

Age Friendly Cities in Australia:

An Emerging Movement

By Penny Spiers & Cliff Key



Penny Spiers

Design Lead

Penny is a Registered Landscape Architect with over 15 years' experience. Her diverse professional background includes open space planning and design, urban design, master planning, landscape design, placemaking, heritage interpretation, detailed design, contract documentation and contract administration. She has extensive experience revitalising and developing parks, public open space, town centres, education settings and urban precincts. Penny is valued for her strategic visioning and design, master planning and community consultation skills. Penny delivers conceptual and developed designs that are well considered, inspired and responsive.



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Design Lead

Cliff's design focus is centred on a passion for understanding why successful places work and recognising the importance of each location's unique context. With 15 years of experience in the development industry and extensive master planning knowledge in a wide variety of residential and mixed use contexts Cliff has played an integral role in the design and planning of successful communities in Australia and overseas including North America, the Middle East and New Zealand. Cliff has delivered cohesive urban design solutions for complex projects working as a key contributor within multidisciplinary teams. He has also been involved in the strategic positioning of projects and the negotiation of key issues with stakeholders. This involvement has given Cliff an excellent understanding of the design and development process providing initiative, creative thinking and commercial awareness.

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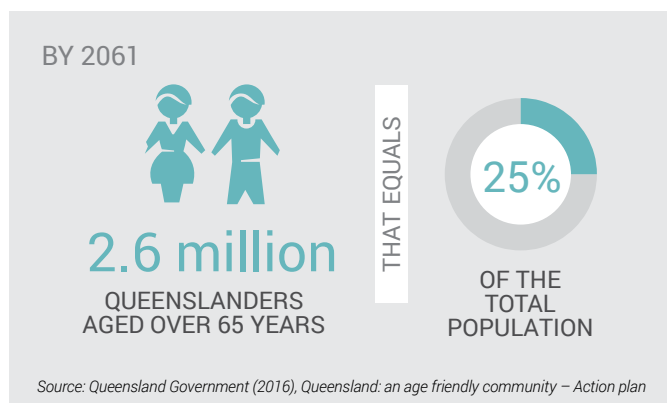
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Introduction

Right now, we are living in an exciting period of change where it is accepted that so many aspects of our lives are continually evolving. One area of this significant global change that will continue to gain momentum is the trend of an 'ageing population'.

Yet as the 'baby boomers' move into their retirement and senior years, this fundamental change to the structure of our society and the challenges that present moving forward, are only now just starting to be given the attention they need and deserve by governments, policy makers and industry.

The publicised issues around ageing populations are often centred on countries such as Japan, but this is also an issue with significant relevance to Australia. In Queensland alone, the population aged 65 years and over in 2011 was 580,000 or 10.8% of the population.



In 2036, the population will more than double, growing to between 1.3-1.4 million people. By 2061 - the number of Queenslanders over 65 years of age will continue to boom to 2.6 million, making up 25% of the total population.

This significant increase is indicative of large scale population changes right across our country, and can't be ignored. It is important to recognise that Australia is currently in the early phase of a demographic evolution - something our cities have never experienced before, requiring an immediate need to go far beyond the common discussions we are currently having around our Australian health services.

At the recent International Federation on Ageing's 13th Global Conference in Brisbane, this complex subject was explored in great depth. A diverse field of international experts, researchers, and industry stakeholders demonstrated and discussed the wide spanning impacts this issue has on so many aspects of our society, nationally and globally.

The concept of an "Age Friendly City" was established by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in 2005 and has increasingly been adopted across the world as an accepted method of defining what our cities need to embed to facilitate healthy and active ageing.

As Australian Designers, we see the importance and inherent challenges in meeting the requirements of our ageing population. In essence, the success and liveability of our cities as better age-friendly places will be largely determined by the ongoing, improvement of our urban and suburban fabric.

This white paper serves to explore the issues within the Australian context: how the rapid expansion of our ageing population presents a variety of challenges around housing options, affordability, proximity to services, transport and community infrastructure; and the solutions that can be applied now to ensure we are well on our way to facilitating an Age Friendly built environment.



WHO Age Friendly Flower

World Health Organisation

"The WHO captures the broad elements of an Age Friendly City within eight domains, many of which are anchored to the form and function of our cities and neighbourhoods, enabling an ageing population to enjoy a high quality of life. Although all the domains are inter-related, it is apparent that housing, transportation, outdoor spaces and buildings capture tangible elements within our cities that largely enable or discourage the success of the other domains."

Cliff Key and Penny Spiers

Place Design Group

Engage with the Experience

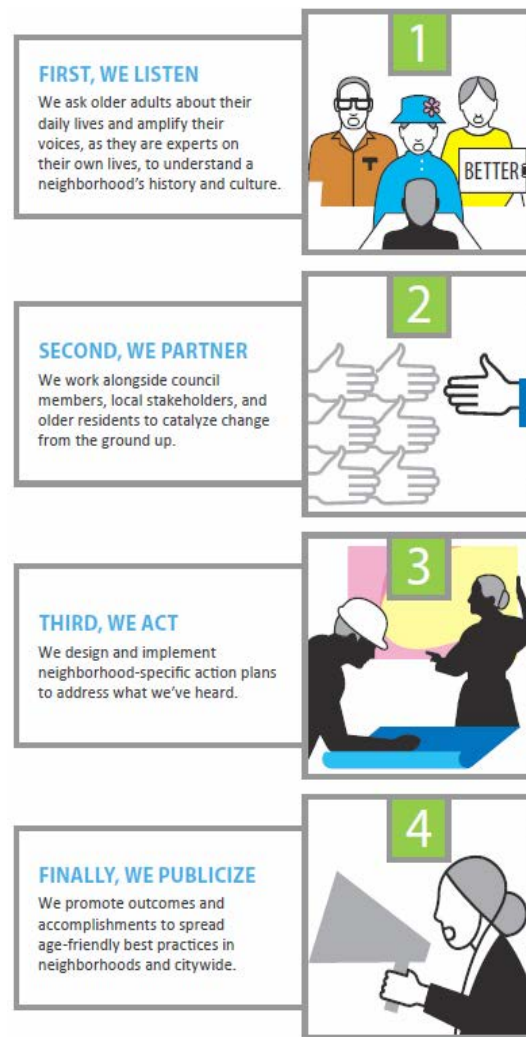
Many different projects varying in scale and complexity were presented at this year's International Federation on Ageing's Global Conference. The projects that made a quantifiable difference within their local context all had a common factor - 'active engagement with the ageing community'. "This commonality recognised that as a society, there is a large degree of knowledge and value that can be shared by connecting with the senior members of our communities. Unfortunately all too often, people over 65 years old feel that their opinions have not been heard or valued, so it was also recognised that moving forward, it is essential to better understand and meet their needs.

Several of the projects, varying from dwelling assessment through to streetscape interventions, involved interviews and community workshops targeted specifically at ageing groups, these often resulted in steering groups comprised of people over 65 years old to represent and drive the projects forward. Successful projects also engaged seniors to actively collect data, photograph and map elements they considered to be the good and bad within their community. Despite common misconceptions, participants were either keen to learn or already familiar with tablets and smart phones to collect this information.

This engagement has its most obvious relevance in established communities where there is an existing population of seniors, but it also has a big role to play in designing better age friendly spaces in new communities. Whether it is the design of a retirement community, individual dwelling or public park, there is an important role in actively gathering feedback from seniors that can enable evaluation of existing places and improve future age friendly projects.



Source: <http://www.agefriendlynyc.org/aid-pilot-east-harlem>



Source: <http://www.agefriendlyneighborhoods.nyc/age-friendly-neighborhoods-neighborhood-action-plans/>

Downsize to Where?

There is almost an expectation that older members of society will move out of their homes into retirement villages and other 'smaller' living formats. The reality is that there is in fact a significant portion of the ageing population who given the choice, would like to stay in their current home for as long as possible. This concept of choice and relevance has never been more prevalent on the Australian health care and supported accommodation agendas with the introduction of Australia's National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and Consumer Directed Care schemes (CDC).

However, as these too are also in their infancy and very early stages of change, there is still a real lack of options for our aging population to actually exercise that choice. For example, in the case that they do choose to downsize, the reality is that it will be to dwelling forms that are currently still in limited supply in Australia, lending reason to perhaps why there is currently limited turn over in this space.



Less than 10% of people over 65 years of age live in retirement villages or relocatable home parks, suggesting that these very specific development models appeal to a small portion of the market. This indicates that a very large proportion of the ageing population are living in the broader community and are choosing to stay a part of their community in this way, for the foreseeable future.

The general comment that 'baby boomers' are not moving out of their large family homes potentially reflects a lack of viable alternatives. Areas within our cities that offer amenity and lifestyle opportunities - something the 65+'s are very focussed on - are commonly dominated by new apartment developments comprising one and two bedroom dwellings less than 75-80sqm. Conversely, new detached housing is generally focussed on bigger being better, maximising bedrooms, bathrooms and floor space on an allotment. This has created a situation where our housing stock is missing a band in the middle of quality moderate sized dwellings.

Bruce Judd (UNSW) noted from his research that people over the age of 65 express interest in downsizing to dwellings between 100-150sqm with two or three bedrooms, enabling them to host grandchildren/guests or to accommodate their hobbies and interests. Preferably these dwellings are single level or easily accessible via lift in the case of apartments. This type of product whether it be a standalone house, townhouse or apartment does not feature heavily in new master planned communities or inner city renewal areas. Where these products are available, they are often packaged as premium apartments or townhouses falling outside of the affordable realm for many over 65 years of age.

With rapid expansion of this segment of the population, our existing and future neighbourhoods will need to better incorporate a greater diversity of residential product. Well-designed, 'universally accessible' dwellings in this 'missing middle' could be the key to enabling our ageing population to downsize. This could be one step in a series of many that unlocks existing family homes and addresses a variety of other challenges in our housing market around the provision of new affordable dwellings for our ageing citizens who are entitled to the choice of downsizing.



Halcyon Waters (Source: Place Design Group)

Accessible Local Neighbourhood

A recurring theme throughout this year's conference was the importance of having a strong local community and supportive neighbourhoods for those members over the age of 65 years.

Much of this was centred on making daily life for seniors manageable and also enjoyable. An increased ability to age within their existing community was also a significant element, affording them the option to retain existing, social relationships and networks.

To achieve these outcomes, it was identified that the basic elements of a local neighbourhood largely determined whether this was possible or not - in critical combination with an engaged community. This extended from high level master planning principles, such as the composition of land uses and movement networks through to detailed design issues.

Inherent in any successful place designed around the needs of the people who live within it, are a number of fundamental design principles. These included walkability; comfortable safe streets; and ease of access to local community destinations such as shops, parks, community facilities and public transport.

Although these outcomes are often planned and designed for the broader population, the older portion of a community is much more sensitive to the realities of partial or poor delivery. The conference reinforced why this is so important in an ageing context - although driving can remain a relevant part of a person's life as they age, there typically comes a time when their access will inevitably need to transition to walking and public transport. If the immediate local neighbourhood does not physically support this shifting need in accessibility, it can become a significant barrier to ageing in place.

The ability to move through a neighbourhood or city is something many of us take for granted and truly successful places do not only support this occurring by car. For a neighbourhood to facilitate elders who have transitioned past

the use of their own vehicle, walking safely along public streets dictates the need for a combination of key elements to be comprehensively delivered.

Examples include even and complete footpaths clear of trip hazards, and frequent public seating for rest between destinations. Shade and shelter is essential to ensure comfort on the journey. Intersections need to incorporate kerb ramps and accommodate the speed with which elderly can cross -and seek refuge if necessary on large intersections. Public parks should also incorporate age-friendly components which encourage outdoor activity and interaction with the broader community.

Your response may be that these are all basic considerations, however if you take a walk around your local area focussing on these specific, age friendly details, it is likely you will see how poorly this is actually delivered in practice, whether it be existing suburbs and even in newly emerging areas.

It is clear that currently, local neighbourhoods are in need of individual assessments to then inform a better and a complete community network with 'no gaps', if they are to be considered true, age friendly places.

There are many examples around the world that demonstrate just how this can be done. When community spaces and places are assessed (often by local seniors) and improvements are made, there is a significant benefit that prevails for the local ageing population.

It is overwhelmingly clear that for an ageing individual to have the choice to move freely around a local neighbourhood goes a long way to address issues such as a lack of social participation, isolation and illness. It can make all the difference for an independent senior who chooses to continue to be active, included and feel like a relevant participant of the community.

This is why it is important that landscape and urban designers, developers, planners and local councils recognise and work to address the significant impact these issues can have on mobility for our ageing community.



Source: <https://extranet.who.int/agefriendlyworld/age-friendly-municipality-guide-to-implementing-the-age-friendly-municipality-initiative/>



Source: www.aucklanddesignmanual.co.nz

Healthy, Wealthy and Wise

It has been widely accepted that green space or nature endows restorative and healing powers to people of any age. This concept was first recognised in the work of renowned environmental psychologists, Rachel and Stephen Kaplan, dating back to the 1970's. Since then, this concept has been popularised and validated by an array of studies.

In the context of our current ageing population, research has progressed to a deeper focus which encompasses both the health benefits associated with access to, and the experience of, green space - with more recent studies conducted around the economic advantages gained as a consequence.

Whilst designers and planners should readily be able to argue for the health, social and environmental benefits of green infrastructure; substantiated, genuine deliberations around the economic imperative of access to green space within increasingly contested urban spaces or otherwise, serves as another weapon in our arsenal of justifications as to why we do what we do - and why we need to do it better.

Most recent studies along these lines explore the potential healthcare savings that result from improved physical or mental health due to the presence, or increased levels of, green space. Whilst there is some international evidence indicating significant economic benefits of green infrastructure, there still seems to be a scarcity of Australian studies on the subject (Bowen and Parry, 2015).

Nevertheless, we understand that open space or green infrastructure does facilitate physical activity and social interaction, targets obesity levels, reduces stress and anxiety, strengthens social networks and alleviates social isolation and loneliness.

Dr Sarah Gibney from the Health and Positive Ageing Initiative in Ireland presented a study at the conference illustrating exactly this. Over 10,000 elderly people participated, with the primary view to determine whether they were meeting the national guidelines for physical activity (based on the WHO's global recommendations).

The study demonstrated a direct link between social isolation and loneliness and environmental factors such as difficulty walking in the neighbourhood and access to public transport. The concern over loneliness is further warranted, with broader medical evidence now connecting loneliness to other elements such as increased blood pressure, a decline in the quality of life and even excess mortality.

In terms of the local/built environment, the study also revealed it had a profound impact on physical activity for participants, with three critical factors being:

1. The availability and accessibility of recreational spaces,
2. The experience of crime, and
3. The perception of safety.

Further to this, a partnership in Israel between the University of Haifa and the Association for Planning and Development of Services for the Aged, the 'Golden Path' project also illustrated interesting, relative findings.

Residents were engaged to become actively involved in improving the accessibility of their neighbourhoods, mapping age-friendly conditions on walking routes around ten neighbourhoods in the city. Participants documented impediments to walkability and safety on tablet computers, which in turn informed the city planners about things that needed attention.

Locally, the Council in Boroonda, Victoria, has similarly begun to implement a, "Walk, Rest and Talk" initiative, which aims to provide a pedestrian friendly, safe walking circuit in the city, with seating on route, maps in four languages, and links to common destinations for elderly residents such as shops, the library, toilets and bus stops.

Both the 'Golden Path' and the 'Walk, Rest and Talk' projects are two great examples of how increased engagement with the elderly can work to deliver more accessible spaces.

Following the conference, it also became clear that issues of crime and safety are worth further industry exploration, as emerging evidence from the United States suggests that increased access to green space is associated with reduction in crime, violence and aggression (Bogar and Beyer, 2015). One such example comes from Philadelphia, where a consistent reduction in gun assaults, coupled with significantly less stress and greater levels of resident's exercise, followed a ten year "greening" of vacant lots throughout the City, (Branas et al., 2011).

These findings did lend merit to the practice of re-purposing under-utilised and abandoned spaces in our cities to provide additional green space - especially since urbanisation, and the competition for land to support housing, schools, hospitals, roads and infrastructure has historically resulted in parks and green space being an afterthought.

Jack-in-the-Box Green Space

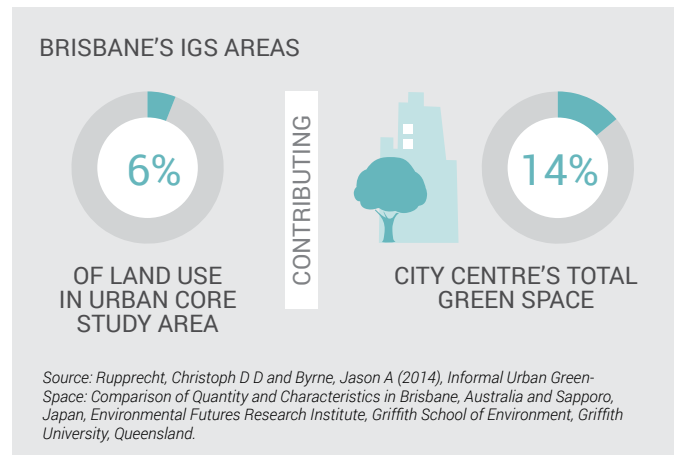
For some of us, it wasn't so long ago when the only thing that "popped up" was an unsettling clown that exploded out of a small box at the turn of a crank, often to strains of "Pop Goes the Weasel".

Now, in an era of the "pop up" phenomenon, it seems that every time we explore our online networks, particularly those within the design arena, there are ever increasing examples of interventions occurring within our cities that seek to improve our physical environment with greenery and other landscape and built elements.

It's an exciting crusade that is gaining momentum across the globe, alongside an awareness of the value that these unconventional solutions have the ability to add more green space to cities, revitalise areas and contribute to a vibrant street life.

Green roofs, green walls, parklets, pocket parks and the appropriation and greening of carparks, vacant lots, railway corridors, laneways, power line easements and road verges all illustrate these "Jack-in-the-Box" green spaces.

Conversely though, there is also an argument that planning for more parkland may not be the solution to consolidating a network of green spaces in our cities to serve an ageing population. Opportunities to create significant, new green spaces within existing metropolitan areas can be limited, yet Informal Green Spaces (IGS) in our cities may be one solution to the challenge of providing access to green space. It serves the dual purpose of better utilising the street verge whilst also being the catalyst for more basic improvements within our existing streets.



Surprisingly, Brisbane's IGS areas (outside parks; reserves; tenured allotments, etc. with existing vegetated cover) makes up around 6% of the land use in the urban core study area (a 10km x 10km grid), contributing 14% to the city centre's total green space, (Rupprecht and Byrne, 2014). The street verge represents approximately 80% of all IGS in Brisbane; whilst over 80% of all forms of IGS were accessible or partly accessible.

This particular volume of informal green space suggests it could play an important role for residents' recreation and nature experience because it substantially increases the amount of potentially available green space to supplement parks and conservation areas and because it is highly accessible. Issues around management, stewardship, maintenance, land use and tenure, site history, the urban context, use and regulation can therefore be considered as potential obstacles to the recognition of IGS as a legitimate part of the open space network.



Source: <https://nextstl.com/2014/07/clayton-parklet/>



Source: <http://designaplause.com/parklet-sf-audi4/>

Panacea Parks

Language was also a point of discussion at this year's conference, with some speakers referring to concepts of, "healthy cities" and "healthy parks" - rather than, "age friendly" in a purposeful attempt to combat ageism, discrimination and a reluctance to fund programs.

This shift in industry rhetoric also reflects a broader influence of 'age friendly' design principles, to the benefit of people across all generations, although it is still important to note that the impact of built environments will still affect individuals differently, depending on factors such as gender, ethnicity or level of education.

Landscape architects and urban designers should be at the forefront of these factors when designing and delivering parks and open spaces to ensure they are flexible, robust and intergenerational. Contemporary design theories, with their origins linked to the influential works of Kevin Lynch, Allan Jacobs, Ian McHarg, Jane Jacobs and the like, encompass a number of key principles that may offer a panacea to good park design within the "healthy city". Such principles include familiarity, walkability, legibility and wayfinding, distinctiveness, accessibility, sense of place, useability, comfort, safety, robustness and sustainability.

In providing elements for comfort in a parkland for an ageing community (such as public toilets, shaded seating areas, covered pathways, sheltered bus stops, heated seating, air conditioning stations, covered parking areas and seats with back support or arm rests), we are ensuring a much more inclusive purpose is achieved being that the broader population also benefits from the comfort these elements can afford.

Achieving safety, as an aforementioned principal for good aged friendly design, through the promotion of surveillance into a park via clear sightlines and vistas, as well as keeping pedestrian paths separate from bike paths can both be great measures to enhance park safety; whilst frequent pedestrian crossing points with audible and visual signals, reduced vehicular traffic speeds and extended pedestrian crossing times also make it easier for seniors to simply and safely cross the road.

A more universal design approach presents added benefits for those of us in the community who have ever crossed a busy road with multiple children, or pushed a pram whilst walking a dog on lead; operated a wheelchair or crutches; or wearing three inch heels. In any of these cases, there is a clear benefit

to the simple addition of extended pedestrian crossing times.

When it comes to truly good design for all members of the community to enjoy regardless of age, landscape architects and urban designers live and breathe accessibility. Walkways, inclined walkways, ramps, step ramps, kerb ramps, landings, handrails, grab rails, kerb rails, tactile ground surface indicators - we know our way around AS1428 (The Australian Standard on Design for Access and Mobility) - and we should not be afraid to use it!

We should be designing generous pathways. We should avoid, or provide alternatives to stairs if we can. Our pavement selections should be cognisant of slip resistance, glare and luminescence with a smooth, even finish.

In practice, we should know our objectives, our limitations, the standards we need to meet, and our non-negotiables. We just need to ensure that the compromises we are asked to make do not adversely impact the people at the heart of our designs.

Across our parks, the facilities that we provide might be co-located or shared across generations. Community gardens, exercise stations, pedestrian paths, picnic tables and BBQ's, seating, dog off leash areas, public art, Wi-Fi and flexible open space are not specific to any age group. There are significant and beneficial outcomes born from the encouragement of social interaction between generations.

Parks, being perfect meeting spots, might include programmed initiatives such as free health checks for seniors, small pet/companion animal experiences, children / school programs and exercise classes. Parks can also serve as a great place for information dissemination via digital or hard copy noticeboards, community rooms and temporary information stations set up by service providers.

And a final word on maintenance relative to this – the interventions we undertake in our open space and public realm areas should be considered in light of durability, longevity and maintainability. Asset managers and their role is another very important consideration in great place design for all generations. They need to be afforded the best opportunity to keep these areas regularly maintained, to preserve the amenity and function of these spaces, and to minimise risk as best they can. Carefully considered materials, finishes, plant selection, facilities, services and other elements need to be fit for purpose and realistic, or the space will not be sustainable in the long term.

Conclusions

The Australian story around Age Friendly Cities is still very much in its infancy. However, many local authorities and state governments are already developing policies and initiatives specifically focussed on moving towards age friendly cities.

There are many local authorities that are already effectively connecting with their local senior citizens and empowering them to take ownership of programs and initiatives that improve their daily lives. However right now, certain issues are still currently too big for a local authority alone to influence. In a country where housing stock delivery is largely left to a private, developer led market, it can be said that developers themselves are currently under-represented in these discussions around more diverse, age-friendly housing and community options.

It is clear this conversation needs to move beyond the typical 'retirement living' and 'aged care' models which currently seem to represent a small percentage of the ageing population. And whilst these models will remain relevant and necessary as the ageing population increases, there is also a growing demand for developers to deliver new and varied options for more appropriate dwellings and spaces for people over 65 years of age who choose to live in a more conventional neighbourhood context. This responsibility also extends into broader master planning, neighbourhood and park design - and as planners and designers, it is important to recognise we are not exempt from this growing need for greater diversification.

Better utilisation of our streets and footpaths via increased activation opportunities; the extension of green space; and better incorporation of age friendly design principles are just a few ways that we can address our accessibility limitations now.

Being mindful to design for our seniors in our parks and public realm is imperative, and only serve to improve the experiences of all community members as a whole, and the true creation of proper 'places and spaces for everyone'. Programming within these spaces can also be considered critical to encouraging better community interaction, and targeting specific groups via activities and events.

Our cities create the framework for us to work, interact, socialise and celebrate - this does not change as we age. However, our requirements to continue being active participants of our communities does. To successfully adapt to the expansion of our ageing population we need to better understand and therefore cater to the diverse needs and expectations of this age group. Good design now can go a long way towards helping communities achieve a much healthier, age friendly status for well into the future.

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