

THE DIRT

American Society of Landscape Architects

What Do Seniors Need in Parks

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<https://aslathedirt.files.wordpress.com/2015/05/taichi.jpg>

The senior population is growing. By 2050, a third of the U.S. will be 65 and older. The World Health Organization, AARP, and other organizations have called for more [age-friendly communities](#), with parks and open space that offer what seniors need to feel safe, but not enough are heeding their call. One question that came up in a session at the [American Planning Association \(APA\) conference in Seattle](#) is whether future parks need to be designed to be inter-generational, or designed specifically for the elderly. Two academics and a landscape architect argued the research shows seniors do better when they are around all age groups, but they need specific things to feel safe and comfortable in parks and other open spaces. If they don't have them, they are far less likely to venture into these places.

Lia Marshall, a PhD student at the Luskin School of Public Health, University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), said older adults have a preference for "aging in place," meaning staying in their community. They need independence. This group — like any other broad category — is amazingly diverse, both socially and culturally. Walking is their most common physical activity, so "distance to the park affects use." But many older people are also at the risk of isolation, which can result in mental health problems. This group is also among the least active, which can also lead to physical health issues.

Parks are too often created for children or able-bodied adults. But they can be designed with a set of aging principles. Through a set of 8 focus groups conducted with elderly about their park use in Los Angeles, Marshall found that they all share "an enjoyment of natural beauty, with an appreciation for tranquility, plants, and fresh air." Being in a park encouraged social interactions, which led to more physical activity. "Group activities — like Tai Chi in the park — lead to friendships and more exercise."

But the elderly polled were also fearful, with their greatest fear being falling. "Breaking a hip can mean losing their homes and moving into a retirement facility." For them, other primary threats were "disrespect by younger generation, robbery, drugs, and crime." Environmental threats include: "uneven ground surfaces, trash caused by the homeless, a lack of visibility with walking paths, a lack of shade, and excess heat or cold." Those with canes, walkers, and wheelchairs feel even more vulnerable outdoors. Marshall pointed to a park right next to a senior center in Los Angeles that wasn't used by the elderly because "gang members are there." Overall, "seniors are afraid of their communities but also want to be involved."

So how can communities create parks where seniors feel safe? Madeline Brozen, [UCLA Lewis Center](#), has developed a [set of guidelines for senior-friendly open spaces](#). Recommendations, which aren't much different from general park design best practices, include:

Improve control: Provide orientation and way finding with large, visible fonts. “The park layout needs to be legible.” Signs should be 54 inches off the ground or lower, so people in wheelchairs can also see them.

Offer greater choice: “Everyone values options, such as passive or active recreation, sun or shade, single or multiple seating. Chairs should be movable.” Brozen emphasized that the group older than 65 is incredibly diverse, from “not old to advanced dementia,” so they have different needs.

Create a Sense of Security: “There should be shade but not too much so it feels enclosed.” Parks should enable “eyes on the street.” Isolated areas need good maintenance. Sidewalks should be wide and smooth. Check spaces between paved and unpaved areas to make sure there aren't spots where a cane or wheelchair can get caught.

Accessibility: If a park is a good distance from a senior facility, add benches along the way so there are places to stop. Parks should have no more than a 2 percent grade for those in wheelchairs.



ASLA 2006 Professional General Design Honor Award. The Elizabeth & Nona Evans Restorative Garden Cleveland Botanical Garden, Cleveland, Ohio by Dirtworks / K. Duteil

Social support: Design should facilitate interaction. Parks can feature bulletin boards, outdoor reading rooms, sculptures and fountains that help start conversations.

Physical activity: Parks should also feature mile markers for encouragement. “These kinds of things are low impact, high benefit.” Exercise machines should be under shaded areas.

Privacy: Use buffer plants to reduce street noise.

Nature: Bring in water features, which are relaxing and beautiful. Make sure they are wheelchair accessible. And lastly, parks should highlight natural beauty.

For Portland-based landscape architect [Brian Bainnson](#), ASLA, [Quatrefoil Inc](#), and ASLA Oregon Chapter Trustee, there is even more that can be done, beyond A.D.A. requirements — and, really, the guidelines listed above. “ADA is really just the bare minimum. It leaves out so many users.” Bainnson said when designing for seniors, “you are really designing for everyone, but there are other

hazards you have to be aware of.” For example, contemporary parks often feature these sleek, backless, armless benches that are essentially useless for the elderly. “Without an armrest, they can’t lower themselves into the bench or get out of it, so they just won’t use it.”

Bainnson recommended the [American Horticultural Therapy Association \(AHTA\)](#) guidelines, which call for “scheduled, programed activities that create park use; access ramps; raised beds; a profusion of plant-people interactions; and benign and supportive conditions.”



Raised beds. ASLA 2010 Professional Research Honor Award. Access to Nature for Older Adults: Promoting Health Through Landscape Design. Multi-Regional USA / Susan Rodiek

Plants should appeal in all four seasons. Park and garden designers need to be aware of wind direction and the sun path to create both wind-free and shaded areas. He added that designers must reduce sharp differences between light and dark. “Hip fractures from falling can occur as the elderly navigate the transition from deep shadow to bright light. They think it’s a step and they can trip up. There should be a middle ground, a transition zone.”

Bainnson has designed more than 20 therapeutic landscapes, including the [Portland Memory Garden](#) and parts of the [Legacy Emanuel Children’s Garden](#). The Portland Memory Garden, which is designed for users with Alzheimer’s or other forms of dementia as well as well as their care-givers and families, is an enclosed loop, with a central entrance and exit, which is not only soothing to those suffering from dementia but ensures they don’t wander off.

The single entrance and exit means nurses or family members can also keep an eye out from a central place. Built in 2002 with \$750,000 in privately-raised funds, the Memory Garden has “no dead ends or choices. You just follow the curve.” Concrete pathways are tinted to reduce glare. Their outer edges have a different color. Raised curbs on the edge of the sidewalks help ensure users don’t fall into the lawns. Bathrooms are extra large in case nurses or family members need to go in with someone in their care.



Portland Memory Garden / Brian



Bainnson
Bainnson

Portland Memory Garden / Brian

For true open spaces, seniors also have special needs. Bainnson is now working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on national wildlife refuges near Portland to make them more accessible to seniors, by putting in trails, accessible paths, and readable signs. He said they may not be able to access the whole system — as the city wants to keep the trails as natural as possible — but these steps will make it easier.

Marshall, Brozen, and Bainnson all made the case: consider seniors when designing public spaces. Why exclude? “What works for seniors will work for everyone.” These spaces will also work for all those people with any other cognitive or physical challenge, like veterans dealing with PTSD, people with prosthetic legs, or anyone in a wheelchair.