wahl and Lang (2004: 11) have observed:

> Theories about the social environments in later life have typically viewed the individual as a recipient or adaptive user of social resources rather than as an active person that engages him- or herself in the construal or even the production of the social environment.

These observations point to the necessity of casting a critical eye on constructions of older people in policies and theories that address the social environment. Baars (2010), for instance, criticizes simplistic accounts that either characterize ageing as an inevitable period of decline or view older people as a homogeneous group being problematically vulnerable and in need of care. These stereotypical descriptions neglect the fact that people aged 60 and over play important roles in society, and that a significant part of informal care is provided by older people themselves. The Belgian Ageing Studies project, for instance, shows that 29.4% of the older population provide care for family, friends, acquaintances and neighbours, and over 40% look after children. Moreover, 65.9% participate in one or more associations; 16% volunteer and 31.1% feel (very) involved with his or her neighbourhood (Buffel *et al.* 2008b).

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Although these figures ignore the differences within the older population, they firmly illustrate that older people's relationship with the environment is a two-directional construct. Individuals are not only shaped by exchanges with places; people also shape and create the environment in everyday (inter)action. Furthermore, it is found that 16.4% of the older population who didn't volunteer at the time the survey took place indicated that they were willing to do so in the near future (Buffel *et al.* 2008b), suggesting there is still a relatively high recruitment potential among older people. Particularly in relation to people going into retirement, it has been argued that in this stage of life many individuals search for new meaningful roles and activities (Verté and Verhaest 2005). However, there is still a great challenge for academics, practitioners and policymakers to develop strategies which will facilitate a more significant role for older people in (local) society's construction.

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Social cohesion and diversity

The argument developed above is that mainstream gerontological research concerned with the social environment has often been informed by an uncritical reliance on assumptions and images about older people as help and support subjects. The support-giving effect of (local) interpersonal relationships should by no means be underestimated; however, there is a need for a broader interpretation of the social environment in the study of ageing.

There has always been given a great deal of attention to the notion of social cohesion or 'the extent of connectedness and solidarity' (Kawachi and Berkman 2000: 175) in neighbourhood studies. Forrest and Kearns (2001: 2130) propose that local social networks, which perform important functions in the routines of everyday life, may be 'the basic building-blocks of social cohesion'. This statement refers to a longstanding debate in sociology about 'community' as predefined locality (neighbourhood cohesion) versus 'community' as personal network (network cohesion) (see for example Wellman 1979, Blokland 2003).

Despite ongoing research dealing with older people's 'sense of community', there is still no agreement on a definitive and consistent measure of this concept. In several studies, neighbourhood cohesion is measured by assessing neighbourhood networks, instrumental and emotional social support available within the neighbourhood, interaction with neighbours and other resources potentially available to all members of the social structure (Young *et al.* 2004). There is a tendency in social gerontology to focus on indicators of neighbourhood cohesion that go back to a more inward-looking notion of cohesion, including aspects such as value consensus, supportive relationships with a high density and connectedness, mutual trust and internal monitoring. Ethnographic studies, however, have taught us that not only the strong and supportive ties are important, but that social cohesion also involves weak and ephemeral relationships (Blokland 2003, Soenen 2009).

In relation to the social fabric of society, 'the strength of weak ties' (Granovetter 1973) is that they are often bridges—relations in a network which are the only connection between two persons, groups or other units. The importance of bridging social ties, as distinct from bonding ties (cf. Putnam 2000), is that they bring people together across society's dividing lines, for example intercultural or intergenerational encounters. Social cohesion is not about a search for communalities,

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then, but addresses the challenges of 'living with diversity'. According to Soenen (2009) the experience of diversity is central to what she calls 'the world of ephemeral relationships'. The latter differ from weak ties in the sense that ephemeral relationships are more superficial and fleeting. They refer to the public realm (Lofland 1998) or the world of strangers. In this world, people have limited relationships with a diversity of other people including unequals. However, Soenen (2009: 11) argues that the experience of diversity has not so much to do with the diversity of people but more with the diversity of the relationships among them: 'Diversity is all about connections. It is a relational matter.'

Studying the social environment from a 'social-cohesion' perspective thus involves a complex understanding of a contested concept that brings together a number of theoretical questions. While some authors support a relational view of social cohesion (cf. Blokland and Soenen), others assume that cohesion requires a form of normative consensus, while others tend to stress the importance of reducing social and economic exclusion. Therefore, we argue that the development of a conceptual model of older people's relationships with the social environment would benefit from revealing the transversal connections with the broader establishment of theories concerning social cohesion, community and a sense of belonging.

Sense of security and feelings of safety

Although neighbourhood safety and feelings of insecurity are often considered to be part of the concept of social cohesion, it has been shown they are separate constructs (Young *et al.* 2004). This finding supports the idea that studies about feelings of insecurity amongst older people may represent a sixth distinct perspective that provides insights into the role of the social environment as a multi-layered and spatially contextualized process. A number of researchers have pointed to older people's need for a sense of security, which relates to quality of life, health, life and neighbourhood satisfaction in old age (Adams and Serpe 2000, De Donder *et al.* 2009). While the focus of 'fear of crime' research has long been on disorder and crime, recently there has been a shift towards a broader understanding of the concept. Pain (2000: 365) outlines this as follows:

> Fear of crime is seen as inseparable [...] from a range of social and economic problems concerned with housing, employment, environmental planning and social exclusion.

According to Pain (2000), feelings of insecurity are rooted in place and are variable between places. The development of theoretical links with geographical and environmental perspectives may therefore be crucial for understanding older people's sense of (in)security in the neighbourhood. In drawing attention to feelings of safety as a relevant aspect of the social environment, we need to understand the ways in which older people experience these feelings and how these sentiments impact their daily lives. For example, feelings of insecurity may become a psychological barrier which influences mobility-related decisions and inhibits outdoor behaviour (Peace *et al.* 2007), especially when going out alone or in the evening (Verté *et al.* 2007). This 'withdrawal from community life' may alter ecological

conditions such as population turnover and heterogeneity; moreover, it affects neighbourhood cohesion and social control (Markowitz *et al.* 2001).

The neighbourhood as a learning space

Another perspective from which to approach the social environment is through the exploration of interconnections between education and social-cultural processes in the neighbourhood. Education is considered to have three distinct roles: a functional-integrative or technical role, a social-moral and an expressive-aesthetic role (Vanwing and Notten 2004). This model of education does not consider learning solely in terms of socio-economical continuity of the system—that is, the functional-integrative role—but as a way of resourcing engagement and supporting people to challenge the limitations and to extend the possibilities of democratic activity. In this perspective, the neighbourhood is increasingly being recognized as a potential context where social-moral and expressive-aesthetic ambitions of education take place (cf. Thompson 2001).

The social-moral dimension of education in locally based settings refers to the wider, social purposes of learning, such as community development, involvement, political participation, having a say in local society's construction, and so on. It emphasizes the importance of everyone's ability to learn in order to improve and change the terms and conditions of people's lives, on an individual basis, but also collectively (Vanwing and Notten 2004). In their model of 'Building communities from the inside out', Kretzmann and Mcknight (1993: 52) explicitly mention older people as 'assets within the community'. Elders are seen as primary contributors to community development processes because they have accumulated a wide range of experiences, skills and talents which can be translated into resources which may serve to invigorate daily life in neighbourhoods. In terms of its social purpose, informal learning for neighbourhood development could become a critical resource to local people (Thompson 2001). For example, this is the case for projects that involve older residents as neighbourhood coaches who play an important role in mapping and mobilizing community assets in order to build local social networks, discover potential partnerships and offer opportunities to get involved in the community.

The expressive-aesthetic role of education refers to the opportunity for learners to express their individual and collective identities through culture, art, symbols, intercultural exchange, religion, and so on. History, tradition and culture are considered potential means to facilitate informal learning processes in a particular neighbourhood (cf. Vanwing and Notten 2004). Any older individual who has lived in a neighbourhood for an extended period of time embodies a unique perspective on the local history, which can be instrumental in community development processes. In addition to a strong sense of history, older people can also actively pass down rich cultural traditions to younger members of the community (Kretzmann and Mcknight 1993). In their study about 'how older Australians from diverse cultural backgrounds contribute to civil society', Warburton and McLaughlin (2006) find that older people have a critical and important role in maintaining and promoting their culture and providing support across their communities based on common experience. Respondents in this study described themselves as repositories of cultural knowledge within their

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communities. These assets can be mobilized and turned into valuable resources for community redevelopment.

While it is true some elders prefer to invest in themselves or are no longer able to dedicate themselves to the community, it is also true that a large part of the older population would like to remain active in the community and would like to stay connected in a meaningful way to organizations or groups that can use their services (Kretzmann and Mcknight 1993, Verté *et al.* 2007, Buffel *et al.* 2008a, 2008b). When people are asked to play a specific role in a well-defined project that makes sense to them and which can make a difference to their lives, there is a great chance they will become involved in the community. These initiatives will be most effective when they take place in locally based settings and in contexts that are easily accessible and unpretentious (Thompson 2001, Verté *et al.* 2007).

However, several authors point to the fact that elders have been at best marginalized in neighbourhood-renewal policies and at worst excluded (Riseborough and Sribjlanin 2000, Scharf *et al.* 2003, Phillipson and Scharf 2004, Phillipson 2007). There is a tendency in regeneration plans to stereotype older citizens: older people are mentioned only as service recipients, victims or are referred to largely as people who needed to be 'cared for' (Riseborough and Sribjlanin 2000). Underlying 'ageism' in the construction of policies, and the effects on older people that lead them to internalize ageist stereotypes, often prevent elders from playing a significant role in the process of revitalising the neighbourhood as a learning space (cf. Phillipson and Scharf 2004).

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Towards a political conception of the social environment

The above-mentioned finding that older people are often 'invisible' in local policymaking demonstrates the importance of incorporating a political view to study the social environment. Critical gerontologists (Baars *et al.* 2006), for instance, have pointed out the absence of attention to power in social relationships, or power differentials between individual and society. These authors illuminate how power is at work in determining which ideologies of age become accepted within popular or scientific discourse and which individuals have the best odds to 'age successfully'. Central to the conceptual development of a political conception of the social environment is the relationship between agency and structure (cf. Shaw 2007), the recognition that agency is mediated through the dynamics of power, authority and control. The latter is closely related to the debate about the social position of older people in contemporary societies, which is essentially a political question.

Societies facilitate a certain type of social construction of old age, which also affects an older individual's pattern of political participation. The political paradox of old age—that is, 'many in number but small in influence'—is an illustration of a general policy failure that is age discriminatory in its impact (Walker and Naegle 1999). According to these authors, this process of social exclusion is not so much a consequence of intentional, conscious age discrimination, but rather has to do with the failure to adapt and reform institutions in accordance with the changing socio-demographic structure. This finding demonstrates the importance of social context in explaining differences in political participation among the older population. As Goerres (2009: 13) concludes:

> Citizens are not atomized individuals who listen only to their internal interests and motivation to engage in politics. Rather they depend on their social environment to be mobilized into participation, to have opportunities to become active and to be motivated.

This finding resonates with studies that point out the importance of making an appeal to older people, senior organizations and advisory bodies for elders—not only to play a role in health- and care-related matters, but also to encourage participation in local social policymaking, social and spatial planning, housing, and so on. (Verté *et al.* 2007). In Belgium, for instance, older people experience that they have most influence over policies on homecare, social services and health care. In contrast, older adults express a lack of opportunities to become active and involved in policies that operate locally, such as housing associations, design and liveability of the neighbourhood and local advisory bodies. However, most older adults prefer to be represented and to participate in local policies, rather than being involved in higher levels of government (Verté *et al.* 2007). Moreover, many of the most immediate issues that impacts upon older people's lives are determined locally (Buffel *et al.* 2008a).

Of course, older people cannot be perceived as one homogenous group with a clear preference structure. Differences of political participation and involvement in society cannot be pinned down in a simple statement valid across European ageing societies, across age groups or across time. Instead, an individual's pattern of participation is shaped by the interplay of generational socialization in politics and society, sociological changes across the life cycle and psychological experiences of ageing (Goerres 2009). The decision to participate in later life is not only related to personal experiences, motivations and resources, but is also based on mobilization attempts, situational opportunities and structural constraints across the life course. In conclusion we can say that involvement in society in late life cannot be studied within a political vacuum.

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Practical and symbolic use of public space: mobility-related issues

Spatial- and mobility-related aspects of citizenship are increasingly recognized as important dimensions of the social environment and social exclusion. Recently it has been shown, for example, that older people in inner cities often face many disadvantages related to access to services (Ogg 2005, Phillipson 2007). Much of the literature on older people's experience of neighbourhood life has focused on their engagement with (or disengagement from) the physical environment, viewed as geographical units with facilities and opportunities (Phillipson 2007). This refers to Bloklands (2003) notion of '*practical neighbourhood use*' or the way in which people use and construe the material and spatial structures of the surroundings in their everyday lives. In relation to older people, engagement with the natural environment (park, garden), the presence of services and shops, the 'walkability' of the neighbourhood and the availability of transport, are all factors that may affect well-being (Peace *et al.* 2007). The Belgian Ageing Studies project, for instance, shows that older people attach great importance to a traffic-calming, pedestrian-friendly environment with public toilets, benches, services and community facilities in the neighbourhood (Buffel *et al.* 2008b).

An equally important dimension (and potential source of exclusion) of the social environment is the way in which places are appropriated symbolically by particular groups in pursuit of their social, cultural, political and commercial interests (Phillipson 2007). Referring to the concept of '*symbolic neighbourhood use*', Blokland (2003) shows how places may become expressions of status and social exclusion. Especially with regard to immigrants and ethnic minorities, it has been stated that public spaces exclude, displace and marginalize particular social groups, rather than unite or bind. Researching the variety of social and spatial practices of certain groups in society therefore involves a multifaceted understanding of contesting and conflicting interests and actions, identity displays and struggles (Yücesoy 2006). Questions about the extent to which regenerated neighbourhoods and public places are constructed to the advantage of only certain age or generational groups may be a new challenge for social gerontology to address (Phillipson 2007).

Heterogeneity and inequality

Ideas about diversity (heterogeneity) of older adults and poverty (inequality) among the aged have been developed as largely separate topics within gerontological discourse; yet, they are related in at least some respects. For instance, heterogeneity in some key domains (such as lifestyle and health) reflects differences in material inequality (cf. Dannefer 2003). Biggs and Daatland (2004: 1) state that: 'Diversity is also a consequence [...] of cumulative inequalities that have been accrued across a lifetime and now accentuate difference in later life.' The decline of collectivism and the general tendency towards privatizing the risks of ageing have placed the responsibility for financial security and healthcare firmly on the individual. As a consequence, increasing social exclusion and inequality between the haves, have nots and have mores is inevitable as there will be an accumulative disadvantage over the life course for those who are poor or less educated (Bond *et al.* 2007).

The argument developed here is that both notions of heterogeneity and inequality provide key conceptual elements for analysing the dynamics between older people and their social environment. This theme has been given clearest expression by Scharf *et al.* (2003) in their exploration of older people's perceptions of the local environment in deprived urban neighbourhoods in the UK. These authors bring into focus questions concerning the extent to which diversity within the older population results from systemic processes such as exclusion from basic services, material resources, social relations and civic activities. The study underlines the value of taking into account life course- and place-related inequalities when exploring older people's relationship with the social environment. Scharf *et al.* (2003) conclude that there is a clear need to develop research that explores the interaction between structural processes and the way these are shaped and influenced by local communities.

3. Recognizing older people as actors in the social environment: towards a relational and inclusive view of citizenship-as-practice

The various perspectives on older people's relationship with their immediate social environment point to the importance of employing an interactive model

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of older people's relationship with the social environment. Older adults are shaped to varying degrees by exchanges with the environment; conversely, these exchanges affect the environment itself. Following this interactive model, 'individual' and 'neighbourhood' cannot be studied as 'fixed entities' to be 'matched', but are continuously being reconstituted in everyday interaction (Dannefer 1999). In making use of, having social contacts within and giving meaning to their immediate social environment, older people are actually (re) constructing and shaping the neighbourhood.

This links up with the concept of citizenship from a dynamic, relational and inclusive view, developed by Lawy and Biesta (2006) and elaborated by Bouverne-De Bie and De Visscher (2008). In relation to young people, these authors conceptualize citizenship in a sense that it is *inclusive* because it assumes that *everyone* in society is a citizen who *moves through* 'citizenship-as-practice', 'from the cradle to the grave'. 'Citizenship-as-practice' makes no distinction between citizens and *not-yet-citizens* (youngsters) (Lawy and Biesta 2006: 43) or *no-longer-citizens* (older people). Instead, people learn to be citizens as a consequence of their participation in the actual practices that make up their lives, signifying a process of transformation over time. Such an inclusive outlook respects the claim to citizenship status of everyone in society, including young and older people.

The concept of citizenship as an ongoing practice not only encompasses an inclusive component, it is also *relational* because it is affected by social and structural conditions that play upon it (Lawy and Biesta 2006). The latter lends support to authors who have emphasized the role of social context in citizenship learning. The ETGACE project[6] (Holford and Van der Veen 2003), whose aim was to explore the nature of citizenship in six European countries, for instance, shows that citizenship learning is embedded in political and socio-historical contexts, and that citizens' identities are formed and reformed—negotiated, transformed—in relation to others. Citizenship is *learned* through a variety of processes and in a range of contexts. In this respect, the ETGACE project (2003) underlines the importance of informal learning processes. Studying the social environment from a multi-dimensional perspective, therefore, also involves questions about how the neighbourhood impacts upon the collective, informal learning processes taking place and how these processes shape the creation of citizenship and the possibilities for agency in old age.

In this respect, Penninx (2003) has pointed out the importance of involving neighbourhood residents in the design and maintenance of public spaces and facilities. According to Penninx, the practice of co-producing shared space (cf. citizenship-as-practice) may be the bedrock of what he calls 'intergenerational and intercultural encounters'. A bottom-up, inclusionary and accessible process centred around how best to involve the community in creating liveable places may offer opportunities to bridge social ties (Penninx 2003). Citizenship, then, is about learning to deal with diversity; it involves a fundamental recognition of the various ways in which people take part in everyday practices (cf. Bouverne-De Bie and De Visscher 2008). In this view, citizenship is experienced and articulated through all age groups. Older people are not seen as an isolated group having little opportunity to shape the situations they are in, but as legitimate participants that co-construe the environment through interactional processes with others.

There are many societal structures and norms, however, which mask the complexity of the definition of citizenship. These same norms can also mask the fact

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that certain social groups are not often recognized as active citizens and are denied a voice in policy- and place-making processes (Holford and Van der Veen 2003). When it comes to participation and decision-making processes, several voices are ignored and some people have little opportunity to change their environment (Lawy and Biesta 2006). It is remarkable, for instance, that both younger and older people are often subject to what we call the 'paradox of neighbourhood participation'. Although younger and older people tend to use their neighbourhoods most frequently during their daily activities (*being part*), contradictorily, they are the first to be excluded as outsiders from a process that they are part of (*taking part*) (cf. Penninx 2003). Taking into account the extent to which people are able, willing and equipped to influence their environment and the conditions of their own lives and those around them is therefore crucial when employing a citizenship perspective for studying the social environment.

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4. Discussion

This paper points to the role of the social environment as a dynamic, multidimensional, historically and spatially contextualized process that both shapes and is shaped by the experiences and practices of older people. The first section reviewed the literature exploring the neighbourhood as an important setting in everyday life in the ageing process. We identified several reasons why place and locality are likely to play a larger role in shaping the quality of life and well-being of older than younger adults. It follows that a growing number of empirical studies focus on the impact of various aspects of the neighbourhood upon quality of life in old age. Yet the lack of attention to theory in this area has paved the way to narrowly defined, problem-based research questions (cf. Baars *et al.* 2006). The absence of a theoretical framework to explore the interaction between older people and their social environment, for instance, has led to a focus on older people as recipients or adaptive users of social resources and support, rather than as active participants that engage in the construal and production of the environs (Wahl and Lang 2004). We showed that the neighbourhood is likely to become a crucial element of the social support system for older people. However, in examining the social dimensions of the neighbourhood, there is a clear need to move beyond the 'social support paradigm' (Schrameijer 1990).

This article has sought to broaden the conceptual field by introducing several key dimensions of the relationship between older people and their social environment. Our perspective has drawn insights from various traditions of theory, representing multiple layers or viewpoints from which the social environment can be studied. Essentially, these various perspectives point to the importance of employing an interactive model of older people's relationship with the social environment (Dannefer 1999). On the one hand, older individuals are shaped by exchanges with the environment. On the other hand, these exchanges affect the environment itself; older people co-influence the social environment of which they are part. In this context, there is still a great potential for involving older people and senior organizations as participants in social policymaking, not only in relation to health- and care-related matters, but also as regards matters that operate locally—such as housing associations, design and liveability of the neighbourhood (Verté *et al.* 2007). The long-standing commitment of many

older people to their neighbourhoods—partly reflecting a need to maintain a sense of identity in a changing environment—suggests that there is a considerable scope for involving this group in different aspects of community redevelopment (Scharf *et al.* 2003).

By recognizing the neighbourhood as a learning space where social-moral and expressive-aesthetic ambitions of education take place (Vanwing and Notten 2004), older people may become acknowledged as assets within the community. With respect to the social-moral role of education, the life experiences and skills older people have acquired over time could be mobilized and turned into valuable resources for change in neighbourhood regeneration, through the development of local voluntary networks, intergenerational relationships and partnerships. Older people are regarded, then, as potential contributors to the processes of community development and informal learning (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993).

In addition, older people can also play a role as informal educators with regard to the expressive-aesthetic dimensions of learning in a locally based setting (cf. Vanwing and Notten 2004). Particularly through their memories of space and location, their strong sense of local history and rich cultural knowledge, older people have the ability to contribute to the process of community development in a range of ways. People who have lived in the same area a considerable length of time, for example, could play fundamental roles as 'neighbourhood experts' for new(er) residents because of their rich local knowledge. This suggests that regeneration policies move away from a deficit model in which older people are seen as service recipients or people who need to be 'cared for' towards a model which builds upon the skills and rich local experiences of this growing number of older citizens. Through recognizing older people as legitimate participants in a process of which they are part, the locality may become a collective learning space where a 'relational and inclusive sense of citizenship' (Lawy and Biesta 2006) is actually practiced.

In providing opportunities to feel part of and play a role in the neighbourhood, policies should also target vulnerable groups of older people and take account of individuals' resources, coping capacities, interests and needs. Strategies for promoting neighbourhood integration cannot treat older people as one homogenous group with a clear preference structure (Phillipson and Scharf 2004). While some older people are no longer able or prefer not to invest in the community, others express a strong desire to become or stay connected to the locality in a meaningful way. Moreover, there is a great diversity in the ways in which older citizens (want to) become involved in shaping community development strategies at a local level, in terms of the roles they play, the projects they engage in, the level of commitment, and so on.

A key argument of the paper, however, is that the extent to which older people are able, allowed and willing to actively shape and (re)construct their environment is related to the dynamics of power, control and place or late-life inequalities. Central to theorizing the social environment is the position of older people in society, and the recognition that agency is always mediated through a relationship of power and dominance. The role of community development is to enhance agency, but this necessitates an understanding of power relations (Shaw 2007). Moreover, we suggest that opportunities for interacting with and changing structures should be enhanced, including efforts and contributions from older people.

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Such questions are relevant to policy as well as to theory, although the intersections of policy change with demographic and economic trends indicate that this will be a challenging task. Strategies to promote sustainable social and environmental policy require a focus on neighbourhood and locality that moves beyond physical environmental risks, towards a perspective that also considers social environmental factors as important determinants of well-being and inclusion in old age. There is still a great challenge for academics, practitioners and policymakers to develop new strategies to facilitate more significant roles for older people in the construal and production of the locality. Hence, much more needs to be known about how interactions between inequality, power, place and time (accumulated disadvantage) influence daily life in old age. This involves a complex understanding of the coming together of social, physical, historical and political dimensions of the environment.

To conclude, the issues discussed in this paper point to a substantial research agenda arising from a focus on the social neighbourhood as a dynamic, multi-layered construct. First, there is still a considerable potential within the field of environmental and geographical gerontology to contribute to this nuanced, theoretically informed understanding of the role of the social environment. Theories concerning 'contextual ageing' must, it can be argued, re-discover the social dimensions of the environment. Furthermore, we suggest that the theoretical development of environmental perspectives in the gerontological field requires integration and response from other disciplines or areas of research dealing with environments. We hope that this article offers a step in that direction.

Second, there are many empirical and methodological challenges that arise from our conceptual framework. Building on earlier work dealing with spatial aspects of citizenship, it may be useful to explore the extent to which older people differ in the way they integrate in their locality. Further investigation would doubtless reveal different types of neighbourhood integration, each reflecting different combinations of personal and environmental opportunities and constraints (Phillipson 2007). Moreover, future work could explore the extent to which older people are able, willing and allowed to play a role in facilitating social-moral and expressive-aesthethic dimensions of education in locally based settings. These are crucial for understanding the dynamics of social and spatial inclusion and exclusion, and by definition difficult to assess solely by means of quantitative methods of investigation. Qualitative research has been put forward to explore dynamic and process-oriented phenomena, such as the meanings assigned to the social environment across time and space. The complexities that underlie individual relationships with neighbourhood environments require an interactive model that unfolds the various dimensions of this relationship. Rather than focusing on one particular tradition of research, it is our contention that structural approaches should be conducted in tandem with more interpretive approaches (cf. Baars *et al.* 2006).

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Notes

1. This is important because there is a tendency in scholarly work to 'de-contextualize' human ageing from the environment, the day-to-day surroundings in which ageing really takes place (Peace *et al.* 2007).
2. But see McNeill *et al.* (2006) for an overview in the context of health research.
3. For example dimensions of social exclusion in urban settings as a consequence of neighbourhood change; arising from pressures operating in the urban environment; and through economic development and growth, most notably in association with globalization (Phillipson 2007).
4. Relationships with partner, family members, parents, son(s)-in-law/daughter(s)-in-law are left out of the neighbourhood networks.
5. In addition to loss-based selection, selection can also be based on individual preferences, that is, elective selection.
6. Education and training for governance and active citizenship in Europe

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