

A Walk-Along Study:

Exploring Older Adults' Perspectives on Age-Friendly Features and Playfulness in Ottawa's
Public Spaces



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Disclosure Statement

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Executive Summary

This study explores how play can enrich the lives of Canada’s aging population. Many cities are experiencing a profound demographic shift, with individuals aged 65 and above increasingly outnumbering younger populations. Globally, the number of older people is projected to rise from 1.1 to 1.4 billion by 2030 (World Health Organization, 2025). The steady upward trend of aging populations in Canada offers a glimpse into the future, with the number of older adults aged 85 and above anticipated to triple by 2046 (Government of Canada, 2022b). The population expansion is further shaped by the growing number older immigrants, who represent 30% of Canadians aged 65 and above (Statistics Canada, 2022), contributing the country’s ethnic diversity.

Now more than ever, there is a pressing need to develop age-friendly urban spaces that support the evolving needs of older adults. Aging comes with a unique set of opportunities and challenges. The latter can include heightened risk of loneliness, social exclusion, and potential declines in mental and physical health. One neglected area of study is the possibility of playfulness to tackle the challenges associated with aging. Play has been traditionally studied in the context of children, and it continues to be largely unexplored in aging, urban planning research, and policy frameworks. There is an even greater gap in understanding the perspectives of ethnically diverse older adults who may experience compounded challenges due to intersectional barriers. Given the substantial growth of Canada’s aging demographic, developing inclusive, age-friendly, and playful urban environments remains imperative.

For older adults (aged 65 years old and above), play offers opportunities for social connectedness, creativity, risk-taking, imagination, and it can be informal and structured. However, most playful public spaces are designated with children in mind, leaving few opportunities for older adults to engage in play within their local urban fabric. To support healthy aging, urban planning

interventions must prioritize inclusive, multigenerational, and culturally sensitive play spaces that support social connectedness, with particular attention to underrepresented older populations.

Research Questions

The driving questions of this research are:

1. How do older adults experience play and socialization within their built environment on a day-to-day basis?
2. What are specific factors that influence older adults from ethnically diverse backgrounds to engage in play?

The primary objectives of this research are to examine the older adult play potential of Ottawa's public spaces through threefold approach: (1) evaluating the age-friendliness of Ottawa's public playscapes; (2) identifying how urban walking can enhance opportunities for older adult play and socialization; and (3) developing actionable policy and planning recommendations for urban planners and policymakers to promote inclusivity and maximize social welfare.

Case Study and Methodology

A series of 14 'walk-along' interviews were conducted with participants aged 65 and above, blending participant observations with semi-structured interviews to explore how play is experienced in the City of Ottawa. By walking alongside participants in their local neighbourhoods, the researcher captured authentic, place-based observations, allowing a deeper understanding of the social and physical dimensions of older adult's lives. Through inductive and iterative analysis, the study uncovered cultural variations of how play is understood and opportunities to make public corridors and spaces more playful.

Emerging Themes and Findings

The findings were grouped into distinct categories: older adults' *experiences of play*, play-enabling *spaces for older immigrants*, restrictive barriers for *play accessibility*, and the desire for *playful walking* and *intergenerational social experiences*. The first theme focused on conversations revolving around life transitions, aging, and the social value of play. The second theme explored the perspectives of ethnically diverse older adults, underscoring their reliance on public services and family support systems to access playscapes, as well as the value of designated spaces that embrace cultural traditions. The third theme examined play accessibility, addressing factors such as dependence on transportation, age-friendly design features, the role of safety perceptions, and supportive living and indoor play spaces. The final theme centered around walking as a playful activity and the preference for street activation and green spaces as avenues for informal play experiences.

The findings inform and contextualize the final recommendations, contributing to age-friendly strategies at all levels of government and serving as pillars for cultivating social capital. To create age-friendly and playful urban experiences, the following data-driven insights must be considered:

1. Recognizing play as a fundamental element of social determinants of health frameworks and public health budgets.
2. Investing in culturally sensitive play spaces that meet the needs of ethnic minorities and support Canada's ethnically diverse aging population.
3. Expanding intergenerational play opportunities through affordable city programs to reduce age-segregation and cultivate relationships within the broader community.

4. Investment in multilingual training programs and age-friendly transit design to mitigate safety concerns, increasing older adult's mobility options and access to play spaces.
5. Acknowledging walking experiences as a metaphorical playground which can offer nature-based learning and playful opportunities to cultivate greater cross-generational connectedness.

Findings from the study inform actionable and practical guidelines for urban planners and policymakers seeking to implement play-friendly environments that meet the unique needs of vulnerable older populations. The newfound knowledge informs emerging research on age-friendly urban planning, and bridge the academic gap pertaining to play, social inclusion, and equitable healthy aging.

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Introduction

1.1 Research Problem

According to Statistics Canada (2022) older adults make up 19% of Canada's population and are projected to make up 30% by 2068. While longevity comes with many benefits, there is increasing evidence of the physical and social challenges linked to growing older in urban settings (Sheets & Gallagher, 2013). The built environment plays a critical role in enabling access to essential health services and amenities, particularly for older adults with limited financial resources (Bosch Meda, 2021). Older adults from low socioeconomic and culturally diverse backgrounds have been shown to be especially susceptible to loneliness and social exclusion (Lu et al., 2023; Robison et al., 2009). This is a major concern as loneliness has been consistently associated with higher rates of depression, distress, increased risk of mortality, and deterioration of physical and mental health (Engel et al., 2016; Kotwal et al., 2021). Given the substantial growth of Canada's aging demographic, it is crucial to develop inclusive and age-friendly urban environments.

An often-overlooked solution to tackle the challenges associated with aging is the integration of play, which is traditionally studied in the context of children (Hartt, 2023). Although the concept of play is inherently personal and ambiguous, play has been shown to foster connectedness and multi-generational inclusion, spark creativity, and reduce the prevalence of mental and physiological health (Donoff & Bridgman, 2017; Fancourt et al., 2021; Hartt, 2023). In Canada's highly urbanized cities and immigrant neighbourhoods, a substantial proportion of older residents face economic challenges, with many living on low incomes (Channer et al., 2020). In response to this challenge, my research will focus on the multicultural City of Ottawa.

1.2 Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are to examine the play experiences of older adults in Ottawa through a three-step approach:

1. Evaluating the age-friendly features of Ottawa’s publicly funded play spaces.
2. Examining older adults’ lived experiences and perspectives of play and social interaction through walk-along interviews.
3. Developing evidence-based recommendations for urban planners and policymakers to enhance inclusivity and expand play opportunities in public spaces, with a focus on the needs of ethnically diverse older populations.

1.3 Report Outline

The report examines the playfulness of Ottawa’s diverse neighbourhoods and public spaces through the multifaceted experiences and perspectives of older people. It begins with a literature review grounded in emerging academic research, including age friendly city frameworks, active mobility, and the experiences of loneliness among older adults and older immigrants. The literature review identifies a substantial gap in the role of play as an urban planning intervention, making it the central focus of the study. Next, the report outlines the walk-along study design, detailing the recruitment process, researcher positionality, and interview procedures across various locations in Ottawa. The following section showcases the emerging findings and observations derived from the interviews, as they pertain to play, socialization and the characteristics of play-enabling environments. Finally, the report wraps up the study with five planning and policy

recommendations, synthesizing of the value of accessible play, socially inclusive and culturally responsive spaces, and re-envisioning of what aging playfully can look like.

Literature Review

Chapter Overview

The built environment plays a critical role in shaping healthy habits and life satisfaction among older people (Bosch Meda, 2021). With the Canadian older adult population projected to reach 30% by 2068 (Statistics Canada, 2022a), there is an urgent need to design environments that cater to the needs of older adults, particularly considering the intersectional challenges faced by racialized and lower-income older adult populations (Engel et al., 2016). This literature review lays the groundwork for understanding key themes that inform this report, such as the importance of active mobility, the benefits of walkability and play in healthy aging, and how play is integrated into the development of age-friendly city planning. The chapter also explores the literature on the issue of loneliness and social isolation experienced by older adults, highlighting the compounded difficulties faced by immigrant older adults.

2.1 Age-Friendly Cities

The social determinants of healthy aging are rooted in the design and accessibility of an older adult's immediate environment and neighbourhood (Channer et al., 2020; Gómez et al., 2021; Robles et al., 2023). Age-friendly planning was developed with the recognition that by 2030 and beyond, two-thirds of the global population will be residing in cities (Buffel et al., 2012). As a strategy to build supportive environments for aging populations, the World Health Organization developed the Age Friendly Cities (AFC) framework in 2007, working with 33 cities worldwide and older adult focus groups. The AFC framework emphasizes key themes such as community, healthcare, transportation, housing, social participation, outdoor spaces, social inclusion, civic

participation, and communication and information, many of which have been adopted in Official Plans and legislation by cities across the globe (World Health Organization, 2007). Over time, additional priorities have emerged, with older adults expressing a greater need for reduced cost of living, attaining access to healthier food options, anti-ageism efforts, and a greater focus on aging in place rather than institutional care (City of Ottawa, 2024; Robles et al., 2023). Policymakers face the responsibility of creating enabling environments that address evolving needs of older adults, while also accounting for natural disasters and climate change, which disproportionately affects aging populations (Ayalon et al., 2023; Hartt & Vincent, 2024). Despite efforts to make cities more age-friendly, there remains limited emphasis on intertwining urban design with opportunities for play through age-appropriate structures and spaces that are designed from the lens of older adults.

2.2 Active Mobility (Walkability)

Research has shown that walkability is one of the key components of an age-friendly environment (Leyden et al., 2024). Older adults (65+) tend to spend more time in their immediate neighbourhoods compared to other age groups and rely heavily on walkable access to essential amenities, pedestrian-friendly pathways, and play spaces (Biglieri & Hartt, 2024; Hartt, 2023). Yet, in the modern world, cities have been designed to accommodate motorized vehicles, and walkable neighbourhoods have become a luxury (Lee & Tan, 2023; Miller, 2017). Walkable and highly urbanized spaces are indicators of successful human development, making these areas more expensive, and directly and indirectly impacting happiness during retirement age (Van Hoof et al., 2018). Restrictive mobility options can often leave older adults experiencing a sense of isolation and disconnectedness, while gradually diminishing their independence and identity (Lee & Tan,

2023). For instance, older adults with limited access to public or private transit and walkable pathways are less likely to spend time outdoors (Lin & Cui, 2021). This issue is further exacerbated with the decline of a walking culture, which has contributed to a growing public health crisis (Adkins et al., 2017). Sedentary lifestyles are linked to higher rates of heart disease, cancer, type-2 diabetes, hypertension, and increased mortality rates (Buehler & Pucher, 2023). Planners and policymakers recognize these challenges, but efforts to address them have been limited due to the difficulty of reversing poor planning decisions. Restrictive urban design, a shortage of sidewalks, safety concerns, and long, unwalkable distances fail to meet the standards of older populations (C. Neale et al., 2020).

Walking is a common form of active mobility that combines exercise with purposeful and/or spontaneous daily activities, making it an activity that most older adults regularly participate in (C. Neale et al., 2020). Research demonstrates that walking for 30 minutes per day, for 5 days per week meets the public health guidelines for enhanced physical and mental well-being (Baker et al., 2008). Regular walking improves mobility, contributes to fall prevention, enhances happiness (Ungvari et al., 2023) and it is a low-cost activity that is beneficial for older adults with reduced economic resources (Chudyk et al., 2017). Emerging studies on centenarians in “Blue Zones” such as Okinawa in Japan, Sardinia in Italy, and Nicoya in Costa Rica reveal the contributing factors to healthy aging and living beyond 100 years of age; these include diet, strong social connections, and walking as part of their daily routines (Ungvari et al., 2023). Research indicates that older adults living in walkable neighbourhoods are three times more likely to meet the Canadian physical activity guidelines and engage more in physical activity than those living in car-dependent neighbourhoods (Winters et al., 2015). Additionally, walkable neighbourhoods play

a crucial role in enhancing social capital among older adults by providing opportunities for social encounters, building a sense of trust and safety, and therefore contributing to higher levels of reported happiness (Leyden et al., 2024). Within their built environment, older adults highly value autonomy, mobility, and strong emotional connections to both their physical neighbourhood and its residents (Leyden et al., 2024). Thus, walking is a powerful intervention to alleviate the challenges of aging during vulnerable years, and it is influenced by the design of the urban environment in which individuals reside (Hartt et al., 2023).

2.3 The Benefits of Play

While the benefits of walking are widely recognized, this activity falls under a broader field with enormous potential for the mental and physical well-being of older adults that has been grossly overlooked: Play. Even with its considerable potential, the concept of play has been extensively studied across various disciplines such as education, psychology, physical therapy, anthropology, and leisure studies, with a primary focus on children (Gordon, 2009). The model of occupational behaviour emphasizes that children play, teenagers socialize, adults work, and older adults shift into leisure activities (Knox, 1998). A systematic review of 3,800 academic urban planning articles revealed that only 3% addressed the topic of play, and of those articles, 90% focused on children, and 82% centred on English-speaking geographies (Hartt et al., 2024). While play is acknowledged as a catalyst for children's learning and psychosocial development (Garaigordobil et al., 2022), it is also recognized as a meaningful human experience over a lifetime (Chang et al., 2014).

Play is defined as ambiguous, spontaneous, creative, imaginative, and may be bound by structure and rules or be unstructured and risky (Gordon, 2009; Hoppes et al., 2001; Woodyer,

2012). The developmental benefits of play for all age groups are substantial, including promoting cooperation, healthy competition, enhancing social relationships, and increasing life satisfaction (Amati et al., 2024; Garaigordobil et al., 2022). Talkative play environments are crucial for ‘tweens’, as they become increasingly aware of self-perception, social status, and take an interest in their social identity (Amholt et al., 2022). Similarly, in a study exploring play memories among older adults, participants recalled engaging in risky play during childhood. As adults, they described play as essential to maintaining mental and physical sharpness, now taking the form of lower-risk activities such as social gatherings, gentle exercise, and board games (Burr et al., 2019). Over the years, cities have intentionally and unintentionally integrated play elements through stimuli experiences, such as sound installations, street performances, and through street and retail activations (Buffel et al., 2012; Hartt & Vincent, 2024). Play is further engrained in the urban fabric of cities through playgrounds, walking trails, parks, and sports fields (Amati et al., 2024). The physical environment plays a role in enabling or inhibiting healthy aging, yet limited research explores how culturally sensitive and accessible spaces can support social inclusion and play opportunities (Wood et al., 2022).

In previous decades, it was believed that neuroplasticity declined with age; however, recent studies indicate that brain plasticity is not age-restricted, and older adults should be exposed to stimulating environments that counteract the challenges of aging (Pauwels et al., 2018). For instance, one study reveals how dance training in older adults enhances attention span, synchronization, sensorimotor skills, boosts cognition and memory, and supports structural and functional neuroplasticity (Nascimento, 2021). Similar benefits are observed in healthy aging when older adults engage in playful activities such as art creation, participating in community

gardens and volunteer work, all of which contribute to their sense of autonomy and independence (Fancourt et al., 2021).

2.4 Older Adults and Loneliness

Social connectivity, autonomy, and belonging are important for people of all ages and can be especially critical for older adults. Older adults are more susceptible to experiencing loneliness compared to other demographic groups (Courtin & Knapp, 2017). According to Statistics Canada (2024), 24% of Canadians over 65 years old express a desire to participate in more social activities. Several factors contribute to heightened risk of loneliness as people age, including relocating to a new area, experiencing cognitive decline, and experiencing significant life changes such as retirement and/or the death of a spouse or friends (Kobayashi et al., 2009; Lee & Tan, 2023). The National Seniors Council (2014) mentions that loneliness is most prevalent among the oldest adults (aged 80 and above), with 23% reporting loneliness in contrast to 19% of those aged 65 to 74 years old (2019). Additional contributing factors of loneliness include limited access to transportation, lack of awareness of available community services and programs, and experiences of poverty and/or inequity (Koehn et al., 2022). The consequences of experiencing loneliness are profound, with research demonstrating that it can increase premature death by 26%-29%, and its effects are comparable to the symptoms of someone who smokes up to 15 cigarettes per day (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023). The effects of loneliness can be detrimental to a person's health, impacting their sleep patterns, cognitive function, biological process, while increasing the risk of dementia, depression and anxiety, among many mental and physical health disorders (Lyu & Forsyth, 2022). Furthermore, older adults with worsening health conditions, such as impaired

vision, reduced motor skills, or depressive disorders, are at an even higher risk of experiencing loneliness (Menec et al., 2019; Ong et al., 2016).

2.5 Older Immigrants

Canada is home to over 8.3 million immigrants, making it the second country with the highest percentage (23%) of foreign-born nationals globally (Statistics Canada, 2021). Older immigrants and refugees represent 30 percent of Canadians aged 65 and older (Statistics Canada, 2021). Migration is often driven by socio-economic and political conditions (Johnson et al., 2019), and for many older immigrants, relocating to Canada meant leaving behind their children, social and family support systems. Unlike older adults who had time to build strong local networks, immigrants face heightened loneliness, language barriers, limited opportunities to meet people, and reduced financial resources due to fewer years in the Canadian workforce (Johnson et al., 2019). These challenges are further intertwined with culture, which shapes how people form relationships, perceive social norms, and navigate their surroundings through language, expressions, thoughts, and personal values (Ojembe et al., 2024). In collectivist cultures, a lack of family connections can often lead to a heightened sense of loneliness and depressive symptoms compared to individualistic cultures (Garcia Diaz et al., 2019; Ojembe et al., 2024). Among older adults, cultural loneliness can lead to feelings of being misunderstood, experiencing identity denial, and struggling to find a sense of belonging within their community (Ojembe et al., 2024). For older immigrants, the intersection of aging and immigration presents additional challenges, such as facing a loss of social and family ties during immigration and experiencing discrimination due to religion or race (Lu et al., 2023; Syed et al., 2017). Older adult immigrants come from diverse ethnocultural communities, bringing unique challenges, life skills and knowledge, and may

consequently face compounded factors that increase their vulnerability to social isolation and economic drawbacks (Johnson et al., 2019; Statistics Canada, 2023). New refugees may experience added stressors and loneliness due to their inability to return to their home country because of political conflict, a lack of social networks, and difficulty forming friendships in a new country (Government of Canada, 2022a). Other contributing factors include unfamiliar weather, navigating new transportation systems, and experiencing ageism when looking for partial employment and participating with the broader community (Koehn et al., 2022). Studies suggest that loneliness is particularly challenging for recent immigrants who arrive in mid-to-late in life (45 years or older) and are likely to face post-migration socioeconomic disadvantages and language barriers in comparison to immigrants who migrated earlier on in life (Lu et al., 2023). Additionally, immigrant women and visible minorities are more likely to experience poverty than Canadian-born older adults, and may face disadvantages in pension systems, government benefits, and retirement saving plans (Curtis et al., 2017). Due to these disadvantages, there is an even greater need to think about cities and communities from the perspective of older immigrants. The implementation of play and walkable environments can be an important tool in facilitating new friendships, reinforcing a sense of place within community, and alleviating negative outcomes induced by loneliness and social isolation.

Summary

In public spaces such as parks, pathways, and community centres, play is often valued for its functional benefits rather than its ability to spark social participation and reduce loneliness (Amati et al., 2024). The WHO Age-Friendly Framework does not explicitly mention play as an essential element of age-friendly urban design (Wanka et al., 2024). In existing literature, play is

studied with a primary focus on the benefits it brings to children (Gordon, 2009). There is a notable gap in existing research on the benefits that playful environments and walkable spaces offer to older adults (Hartt et al., 2024). When strategically designed, play can serve as a powerful tool to combat loneliness, promote mental agility and bolster community connections, offering an opportunity to challenge ageism and xenophobia. Currently, the limited play study focused on older adults is also rooted in the Western context, overlooking how different cultures conceptualize and engage in play (Johnson et al., 2019; Salma & Salami, 2020). Further research on play spaces presents an opportunity to study the challenges faced by older adults, and moreover the experience of culturally diverse older adults as they relate to play. The following research will evaluate features that make a public space age-friendly, while learning directly from older adults' lived experiences of play and social interaction within their built environment.

Methodology

3.1 Case Study

This chapter outlines the research design and methodology, followed by a discussion of the study's limitations. The study examines the age-friendly features and playfulness of Ottawa's publicly funded spaces, assessing their potential to stimulate social connection and playful engagement among older adults. Through walk-along interviews (also known as go-along interviews), participants share their lived experiences on play, offering insights on how urban spaces can be made more accessible and inclusive for play opportunities. The derived findings will contribute to existing empirical evidence for urban planners and policymakers as they implement cohesive, playful environments that are responsive to the needs of older adults.

The walk-along methodology integrates environmental observations with semi-structured interviews. The study used an inductive and iterative qualitative approach, allowing for the identification of emerging patterns and themes through cycles of data collection and interpretation in response to the lived experiences shared by older adults (Kusenbach, 2003; J. Neale, 2016).

A single case study approach was employed, involving older adults, aged 65 and above, from diverse ethnic backgrounds and across diverse physical environments throughout the City of Ottawa. Walk-along interviews provide an in-depth understanding of the relationship between older adults and play, capturing the place-based and time-sensitive nature of the phenomena (Bilsland & Siebert, 2024; Carpiano, 2009). Observing and interviewing older adults in distinct spaces provided an ideal setting for analyzing the phenomena and understanding the real-life experiences of city living (Yin, 1984). This approach explores how different public spaces shape play experiences, recognizing that play varies by location, setting (across indoor or outdoor spaces), and neighbourhood context (Stevens, 2007).

3.2 The City of Ottawa

Ottawa is Canada's capital, the fourth largest municipality in the country, and home to over a million people. The city is situated in southeastern Ontario, and it covers 2,778 kilometers square, combining urban and suburban environments (The City of Ottawa, 2024). Ottawa's population is aging rapidly, with 37% of residents now aged 50 years and over, the fastest-growing age group. This is followed closely by significant growth of residents aged 85 and older. Currently, there are more older adults (aged 65+) in Ottawa than children under the age of 15, and by 2030, it is projected that one in five adults will be aged 65 and over (City of Ottawa, 2025). Rural and

suburban areas of Ottawa are projected to see an increase of 183% of older adult population from the years 2011 to 2031 (City of Ottawa, 2024).

These trends are not unique to Ottawa, as the city reflects patterns observed in many other North American cities with growing older adult populations. Like other Canadian cities, Ottawa's geography features a downtown core, surrounded by expansive suburban spaces and neighbourhoods. Thankfully, there are several advantages that make Ottawa a suitable place to age, such as easy access to healthcare, amenities, green spaces, and parks (Council on Aging of Ottawa, 2024). While accessibility to recreational facilities can be found through participation in Rotary Clubs and exclusive senior spaces, financial constraints can be a barrier to access those facilities. Ottawa's demography, geography, and built environment make it an ideal case study for exploring playfulness from the perspectives of older adults from diverse ethnic backgrounds across the city's varied settings.

3.3 Walk Along Interview Approach

Walk-along interviews were selected as an effective qualitative approach for observing and understanding the relationship between the life experiences of older adults and their environment. The go-along interview, described by Kusenbach (2003) and Carpiano (2009), blends interviewing with participant observation, allowing researchers to walk alongside participants in their own neighbourhoods during their regular routines. This method offers a unique opportunity to observe authentic moments, interactions, and elicit natural responses as participants recall memories and experiences that would otherwise be missed during traditional sedentary interviews (Bilsland & Siebert, 2024; Evans & Jones, 2011). The nature of walking interviews diminishes power imbalances, which is beneficial for vulnerable and marginalized populations (Bilsland & Siebert,

2024). By situating the interview in the participant's local context, researchers gain deeper insights into the social, health and physical dimensions of their daily lives. The approach allows for an immersive exploration of urban characteristics, age-friendly features and play opportunities through the participants' lived experiences.

3.3.2 Participant Recruitment

Given that walking interviews, by definition, involve human participants, ethics approval for this study was secured from the Queen's University General Research Board (GREB) in September 2024 before commencing recruitment. Eligible participants were required to be aged 65 or older, reside in the greater Ottawa region, and be able to communicate in either English or Spanish. A total of 14 participants were recruited, representing a sample of older adults from various ethnicities, including Canadian, Latin American, African, and Southeast Asian descent.

There were two recruitment methods utilized throughout the study (see Figure 1). To ensure diversity, the first recruitment method used purposive sampling, seeking older adults with a range of demographic characteristics, including gender, race, and immigration status, with a particular focus on capturing the voices and perspectives of older adults from underrepresented communities. Older adult community centres in Ottawa were identified through a web search and shortlisted based on their location and neighbourhood equity index scores (identified in Ottawa's Neighbourhood Equity Index (2024)). As part of purposive sampling, a gatekeeper system was implemented in which community leaders, administrators and organizational stakeholders served as intermediaries and facilitated access to potential participants. A total of 10 older adult centres were contacted through phone calls and emails. Recruitment posters (see Appendix A) were sent to gatekeepers who were informed about the research and were asked to distribute information to

potential participants. The selected community centres had a high concentration of older adults from lower- and upper-income neighbourhoods and included city-operated senior centres, senior clubs, and local non-profit organizations, which offered a wide range of activities to support the mental and physical well-being of older adults.

As a result of these efforts, two community centres expressed interest in participating. The first one was La Casa de Los Abuelos, a non-governmental organization (NGO) based inside the Bronson Centre in downtown Ottawa. La Casa de Los Abuelos supports Spanish-speaking older adults by reducing social isolation and promoting healthier lifestyles. The second was the Kanata Senior's Centre located in a suburban neighbourhood in Ottawa that offers year-round events and programming for retired residents. Both centres requested that the researcher visit in person to deliver an 'elevator pitch' about the study during community programming hours. The Spanish language was used at La Casa de Los Abuelo to engage non-English speakers and clarify the study's purpose and participant involvement.

The second recruitment method used was snowball sampling through the researcher's existing network. One known older adult, residing in Ottawa, supported passive recruitment by sharing details of the study with fellow friends.

For all recruitment methods, interested participants were asked to contact the researcher directly to obtain a Letter of Information (see Appendix B) with further details. Once a participant expressed interest and agreed to participate in the study, the researcher provided a consent form and proceeded with scheduling an interview date and time.

3.3.3 Interview Process

The walking interviews took place during the week of October 7th and 14th 2024, and they consisted of a three-step approach:

Step 1: Pre-Interview

Pre-interviews were conducted via phone and email to introduce the researcher, discuss the study's purpose, and address any questions or concerns. If participants agreed to proceed, they were invited to select a safe, accessible walking route, and schedule a suitable interview time. Most participants preferred to meet near their play space facility (public community centre), as they were already planning to be there. Others chose to walk toward a park or trail near their home, a recreational activity that is naturally incorporated as part of their regular walking routines.

Step 2: Equipment Set-up

The interviews were recorded with wireless microphones connected to an iPad device. Participants were given the option to capture photographs of significant landmarks, points of interest, and the playful and/or non-playful attributes they observed, using a second smartphone device held by the interviewer. To facilitate this, a written consent was obtained prior to the interview, and participants received basic training in smartphone photography before the interviews. During the walks, the interviewer prompted participants with the question, "would you like to take a picture?" whenever an important landmark or urban feature arose in conversation. The combination of walking interviews and photography allows researchers to access local knowledge, opinions, and experiences, using visual references (Huber et al., 2023; Orr et al., 2020).

Step 3: Semi-Structured Walking Interviews

The walking interviews consisted of audio-recorded semi-structured interviews while the researcher accompanied the participant through their local neighbourhood, park, and/or as they walked around their recreational space. During these interviews, participants shared their experiences and perspectives on the play and the social opportunities available along the selected pathways. Semi-structured interview questions focusing on site context, social opportunities, experiences of play, and transportation and financial accessibility to play spaces, can be found in Appendix B. Each interview lasted approximately 35-45 minutes. The planned routes incorporated 1-3 stopping points in places such as benches and picnic tables to encourage participants to provide additional comments on the images taken, places observed, or conversations held. These scheduled walking breaks were particularly beneficial for older adults with reduced stamina or mobility challenges. On rare occasions, the interviews were moved indoors due to unforeseen rain, and when participants felt fatigue from taking long bus rides and walks to reach their recreational facility.

Interview Details

Eight walk-along interviews took place around the Bronson Centre, where La Casa de Los Abuelos is located. The Bronson Centre is a revitalized building that hosts various organizations including emergency food services for unhoused populations, non-profit cooperative housing, the Ethiopian Community Association, counselling and pastoral services. The group consisted of 1 male and 5 females, all immigrants from Latin American with one participant of Afro-Latino descent.

Likewise, two interviews were conducted inside and near the Kanata Senior’s Centre. One female participant (aged 74) of Canadian-Caucasian descent preferred to be interviewed inside the Kanata Centre. Another male participant (aged 90+) of Southeast Asian descent preferred to be interviewed outdoors on a natural trail near the Kanata Senior’s Centre.

Four walking interviews were conducted with participants recruited through snowball sampling in parks and spaces near their homes. All participants were of Canadian-Caucasian descent. One female participant (aged 87) was interviewed in the Westboro neighbourhood, near a senior living building, while another female participant (aged 70) was interviewed at Mooney’s Bay, a well-known park in Ottawa. The final two interviews (aged 87 male and 81 female) were conducted simultaneously in the scenic Mud Lake Park, situated between urban and suburban neighbourhoods. Additional participant details and recruitment process can be found in the flow chart below.

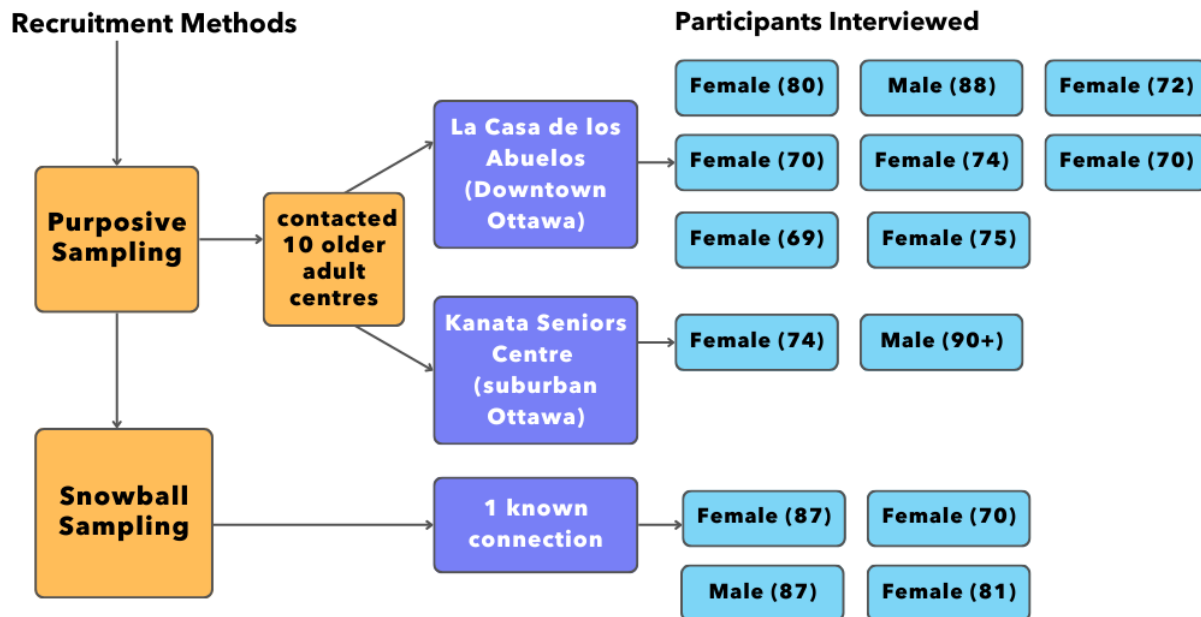
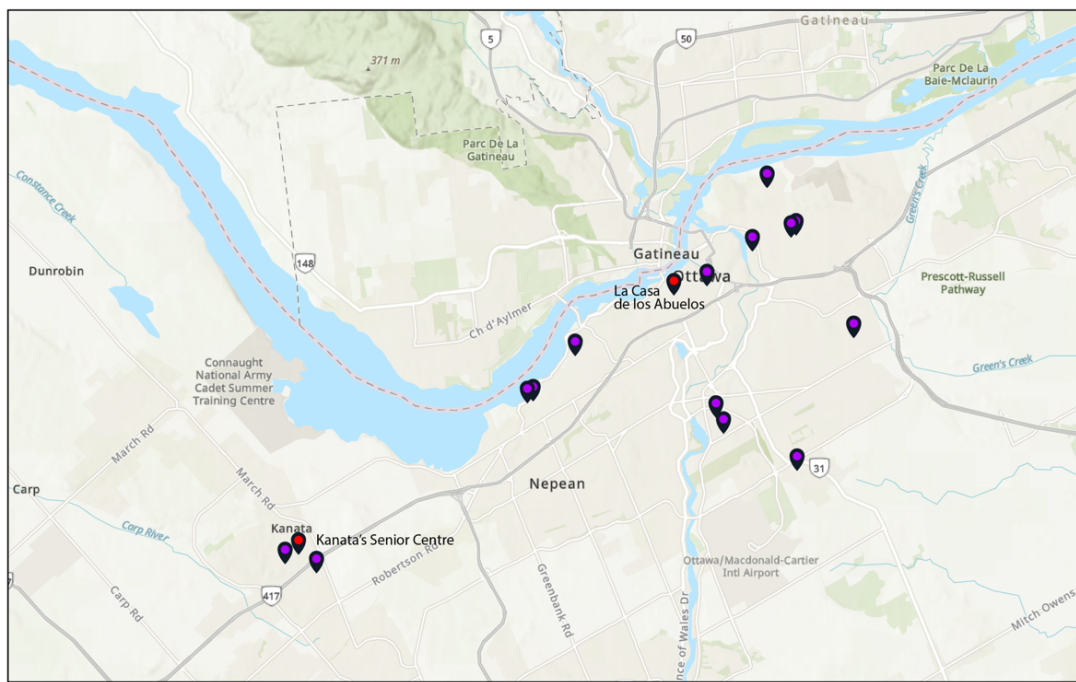




Figure 1. Participant recruitment process.

The varied locations provided invaluable insights into mobility patterns, walkability challenges, and the diverse types of play spaces that older adults may encounter, depending on the built environment in diverse urban settings. The Figure 2 map of Ottawa illustrates the spatial relationship between the location of targeted older adult community centres (marked with red pins) and the approximate place of residence for older adults (marked with purple pins). Although, 10 of the 14 interviews were conducted near community centres, the proximity of older adult’s neighbourhoods to these leisure spaces provides insight into play accessibility and travel behaviour, which are discussed in the findings.

Older Adult Community Centres vs. Older Adult Neighbourhoods



Legend

-  Older Adult Residential Neighbourhoods
-  Community Centres

1:239,422
 0 1.25 2.5 5 mi
 0 2.25 4.5 9 km
 Esri, NASA, NGA, USGS, Sources: Esri, TomTom, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS, © OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS User Community

Figure 2. Map of targeted community centers vs. participant’s approximate place of residence.

3.3.4 Transcription and Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using the NVivo software. Employing an inductive and iterative approach, code-recode procedures were applied to identify and categorize emerging themes, ensuring that the research questions were effectively addressed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Additionally, photos taken during the walks served as a supportive tool to help the researcher recall conversation about urban attributes, and to reinforce research findings and participant quotes. A master linking log was utilized to anonymize participants and track demographic attributes and geographic locations. To distinguish responses without jeopardizing participant anonymity, interviewees were assigned an identifier based on the order of their interviews (Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3, etc.). The data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic framework, which involves familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, synthesizing themes from existing codes and relevant quotes, and defining themes to develop the study's findings. Key themes were illustrated with direct quotes and supported by visual aids such as photographs taken during the walking interview to provide further context towards the research objectives.

3.3.5 Positionality

Additionally, as a Canadian immigrant and native Spanish speaker from Latin America, the researcher acknowledges that their personal perspectives on play may have unintentionally introduced potential biases and assumptions, particularly in relation to underrepresented communities. This lived experience may have served as a motivating factor in centering the study on underrepresented older immigrants. Furthermore, the researcher's familiarity with Ottawa likely added depth to the discussion about local areas, city programming, and urban design

features. Likewise, the researcher being female may have added a layer of comfort during dialogue with participants.

3.3.6 Methodological Limitations

As a young, able-bodied adult, the researcher may have inadvertently overlooked certain mobility barriers throughout the study. Given that this was a walking interview, the experiences of individuals using wheelchairs or those unable to walk for long distances were not captured. While the research represented a small sample of older adults from various ethnicities, the 14 go-along interviews may not be generalizable of the broader older adult population. For example, only three of 14 participants were men, limiting the male perspective on play and urban settings.

Given that some of the interviews were conducted in Spanish, at La Casa de Los Abuelos, the translation from Spanish to English during transcription process added a potential limitation. To address this possible area of bias, two additional bilingual Spanish speakers supported in translation from Spanish to English, ensuring accurate interpretation, verifying quotes, and checking for discrepancies.

Additionally, efforts were made prior to the interviews to allow participants to choose their desired walking paths, ensuring a space where participants felt understood, respected and in their natural space. In most cases, the researcher and the participant chose to walk towards quieter neighbourhoods to ensure ease in conversation, as it was difficult to maintain conversation along busy and loud arterial roads. The adjustment led to a few walking routes that deviated from the

participant's usual routine, potentially underrepresenting the challenges experienced in high-traffic areas.

There were also environmental and technical constraints during the walk-along interviews, including strong winds, unforeseen rain, and loud vehicle noises. These factors may have disrupted the sound quality, as well as the natural flow of the interview during the analysis and transcription phase. In two instances, the interviews had to move indoors due to rain and cold weather.

Findings

Chapter Overview

This chapter presents a comprehensive analysis of the emerging themes from the walk-along interviews, incorporating participant quotations to provide depth and context. Key themes included the varied play experiences, older immigrants' perspectives on play, and barriers to access such as transit challenges and safety concerns. The chapter also examines play-enabling walking pathways and their potential for facilitating intergenerational play. The chapter concludes with overarching insights into the age-friendliness of Ottawa's public spaces and opportunities to reimagine playful urban experiences.

4.1 Experiences of Play

Fourteen older adults were interviewed who incorporate play as part of their daily routines. When asked about how they play, many were apprehensive about the word *play*, associating it with children or structured games, such as board games and sports. The experiences of play were categorized into subgroups: structured and unstructured play.

“The word play means to play games. For example, I play chess on the computer, and I don't communicate with anyone. Play means, playing games alone or with others”

(Participant 9).

“Well, the first thing that comes to mind [when you think of play] is children, because it's a word we associate more with children, and with adults it's recreation but also maybe sports” (Participant 6).



Figure 3. Participant pointing at a traditional play space (children’s playground).

Play is a term that is often stigmatized, with the perception that it is a wasteful, unproductive activity, something that can be indulged in as a luxury rather than a necessity (Amati et al., 2024). During the interviews, the researcher discussed the different ways play can manifest for older adults, prompting participants to reflect on their own experiences. Structured play is time-bound, involves an instructor, there are rules, and it is goal-oriented, often focusing on maintaining physical and mental stimulation (Beck et al., 2016). Many participants subsequently linked play to scheduled activities and events of their enjoyment.

“I come here three times per week for different activities. I come to choir, to the literature circle, I come to the crochet group, I can still crochet” (Participant 1).

“There are so many classes here. There are sewing and embroidery classes, two English classes, and painting classes. Birthdays are also celebrated, so there are activities all week long” (Participant 10).

Findings suggest that community programming offers participants with a sense of purpose and routine, keeping their minds and bodies engaged. Structured play predominantly takes place in public community spaces, seniors centres, churches and organizations where the social construct of play is embraced and there are organized activities available (Yarker, 2021). Throughout the study, older adults mentioned attending recreation classes an average of 2-3 times per week. Some of the activities mentioned were aerobics, board games, choir, aquafit, Taichi, Zumba, dance classes, going to church, quilting, learning a new language, volunteer work, computer classes, joining a reading club, and more. Although subconsciously recognized, participants identified the many ways in which they engage in unstructured play through hobbies, walking, and taking grandchildren to the park. Informal play occurs when individuals follow their natural instincts, engaging in activities without instruction, which allows for creativity and freedom while navigating unbounded territories within the built environment (Canadian Public Health Association, 2019). One participant identified unstructured play as:

“I guess, I see gardening as play. I do it because I enjoy it. It gives me satisfaction. It makes me feel good” (Participant 7).

4.1.1 Play Transitions with Age

All interviewees mentioned the involvement of less risky play and how effortless activities such as walking and socializing supported this. Aging can come with diminishing physical strength and life transitions, which in turn shifts how older adults engage in play. These transitions often contrast with the play experiences of younger generations, as they involve adapting to new roles, evolving social dynamics, and changes in personal needs shaped by social and physical environments (Hoppes et al., 2001).

“I have more physical limitations than I had when I was 50. So, I may have a desire to run a lot of marathons or do a lot of bike races, but I don't have that physical capability” (Participant 7).

“I used to bike, but I don't anymore. So, it's mainly walking. I belonged to a walking group for a long time. We went to all different kinds of places in the city, like Mud Lake and well, the tulip festival and some farm places” (Participant 5).

“I used to do a lot of running and I still like to run. I'm 87 years old now, so I'm down to running twice a week. I used to run every day of the week, but it takes me a while to recover” (Participant 8).

4.1.2 Play is Socialization

When discussing how older adults participate in play, all respondents highlighted socialization as a key source of amusement. While physical and mental health benefits are important motivating factors, leisure activities centred around friendships contribute to a higher quality of life (Chang et al., 2014). Happiness is intrinsically tied to being surrounded by others and attaining social capital (Leyden et al., 2024). A few participants capture this sentiment:

“For me, recreation is mostly about socializing. It's not about being alone. I need to be with people I can talk to for a while, laugh with for a while. Maybe go out, grab a coffee? For me it's all about socializing” (Participant 1).

“There is a lot of coffee, lunches with friends, lunch with friends at their house or coffee shop along the street here, some in the condo. Quite a few of my friends from church get together for coffee, for lunch” (Participant 5).

Social support is especially beneficial for older adults who experience shrinking social networks and extended periods of isolation as they age (Courtin & Knapp, 2017). The interrelation between play and socialization offers opportunities for older adults to share laughter, reminisce on life experiences and reduce feelings of loneliness (Hoppes et al., 2001). The concept was reflected across all older adults interviewed.

“I don’t talk to people [at the community centre] all the time but we know each other’s name. It’s nice when someone says ‘hello’ you know? It feels good, it feels like you belong here, and it gives you peace of mind that nothing bad will happen, that everything is okay because I live alone” (Participant 2).

Notably, for individuals experiencing diminishing health, community spaces with social support also offer therapeutic benefits.

“We sing old hymns. And that’s a good thing for some older people. Like when [my wife’s] mother developed dementia. She lost her ability to recognize friends and even family, but she still heard the words of old hymns in her head. And so, she could still remember and sing along to hymns she had learned years ago” (Participant 7).

“There is an instructor who is an expert at sewing. My wife joined and she was immediately excited. She is about to turn 92 years old and sewing helps keep her mind and physical state intact” (Participant 3).

4.2 Play Perspectives from Older Immigrants

Participants expressed their perspectives on the importance of socialization and social play spaces for establishing their sense of identity in their new home. One participant eloquently explains:

“When you arrive here, they tell you, look, you have to make a family here, not replace the one you left behind, but you build a family here [with friends] because you can’t live without a family. Humans are social beings. So, you must search for socialization, you have to interchange ideas, your thoughts” (Participant 9).

“You know, sometimes you’re dealing with lingering health issues or issues from back home or missing your family. And suddenly, all you need is to hear kind words from friends [at this organization], to receive a hug” (Participant 11).

Barriers such as the lack of family and language can perpetuate the feelings of isolation, and thus it is essential older immigrants to attain access to social support systems.

“When I came to Canada, nobody spoke Spanish and I went outside, I looked everywhere to find someone to speak to, but I had nobody... It’s a horrible feeling” (Participant 2).

“I am alone in this country, I don’t have a family, so I consider that my family are the friendships that I have here. As well as friendships that I have at Church. This is the main reason why a lot of us come here, so we feel united and cared for by someone” (Participant 10).

4.2.1 Cultural Elements of Play

Older immigrant community centres demonstrated cultural sensitivity as part of the age-friendliness of their environments. Ottawa's Punjabi Association and La Casa de Los Abuelos both provided opportunities to share similar interests, language, religious practices, and cultural celebrations:

“We play local games like Carrom board. Do you know Carrom board? There are about 40 people who play” (Participant 4).



Figure 4. Participant showed researcher how to play Carrom (game) post interview.

“We pray to the Almighty [God/s], we sing songs, and we celebrate birthdays... whoever has a birthday, they provide the food that day” (Participant 4).

“Well, I come here because I can connect with people who speak the same language as me. But I also have groups where I can communicate in English. To practice, we will speak in English, so we improve our language skills” (Participant 11).

Older immigrants often come from cultures that place a strong emphasis on community, food, and cultural practices. For instance, in Latin American culture, dancing and music are deeply engrained traditions, closely tied to a sense of play (Delgado & Muñoz, 1997). Dance emerged as a reoccurring theme in conversations about play.

“I used to like dancing and attending social gatherings, but today I physically can’t. I would like to go to dancing in spaces where the pace matches my [slower] movement, the movement of older people” (Participant 3).

Ethnically diverse older adults were found to be less engaged in activities such as winter sports, hiking in nature, and canoeing in comparison to their White counterparts. The difference may be attributed to the relationship between play and cultural norms, certain older adult groups have been found to have limited or no exposure to these activities in their upbringing (Salma et al., 2020). Multilingual spaces, traditional games, religious practices, and cultural celebrations are a few ways in which spaces can be culturally sensitive, meeting the unique needs of ethnically diverse older people.

4.2.2 Intergenerational Dependency to Access Play

Older immigrants emphasized the importance of family support during retirement age, particularly in terms of financial assistance, which can influence their access to play spaces. A few participants explain:

“I got them [other older adults] bus tickets to travel to the city because they rely on their children to give them bus money for transportation” (Participant 4).

“I don’t pay rent or anything because I live in their [my son’s family] home. When it comes to buying food, they buy me food. And when winter came, they spent a lot of money on me, they bought me a coat and everything I needed” (Participant 13).

“I help a lot around the house. I cook, clean, and I help with the kids. I guess we are an intergenerational home. My daughter-in-law's father, he’s Canadian, he also lives in the same household” (Participant 12).

“There are people for whom it is very difficult to afford the \$25 so that can be an obstacle. People aren’t going to say ‘no, I’m not going [to a playful space] because I don’t have money, but they might feel bad, ashamed, embarrassed, and that could be a great challenge” (Participant 2).

Financial reliance presents significant barriers for older immigrants with smaller family units or for those who do not have children. In intergenerational houses, older adults may feel like a burden, experience certain expectations and family pressure both for themselves and the families supporting them (Ansari-Thomas, 2024). These individuals rely more heavily on public services and communal spaces for emotional and financial assistance, providing nuance to the complexity of immigrant household structures.

4.3 Play Accessibility

4.3.1 Transportation

Public

Since most interviews were conducted near community centres, the availability and access to transit plays a significant role in enabling or hindering access to play spaces.

“I’ve lived in my neighbourhood for 22 years, and I wanted to stay there because I don’t like driving. I never wanted a car, so I’ve always used public transit” (Participant 1).

When older adults give up their driver’s license, they increasingly rely on public transit services and walkable neighbourhoods to participate in playful experiences. The shift contributes to their autonomy, freedom, and life satisfaction (Lin & Cui, 2021). The dependence on public transit was particularly noticeable among older immigrant women interviewed, many of whom had never learned how to drive or relied on their male companions for transportation. In this study, six of the seven Latin and Afro descendant participants relied on public transportation, while the two men interviewed had wives who relied on them for rides. Most women who did drive were of White descent. The map in Figure 4 symbolizes the spatial relationship between La Casa de Los Abuelos and participants’ residential neighbourhoods. The dispersion of the neighbourhoods (marked with purple pins) in relation to the city core (marked with a red pin) demonstrates that participants from La Casa de Los Abuelos are more likely to travel longer distances and depend on public services to access play communities that share their culture, language, and customs.

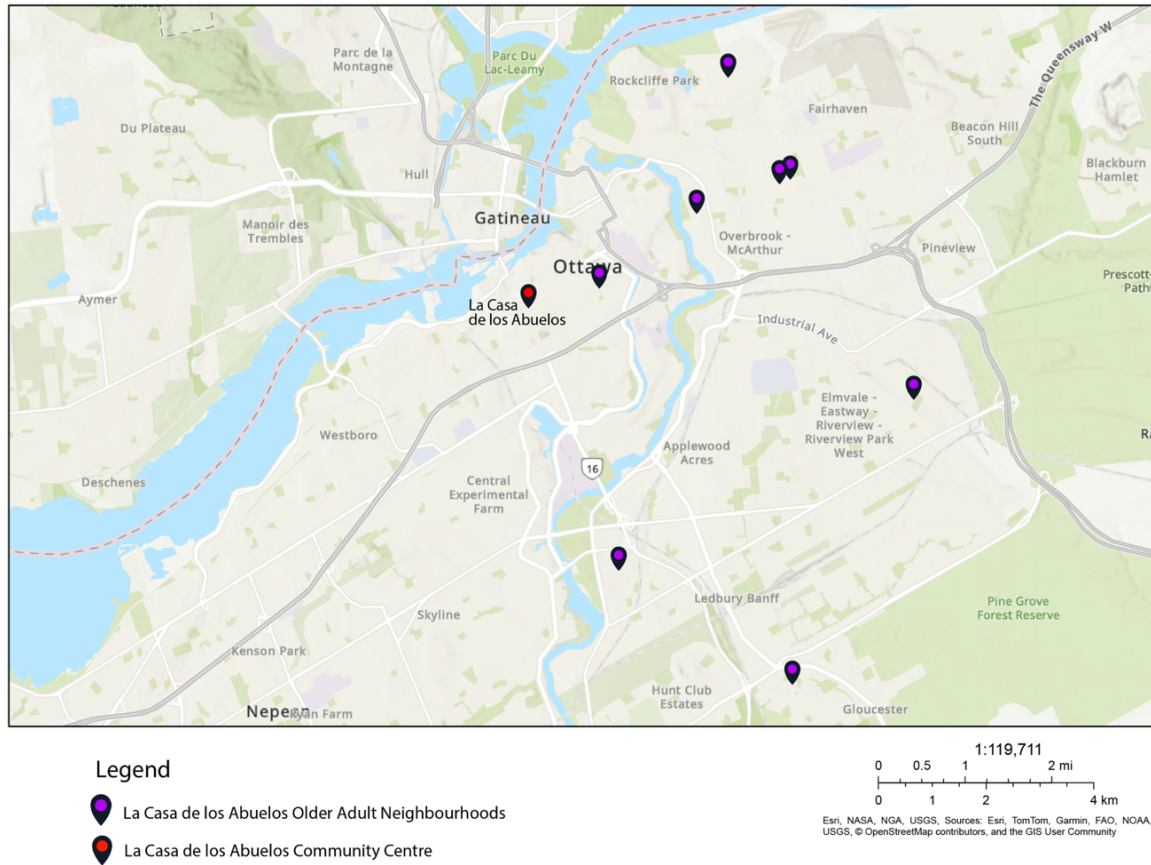


Figure 5. Map of La Casa de Los Abuelos vs. participant’s approximate residential neighbourhoods.

Older adults highlighted inefficiencies with their transit experience, highlighting lengthy travel times and the infrequent bus service, even for relatively short distances.

“The transportation system here isn’t very good because there are parts of the city where you wait a very long time for a bus. But I don’t have any other options, I have to take the bus” (Participant 9).

“Well, for example, to drive to Carleton for the exercise class I go to, if I want to be there by 9:15 by bus, it could take me up to 50 minutes. If I drive, it takes me 10 minutes” (Participant 6).



Figure 6. Participant pointed at the bus they take to go home.

The findings also revealed beneficial initiatives offered by Ottawa’s transit system. On Wednesdays and Sundays, the OC Transpo (Ottawa’s public transit system) is free for older people. Participants mentioned taking full advantage of this service, and as a result play centres see a spike in attendance on these days.

“On Wednesdays and Sundays, the buses are free. I noticed that I don’t even need to show identification on Wednesdays. This is a great benefit” (Participant 2).

For participants with physical disabilities, such as visual impairment, there is a strong reliance on the Para Transpo service in Ottawa, an adapted transit system designed with accessibility measures. Riders can book trips ahead of time by phone and they are picked up and dropped off at their destination, making it very similar to a taxi service but more affordable.

“I use Para Transpo. It’s a service for people with disabilities. Since I’m blind, I qualify for it. This is one of the wonderful things about this country” (Participant 1).

“Para Transpo is very difficult because you sign up in advance and you have to wait. I know at the senior centre they'll often be people waiting on the bench because they have a one-hour window to be picked up. It's the same for appointments” (Participant 14).

Private Transit in the Suburbs

Older adults residing in the suburbs used private vehicles to access play spaces. There was stigma associated with public transit, particularly among men who have driven their whole lives. Notably, some interviewees appeared bothered or even offended when asked if they use public transit, suggesting underlying perceptions linking transit to specific socio-economic groups (Lin & Cui, 2021). Many older adults in the suburban Ottawa have limited access to transit and view driving as a necessity. One participant mentioned:

“Thank God, they still give me permission to drive. I have a little car. So, I don't have problems getting around. I drive” (Participant 3).

4.3.2 Age-friendly Design Attributes

Many participants highlighted the importance of shaded areas, seating, public bathrooms, and well-maintained pathways as part of urban design features. Some also expressed a desire for parking spaces close to play spaces, which could be beneficial for those with restructured mobility.

“Shirley's Bay [Park] is right along the Ottawa River and it's gorgeous...parking lot is almost next to the water. And they have nice little like gazebos providing shade” (Participant 14).

“It would be nice to have open shelters where you could sit if it's raining or if the sun's really hot with benches or chairs. There's not a lot of that” (Participant 2).



Figure 7. Participant noted that benches are placed without the consideration of shade.

Public Bathrooms

The lack of bathrooms in parks is a significant barrier for older adults. After a long commute to outdoor parks, the absence of essential facilities may force their visits to be cut short or not occur at all. Additionally, they felt that poor design sends the message that older adults are not welcomed, and it is not anticipated for them to spend a long time there.

“Even where there are bathrooms, they’re often locked. For instance, the pool near here has washrooms, but it’s always locked” (Participant 5).

“They put up these tiny porta-potties [in Mooney’s Bay], but they aren’t great, especially for kids. They didn’t anticipate that people would be staying for a long time” (Participant 6).

Street Lighting

Participants expressed challenges with poor street lighting when taking leisurely walks, this was particularly evident for participants with physical disabilities such as visual impairment.

Inadequate street lighting reduces participant's ability to visit public pathways during the evening hours.

“I don't like biking through Mooney's Bay in the evening because it's so dark. The lighting could be improved...” (Participant 6).

A participant with a visual impairment mentioned the following:

“I used to go [to Mooney's Bay] almost every day. Now, I need someone to go with me because I can't cross the street by myself. There's some light, but it's a major road with smaller side streets where cars turn and there is no light. There's a lot of traffic, so unless I have someone to go with me, I'm very limited” (Participant 1).



Figure 8. Street lighting is provided for arterial roads but walking paths have limited to no lighting.

Well Maintained Surfaces

One participant with knee pain pointed to a crack in the street and mentioned the inconvenience of uneven pavement.

“There are some cracks, there are potholes, and personally, I have a hard time walking on the street because it’s not even, especially at night” (Participant 11).



Figure 9. Participant noted uneven street pavement.

4.3.3 Perceptions of Safety for Play Spaces

Neighbourhood safety

As people age, they may develop increased fears about personal safety and the inability to react during an emergency (Choi & Matz-Costa, 2017). These fears can influence how older adults engage and navigate their physical environment (Ottoni et al., 2021). La Casa de Los Abuelos is situated in Ottawa’s downtown core, inside of a revitalized high school (The Bronson Centre).

The building hosts foodbanks for unhoused individuals, as well as a rehabilitation centre supporting former inmates in their reintegration into society. Participants at La Casa de Los Abuelos, as well as nearby residents, expressed concerns about unhoused individuals in Ottawa's downtown due to their unpredictability.

“Around here, I feel it is a bit dangerous because, as I said, the Bronson Centre has offices that help people with problems... there have been incidents with aggressive people coming in, yelling, and breaking things like the posters on the wall” (Participant 12).

Specific incidents like assaults and murders near the Bronson Centre and the Rideau Centre have further amplified feelings of insecurity for some interviewees, particularly during evening programming hours.

“Well, until about a year ago, I didn't consider this area dangerous. It was never an area where you'd feel 100% safe, but I didn't consider it dangerous. About a month ago, maybe a little more, after a concert, in the parking lot corner near Bronson, a young man was killed after leaving a concert” (Participant 1).

“I run home after closing time. Before, I didn't have any problems with safety, but now I do. There are so many people on the streets now, and you never know how they will react or if they might be violent” (Participant 2).

Bike Lanes, Traffic and Pedestrian safety

Participants expressed feeling uncertain and fearful when sharing public pathways with cyclists or in noisy, vehicle-heavy areas. They felt the absence of clear biking rules and lack of courtesy

from some cyclists created an unpredictable environment, leading to concerns about getting hurt. Individuals with less experience or knowledge of cycling norms were more likely to feel unsafe.

“One thing that I find very unsafe is the combination of cars and cyclists in the same street. Sometimes there are bike paths in the middle of the street, and sometimes they suddenly stop. It's relatively unsafe for the cyclists, and scary for the drivers” (Participant 5).



Figure 10. Sharable pathway with pedestrians and bikes.

“There was an older man from my church. He was killed in a bike accident last week; he was hit by a car and the person took off. That makes me feel more worried about cycling. When I tell my husband that I will bike somewhere, he says no, I will drive you.” (Participant 6).

“A lot of the time, cyclists aren’t respectful. During the summer you see scooters and cyclists who see my cane and do not realize or care that I am blind. It is especially

disappointing when young people bump into me. They are on their phones and when they look up, they give me a look as if to say “move”, and I have my cane, showing that I cannot see. People have no consideration” (Participant 1).

Loud vehicle noises on arterial roads led to changes in the walk-along interview routes. The noises affected ease of conversation, and the interview moved to quieter routes. Throughout all interviews, participants demonstrated a preference for quieter spaces, away from traffic congestion and heavy vehicle presence.



Figure 11. Loud vehicle interrupting ease of conversation during interview.

4.3.4 Play Access Through Indoor Spaces

The theme of indoor play spaces emerged as an opportunity for encountering social interactions. Many participants expressed a preference for climate-controlled environments due to harsh

weather, safety concerns, and limited outdoor programming. Indoor spaces such as shopping malls, churches, and residential buildings were noted as play-enabling spaces.

“During the summer we come here [to parks], but for the rest of the year we are very limited. So, we usually plan to go shopping, we go to Billings Bridge, Saint Laurent, to the malls” (Participant 3).

“The lakes are beautiful... And then, when it starts getting cold, the gatherings move indoors, but you can enjoy this [social] atmosphere all year round” (Participant 9).

For older adults with visual impairments and mobility challenges, effective wayfinding is pivotal for enabling a sense of security and independence. One participant describes their experience entering a community centre:

“What I do is count the stairs, the first section has 11 steps, and the second section has 10 steps” (Participant 1).

Beyond public spaces, residential buildings such as condominiums and high-rise apartment buildings were identified as hubs for facilitating socialization, community cohesiveness, and play:

“There’s far more social interaction in the condominium than there is in a house. We didn't think of it, but when we moved to our building, we were moving to a place where there's 200 or 300 other people living and you see these people regularly on the elevators, in the hallways, and there's a lot of social activities and we go to some of those” (Participant 8).

Some participants noted that they were living in a NORC (Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities); these are residential buildings with a high concentration of older adults who receive support from the local Councils on Aging, health agencies, and social organizations (DePaul et al., 2022). These programs help older adults live independently in their homes for as long as possible by offering social networking, leisure activities, physical and nutritional wellness initiatives (DePaul et al., 2022).

“There’s a lot of people in high rise buildings that are very isolated. They only go out to the grocery store, or they may not even do that. They may just have their food delivered, and they don't see anybody, and something could happen to them, and nobody would know about it” (Participant 8).

“Part of NORC is to develop a buddy system or somebody will come and knock on your door every so often. Just inquire how are things going? And that's easier to do in a condo building” (Participant 7).

“I had a friend who lived in our building, and he started to develop a form of dementia, aphasia, which made it difficult for him to recall words. He has memory of things, but he couldn’t find the words to express them. We started our own little book group, and we would read to him” (Participant 8).

Through coordinated condo-based gatherings, buddy systems, and structured programming, indoor living environments enable older adults to develop social support networks, which in return provides a sense of purpose. The findings highlight how public and residential indoor spaces have been deliberately and incidentally designed as spaces that cultivate playfulness.

4.4 Play-Enabling Walking Spaces

During the walk-along interviews, older adults were excited to show the researcher spaces near their neighbourhood and around their community centres. They pointed out and recalled places they found enjoyable. The respondents had a strong appreciation for Ottawa's green spaces, specifically those with scenic views, animals, and lakes, which allowed them to connect with nature.



Figure 12, 13, 14. Participant pointed to a safe and natural walking paths.

Green spaces were often highlighted as age-friendly, as they allowed opportunities for learning, connecting with others, and having spontaneous conversations. Walking around parks allowed opportunities for unstructured play. For instance, during the walking interviews, the researcher and participant engaged in unexpected social interaction with local pedestrians about bird sightings and tree species.



Figure 15. Spontaneous conversation with strangers about male and female duck species.

“Laminated signs in parks will tell you the birds that you can look for and watch for, and the sound of the call or the different trees that are unusual. It’s almost like a game. They’re like interactive stations and I think more there should be more of that you know, where seniors could pull their walkers or their wheelchair and just enjoy reading”
(Participant 14).



Figure 16. Participant identified park signage as a learning and play opportunity.

Walking emerged as a central activity for older adults, offering a sense of autonomy, and freeform play. Interviewees described how walking is intertwined with their daily or weekly errands, and it is their predominant form of exercise. They noted that mixed-used neighbourhoods provided more opportunity to organize meet-ups with friends and family.

“I like walking for exercise. I walk through parks, there’s a very nice lake near my house, and I walk with friends” (Participant 12).

“I walk with my wife; we go to a park every day. For about one hour” (Participant 3).

“I try to walk three times a week. I also ride a bike and now I have an electric bike. I go all over the city. It gives me real freedom, and it doesn’t cost money” (Participant 7).



Figure 17. Mixed used neighbourhood in Westboro, Ottawa.

“I like Westboro because it’s where I live and it’s relatively safe. There are coffee shops, restaurants, shopping, the bank, and the post office, all right here. I can almost do without a car except for church” (Participant 5).

4.4.1 Preference for Intergenerational Programming

During the walking interview, observing different spaces sparked memories of playful experiences and participation in programmed events. The events typically included getting a group together, visiting parks in the summer, and attending city-wide festivities. Despite potential financial barriers, participants emphasized the importance of free public spaces in Ottawa. Affordable activities and spaces not only encourage social engagement, but they align with the principles of age-friendly cities, which prioritize inclusivity and social equity (World Health Organization, 2007).

“All museums in Ottawa are free on Thursdays after 5pm. All parks have a free entry. So, there isn’t much of an issue when it comes to needing money to leave the house”

(Participant 9).

“Down at the Ottawa River at Shirley's Bay, they do constellations in the evening during the summer months and it's free. You can see the stars down there and those are learning experiences” (Participant 14).

In addition to attending programmed events with friends, participants expressed a desire for more intergenerational spaces where they could connect with individuals beyond their traditional age-segregated settings. They highlighted the importance of conversational play, spending time with grandchildren, and multi-age city programming.

“My husband and I like going to the theatre in the park. There's a Strathcona Park in Ottawa and they do the summer theatres in the park, and you get all age ranges, which is fantastic because they do Shakespeare” (Participant 8).

“In the [summer] evening when it was cooler, the instructors would put on Zumba classes, which was so cool. Yoga And Taichi...it was completely intergenerational so the younger kids would go” (Participant 14).

“For me, it’s fun to talk with friends of different ages, especially with younger people. They learn from my life experiences and treat me with a lot of respect. I share what I know because I’ve always been very friendly and try to help young people in different aspects of their daily lives, their work lives, and their family lives” (Participant 3).



Figure 18. Participant pointed at outdoor gym where they saw groups of old and young people workout together.

Chapter Summary

The chapter provided a detailed overview of the findings extracted from the case study investigation. Participants discussed how life transitions often lead to less risky forms of play, requiring the built environment to be responsive to their evolving lifestyle needs (Lyu & Forsyth, 2022). The findings emphasized the role of community programming, and for older immigrants, the importance of designated spaces that support shared language and cultural traditions. The

implementation of age-friendly design features has the potential to improve play access and address environmental barriers such as noise, shade, and insufficient resting areas. Prioritizing inclusive urban design and public services is pivotal for allowing play-friendly spaces where older adults feel safe, stimulated, and connected. The varied observations reveal valuable insights into older adults' perspectives and longing for walkable and age-friendly spaces that contribute to a deeper awareness of the complexities between play and healthy aging strategies.

Recommendations and Conclusion

5.1 Recommendations

Public spaces are the heart of city living. They hold the potential to ignite adventure, celebrate cultural diversity, and develop deep-rooted connection among people and their environment. Transforming public spaces into age-friendly spaces benefits everyone by creating supportive environments for all ages and abilities (Fang et al., 2023). The following recommendations reveal the potential of playful environments to promote longevity and active living for Canada's aging population. The analysis presents five areas of practical, real-world guidance for urban planners and policymakers to design age friendly spaces that maximize social cohesion.

1. Integrating Play within Aging in Place Frameworks

As people age, their ways of engaging in play naturally evolve (Hoppes et al., 2001). To support aging in place, the built environment should be responsive to the shifting needs of older adults (Biglieri & Hartt, 2024). Municipalities, including the City of Ottawa, should recognize play as a valuable aspect of later life, and integrate play into their Official Plans, Parks Plans, health promotion strategies, and overarching age-friendly initiatives. To create inclusive and supportive environments for older adults, play-enabling spaces should be incorporated within broader frameworks for the social determinants of health and incorporated into public healthcare budgets. For instance, investment in Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs) and dedicated indoor play spaces, like the Kanata Senior's Centre and La Casa de Los Abuelos, can provide opportunities where older adults can build friendships, stay physically active, and receive emotional support. By prioritizing playful, age-friendly spaces, municipalities enable older adults

to remain in their local neighbourhoods longer and experience a higher quality of life (DePaul et al., 2022).

2. Investing in Culturally Sensitive Play Spaces

Ethnic minorities experience higher rates of loneliness (Victor et al., 2012), yet there is limited research on how playful spaces can endorse social participation for racialized older people (Donoff & Bridgman, 2017). One research participant expressed; “I am alone in this country, I don’t have a family, so I consider that my family are the friendships that I have here” (Participant 10). Spaces that support religious practices, cultural traditions, and linguistically similar programming are essential in alleviating loneliness and facilitating social connectedness. Intergenerational family structures are common among older immigrants, since placing elders in supportive living homes is often associated with feelings of guilt (Chamberlain et al., 2024). To cultivate inclusivity, policies should reinforce intergenerational support systems that many racialized older adults rely on, reducing the burden on families by providing transportation and financial assistance to access play spaces. Municipalities must prioritize culturally sensitive spaces by directly engaging with ethnically diverse older adults to better comprehend their local needs, challenges, and evaluate the effectiveness of existing solutions. Such efforts are essential in advancing Canada’s commitment to greater diversity and equitable public spaces.

3. Investing in Intergenerational Play Through Accessible Public Space Activation

Play takes shape in many forms, but social play refers to group-based activities that spark social connectedness (Dobbins et al., 2020). While recreational facilities and public health agencies often focus on the physiological benefits of play (Kim et al., 2014), research participants instead highlighted the social benefits, along with their desire for greater cross-generational experiences.

Public spaces can serve as powerful facilitators of intergenerational engagement and meaningful connection, particularly through free public space activation. The City of Ottawa exemplifies this approach in some of their programming, including free museum entrances on Thursdays, theatre performances in the parks, and a variety of all-age activities throughout the year. Free public transit for older people on Wednesdays is an initiative which has successfully increased participation in play programming, and it is a model that should be extended to other days of the week. Playful street activation efforts can include, and are not limited to, street furniture, light shows, visual art, farmer's markets, musical performances, and city activities aimed at driving cross-generational and intercultural dialogue.

4. Training Programs to Shift Perceptions of Safety & Improving Transit Systems for Older Adults

Concerns about downtown neighbourhoods' safety were a recurring theme among respondents, occasionally acting as psychological barriers to access and roam comfortably within public spaces. Implementing multilingual training programs in older adult community centres and designated spaces can help mitigate stigma around public transit and city mobility by allowing opportunities to ask questions, express concerns, and access key resources. These programs can educate participants on safe usage of public transit and active mobility, along with their associated financial and social benefits. Training programs in group settings can further strengthen social cohesion, which is linked to lower perceptions of crime and fear (Choi & Matz-Costa, 2017; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023).

Further strategies to improve access to play should be included within Ottawa's Transportation Plan, aiming to increase the frequency of transit routes that connect to community centres and play

spaces. Community centres, clubs, and non-profit organizations can also play a crucial role in organizing carpooling, bus shuttle, or ride-sharing services, with public-private partnerships, to improve access to play spaces, especially for older people with physical mobility challenges. By combining training initiatives with improved transit design, older adults will have improved perceptions of safety and can enjoy increased access to playful urban spaces.

5. Transforming Walking and Walkable Environments as a Form of Play for Aging Populations

Play is depicted as ambiguous, multifaceted, and shaped by socio-cultural contexts, provoking a state of being that can be imaginative or realistic (Sutton-Smith, 1997). The action of walking serves as a proverbial sandbox for play, offering opportunities for creative discovery, movement, communicative play through storytelling, and participation in structured activities such as walking groups. Play can also be embraced in direct contact with the built environment, such as crunching of leaves beneath each step (Stevens, 2007). Walking is an affordable and low risk activity that is suited to the needs of older adults, particularly those on low-income (Chudyk et al., 2017). While outdoor playgrounds are typically designed for children, accessible walking paths in parks, along lakes, and to essential amenities can offer playful experiences. Study participants expressed that playful experiences could be further enhanced through opportunities for learning, such as birdwatching, listening experiences, and intergenerational and social interactions. This perspective complements emerging research, suggesting that exposure to nature can enhance holistic health and reduce loneliness (Lavelle Sachs et al., 2024; Makanjuola et al., 2023).

Urban planners, policymakers and urban designers should adopt age-friendly audits into their monitoring and evaluation processes, as well as during the development and revitalization of

public spaces, such as green spaces, pathways, and neighbourhood routes. Key physical features mentioned by participants include shaded areas in public spaces such as parks and bus shelters, and the accessibility of public bathrooms. They also emphasized repairing uneven walking surfaces, improving street lighting for night-time safety, and the maintenance of quiet spaces away from heavy traffic areas. Supporting walking and creating walking-enabling spaces offers local governments with effective and cost-efficient opportunities to promote exercise, socialization and play for older adults.

5.2 Conclusion

The study examined the play experiences of fourteen older adults by assessing the age friendliness of Ottawa's publicly funded spaces and examining their play and social interactions. It also aimed to formulate evidence-based recommendations, with a particular focus on the needs of ethnically diverse older people. Walk-along interviews in diverse neighbourhood contexts provided invaluable insights by capturing personal stories and firsthand observations of how the built environment facilitates or restricts play.

Older adults are often segregated in age-specific spaces such as their places of residence and community centres (Malmberg et al., 2024) but activating playful and socially inclusive programming can bridge these generational divides. Research participants emphasized the need for social play, but their perceptions of safety, inadequate transit systems, financial constraints, and lack of accommodating spaces presented feelings of fear and impediments to accessing play opportunities (Hong et al., 2018). As Canada's aging population becomes increasingly diverse, policymakers must acknowledge the cultural differences and specific needs among its aging demographics. Socioeconomic disparities among ethnically diverse populations are closely linked

to poor physical health and social support systems (Robison et al., 2009). The ethnically diverse older adults interviewed in Ottawa described challenges related to limited social ties and dependency on family. Play cultivates a deep-rooted sense of community that is integral for preventing social isolation, loneliness, and cognitive deterioration. Municipal governments should apply an intersectionality lens in policymaking, moving towards inclusive, culturally relevant spaces, multilingual programming, and targeted outreach programs to expand play opportunities for ethnocultural groups. For instance, recognizing intergenerational dependency as it relates to play accessibility, and the realities of specific living arrangements for ethnically diverse older people can strengthen healthy aging.

Play is a universal component of healthy aging (Hartt, 2023). Spaces and programs tailored specifically for older people help establish routine and structure, allowing them to remain active contributors to their communities while aging in place (Russell et al., 2023). However, age-friendly cities must go beyond these specialized spaces and prioritize both formal and informal play opportunities. Public space activation and re-envisioning playful walking in green spaces and neighbourhood pathways should be an integral part of the urban fabric. With the constant expansion of road networks and active mobility infrastructure in city planning, addressing older adult safety concerns is critical. Municipalities could further promote inclusivity by implementing a sliding scale for equitable access to indoor-outdoor play enabling settings.

Play should be intentionally woven into urban policy and design as a core principle of inclusive planning, rather than treated as an afterthought in the development of functional infrastructure. Age-friendly, safe, vibrant, and culturally responsive environments allow older adults with the

freedom to walk, experience social connectedness, and feel motivated to reconceptualize aging playfully.

5.2.3 Directions for Future Research

This research focuses predominantly on the perspectives of Latin American older adults; however, further investigations should explore the play experiences of other ethnic groups, such as Women of Colour and individuals with mental and physical disabilities for more inclusive policy development. Ongoing investigations should incorporate quantitative analysis of the geo-specific outdoor and indoor play spaces as they relate to socialization, age-segregation, and healthy aging. Additionally, since the theme of transportation emerged as a barrier for participants, further research should examine the connection between transportation systems, geographical segregation, and play access.

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PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR STUDY

**A Study of Age-Friendly Features and Playfulness in Ottawa's
Public Spaces from the Perspectives of Older Adults**

JOIN US IN A WALKING INTERVIEW

Enjoy a walk with a researcher in your neighbourhood
and share your thoughts on the age-friendly and playful
features in your community.



we are looking for ten older adults who:

- Are at least 65 years of age or older
- Reside in the City of Ottawa
- Can understand or communicate in English

INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE?

Contact Principal Investigator: Jennifer Rodriguez,
Research Assistant, Queen's University

jennifer.rodriguez@queensu.ca | 519-9987332

Please Respond by September 20, 2024 if interested.



If you have any ethics questions or concerns, please contact the General Research Board (GREB) at 1-844-535-2988 (Toll free in North America) or email chair.GREB@queensu.ca

This study has received ethical approval by the Queen's University General Research Ethics Board (GREB).

Appendix B

Information Letter for Participants

Study Name: The Playful City: A Study of Age-Friendly Features and Playfulness in Ottawa's Public Spaces from the Perspectives of Older Adults

Principal Investigator:

Jennifer Rodriguez, Masters Student

School of Urban and Regional Planning, Department of Geography and Planning, Queen's University

Email: jennifer.rodriguez@queensu.ca

What is this letter about?

We are inviting you to participate in our study **The Playful City: A Study of Age-Friendly Features and Playfulness in Ottawa's Public Spaces from the Perspectives of Older Adults**, conducted by Principal Investigator, Jennifer Rodriguez, master's student in the Department of Geography and Planning at Queen's University.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Before you decide to provide consent, it is important for you to understand what the research study involves. This letter will explain what the study is about, the possible risks and benefits, and your rights as a research participant. If you do not understand something in the letter or have any concerns, please contact the Principal Investigator prior to providing consent. The Consent Form is attached to this letter.

What is this study about?

The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between play, public space, and older adult's (aged 65 years or older) wellbeing. Canada's aging population is rapidly growing, with older adults currently making up 19% of the population and projected to reach 30% by 2068, bringing significant physical and social challenges, particularly in urban environments. The built environment plays a critical role in providing access to essential services and amenities, especially for older adults, who are particularly at risk of loneliness and social exclusion. To address these challenges, it is essential to create inclusive and age-friendly urban environments. One often overlooked solution is the integration of play, which can foster connectedness, multi-generational inclusion, creativity, and improved mental and physical health in older adults. This research focuses on the City of Ottawa and aims to evaluate the age-friendly features of Ottawa's municipally funded outdoor play spaces, examine older adults' lived experiences and perspectives

on play and social interaction through walking interviews. The findings will be offering guidance for urban planning practitioners, raising awareness for interventions that support wellbeing and address aging-related issues in outdoor public spaces.

NOTE REGARDING CONSENT: If you wish to participate in the study, you will be asked to provide consent prior to participating in the interviews.

1. Responsibilities as a Participant

What does participation involve?

Your participation will involve a walking interview with a member of our research team, lasting approximately 45 mins - 1 hour. In this method, you will walk together through your own neighborhood while discussing topics related to older adult play and the outdoor built environment. This approach blends interviewing with observing, allowing us to capture your everyday interactions and experiences that might be missed in a traditional stationary interview setting. The conversation will be recorded and transcribed by a professional service.

2. Your Rights as a Participant

Is your participation voluntary?

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and you may choose to withdraw from participation at any time. If you wish to withdraw from the study at any point, we ask that you contact Jennifer Rodriguez (23ymhs@queensu.ca) to withdraw from the study. You may also decline and/or withdraw your consent to participate in the study without penalty or need to cite a reason. Data withdrawal will be available at any time, however, once anonymized data has been included in published works, it cannot be removed. The deadline for data withdrawal is April 30, 2025

Can you decide not to answer a question?

If you agree to participate, you will be asked questions during the interview portion of the research. As a participant you have the right to decline to answer any of these questions for any reason. If there is a question you do not want to answer, you may say, "I don't want to answer that question".

Will the study help you or others? Will it benefit me?

We do not know if being in the study will help/benefit you directly. However, with this study, your participation will help the investigators better understand the suitability of play as an age-friendly planning initiative and help determine the availability, accessibility, and appropriateness of public play infrastructure for older adults in Ottawa, ON. The information gathered from this study will be used to develop a set of recommendations for planners, policymakers, and community leaders regarding the use of play as an age-friendly intervention, and ways of improving opportunities and

equitable access to play infrastructure. The findings of the research will be disseminated at relevant international and national academic and practitioner conferences and published in academic peer-reviewed journals and practitioner magazines. Therefore, the findings and recommendations that are reached as a result of the study have the potential to influence city planning in the future.

What are the risks associated with the study?

The interviews will prompt a discussion surrounding the themes of older adult play and while we do not anticipate these questions will upset you, if you at any point do not feel comfortable with what is being discussed, please notify a researcher and we will take the necessary steps to ensure you have access to appropriate resources. Further, you are not required to answer any question you do not want to answer, simply say “I do not want to answer that question”.

Please be aware that there is a risk of feeling fatigue during the walk, however, we will take scheduled and impromptu breaks as needed. If extreme weather conditions arise, we may reschedule the interview or move it to an online format to ensure your safety and comfort. Additionally, while we will take precautions to avoid any potential injury, it’s important to inform us of any concerns you have about your physical comfort during the walk.

There is a very small risk that a participant may have their data linked to them. This risk will be mitigated by anonymizing data and storing it within the Queen’s secure, encrypted OneDrive.

What information will I be asked to provide?

Participants will not be required to provide members of the research team with any demographic or personal information throughout the course of the study.

Will my identity be known?

The research team will take the necessary steps to safeguard the participants' personal and sensitive information. Outside of the data collection in the study (for example in research papers, conferences, etc.) you will only be identified based on the order of your walk (e.g., Walker 1 or Interviewee 1) to ensure your identity remains confidential. Personal information will not be identified during publication and the dissemination of the research.

Will my information be confidential?

All information given during the study will held in confidence. The interview recordings and transcripts will be stored in a secure hard drive at Queen’s University that is password protected. The Principal Investigator (Dr. Maxwell Hartt) and the Research Assistant (Jennifer Rodriguez) will have access to the files. After the Queen’s University retention policy of maintaining research records for 5 years has been reached, all electronic files will be destroyed. A professional transcription service will have access to the audio recordings of the interviews and will be required to sign a Confidentiality Agreement prior to transcription. Participants will not be named and all

identifying information will be removed from the transcript. Participant confidentiality will be protected to the extent permitted by applicable laws.

The Queen's General Research Ethics Board (GREB) may request access to study data and/or all other study materials used in this research to ensure that we (the research team) have or are meeting our ethical obligations in conducting this research. GREB is bound by confidentiality agreements and will not release any personal information.

A reminder that your participation in this research study is voluntary, and you may withdraw your consent at any point without penalty. If you wish to withdraw your consent we kindly ask that you contact 23ymhs@queensu.ca.

If you have any ethics questions or concerns, please contact the **General Research Ethics Board (GREB)** at **1-844-535-2988** (Toll free in North America) or email chair.GREB@queensu.ca

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Study Title: The Playful City: A Study of Age-Friendly Features and Playfulness in Ottawa's Public Spaces from the Perspectives of Older Adults

Information about semi-structured interview questions: Approximately 10 one-on-one semi-structure interviews will take place with older adults. Interviews will be roughly 1 hour in duration. The questions listed below are open-ended, and the exact wording may differ slightly between interviews. In addition, sometimes other short questions may be asked in order to ensure understanding of a participant's response or if more detail is required on a topic of conversation. For example, supplementary questions to ensure understanding ("So, you are saying that...?"), to get more information ("Could you expand on that?") or gain additional insight ("Why do you think that is...?").

1. Introducing myself and the purpose of the research:

Hello, my name is Jennifer; I am currently a student at Queen's University completing my Master's in Urban and Regional Planning. My research focuses on understanding the play experiences and social interactions of older adults in Ottawa. The goal is to create recommendations for urban planners to make public spaces in Ottawa more inclusive, accessible, and enjoyable.

2. Instructions and Participant Training:

I will attach this microphone to your clothes, and it will record your responses as you answer my questions. I would like to remind you that you may stop the interview at any time if you feel uncomfortable. Your identity will remain private, and no information about your identity will be disclosed.

I will show you how to use the camera. You can take photographs of any landmarks or places that catch your eye. Please note that this is optional, and if you choose to participate, avoid taking pictures that could identify anyone.

Our walk will include 1-3 stops at places like benches, parks, and picnic tables. Near the end of the interview and at each stop, we'll discuss your thoughts on the photos and your observations during the walk.

3. Interview Guide

3.1 Play and the Environment

- Tell me about yourself, how long have you lived in Ottawa?
- Do you visit outdoor public spaces often? Which ones? What activities do you do there?
- How easy or difficult is it to travel to [name of space of walking interview]? Can you share any stories about your journey there?
- What places for social interaction do you see along this route?
- What are your first impressions of this area?
 - o How does this space make you feel?
 - o Is it comfortable? Why? If not, how could it be better?
- Do you think this is a space where you could meet new people? if so, how?
- If you could redesign this space to be more fun, what features would you include?
- Can you share any personal stories about using these spaces for play or socializing?

3.2 Photography Questions

- Can you show me a spot in this space that you like and tell me why?
- Can you show me a spot that you find challenging and tell me why?
- Why did you choose to photograph this feature, space or object?
 - How does this observation impact your experience of outdoor spaces?
- How does this image match your vision of an accessible and playful outdoor space?

3.3 Final thoughts

Thank you for your time and valuable insights. Your input will support research on play and potential improvements to public spaces. Before we stop, is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences in outdoor public spaces?