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# GRC NEWS

A publication of the Gerontology Research Centre at Simon Fraser University

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# DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

On behalf of the Simon Fraser University Gerontology Research Centre (GRC), I am delighted to share with you the June Volume 43, Issue 1 of the GRC News. This issue showcases a spectrum of activities and accomplishments of the GRC and department, including faculty, community partners, and students. One of our major events is the annual Friesen Conference. This year's highly successful conference was entitled: Community Care and Supports for Older Adults: Inclusion, Innovation and Integration. I wish to thank the organizing committee, gerontology staff, and student volunteers for their assistance. The conference aimed to provide information enabling our society to address cutting-edge issues and new opportunities to enhance community care and support systems targeting a rapidly aging population. Highlights included: keynote addresses; topical panel discussions, symposia, and poster displays presented by local, national, and international speakers representing community organizations, NGOs, government, and academic sectors. Some of the emerging themes included social prescribing, care and integration of community and health care systems, applications to age-friendly communities, and examination of facilitators and barriers to enhanced care, such as ageism, declining economic security, marginalization, and technological literacy and its age-related divides. Social prescribing builds on community and healthcare integration by focusing explicitly on the access and alignment of services to meet the assessed needs of individuals and communities. The keynotes by Dr. Suzanne Dupuis-Blanchard, Université de Moncton, New Brunswick; and Dr. Michael Routledge & Kathy Henderson from Winnipeg Manitoba, as well as the United Way panel, addressed new social prescribing initiatives across Canada. The new Seniors Advocate of BC, Dan Levitt, delivered a terrific evening public lecture. The recording of the conference can be found at: https://www.sfu.ca/grc/events/friesen/2024.html. I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to John Friesen and his family, who are the original benefactors of this event. Several other benefactors of the GRC and department were recognized at the conference, including Lorna Court, Jessie Childe, Louise Samson, Heidi Andie, as well as several faculty donors for graduate student scholarships, including Gloria Gutman, Barbara Mitchell, and myself.

It is worth noting the strong representation from BC and SFU Gerontology at the 2024 UN Open-Ended Working Group on Aging. Also spotlighted in this issue is our newest gerontology faculty member, Dr. Mei Fang, jointly appointed with Urban Studies, who has expertise in age-friendly communities targeting marginalized and vulnerable populations. Several major collaborative projects spearheaded by gerontology faculty are also prominent in this issue, including the DemSCAPE project and SWAN/MAP.

The GRC continues to forge new frontiers in research, practice, and policy in its six thematic areas: Aging and the Built Environment; Changing Demography and Lifestyles; Culture and; Population Health and Aging; Prevention of Victimization and Exploitation of Older Persons; & Technology and Aging. Numerous research and community-based projects connect organizations, academics, government, older adults, and private sectors to advance knowledge and practice. The GRC is led by the Director and Associate Director Dr. Habib Chaudhury, with core members: Research Associate & Prof. Emerita Dr. Gloria Gutman, several prolific post-doctoral fellows (Drs. John Best, Jennifer Ferris, John Pickering, Julie Beadle, and Mohammadjavad Nouri), and a highly supportive staff (Sarah Qiu, Dora Lau, and Heidi Antolick), plus a strong supporting cast of affiliate members including all gerontology faculty. The GRC Steering Committee guides the strategic initiatives and governance of the GRC and is comprised of university-wide experts in aging research as well as community leaders in the field. You can read about these in this issue and visit our website https://www.sfu.ca/grc.html, and other social media outlets.

One of the flagship long-term research projects of the GRC is the Canadian Longitudinal Study on Aging (CLSA). As the SFU Principal Investigator, I would like to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Heather Stewart, Manager of the SFU CLSA Data Collection Site at the Surrey Camus, and Eireann O'Dea, Manager of the SFU Computer Assisted Telephone Interview site at the Vancouver Campus for their leadership roles on the CLSA at SFU. The CLSA is following over 53,000 Canadians over 20 years who were aged 45 to 85 in 2011 at the start of the study, with a collection of physiological, psychological, and social data that are being analyzed by over 250 researchers across Canada and internationally (see https://www.clsa-elcv.ca/).

The GRC is committed to improving the lives of older persons today and in the future as we move into the most rapid pace of population aging ever experienced in Canada. For more information, please.

I hope that you enjoy this issue of the GRC News.

**ANDREW WISTER**

**DIRECTOR, GRC**

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The GRC News is a print and digital magazine designed to keep readers inspired and informed about the people, projects and passions that make our research community so extraordinary. The GRC News covers a range of issues of interest to engage readers and encourages researchers, alumni, and community partners to contribute to making each issue visually rich and engaging.

GRC News, Volume 43, Issue 1, June 2024. Director of the GRC is Andrew Wister. Layout and design by Sarah Qiu. The GRC News is published by the Gerontology Research Centre at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada.

# 31st John K. Friesen Conference

Sarah Qiu

On May 23-24, 2024, the 31st John K. Friesen Conference brought together researchers, community organizations, stakeholders, students, and more. This year's theme was "Community Care and Supports for Older Adults: Inclusion, Innovation and Integration."

Dr. Suzanne Dupuis-Blanchard from the Université de Moncton presented the opening keynote address on Rx Building Community: Approach for Aging in Place. Kathy Henderson and Dr. Michael Routledge from the Manitoba Association of Senior Communities presented the keynote address on day two about Social Prescribing in Manitoba: Innovation in Community Connection.

With a focus on community support, this confernece highlighted local, provincial, and national projects and resources aimed at improving the lives of older adults. In particular, social prescribing was highlighted across several sessions.

Presentations from community organizations and healthcare providers such as United Way British Columbia, L'Chaim Adult Day Centre, Seniors Services Society of BC, West End Seniors' Network, and the BC Centre for Palliative Care provided attendees with a multi-disciplinary approach to support services for older adults.

Finding the link between community services and healthcare services is key to aging in place – which is preferred by many older adults. As the cost of living increases, it will become more difficult for older adults to age in place. Brightside Community Homes Foundation is one organization that provides affordable housing for seniors, low-income families, and People with Disabilities.

Researchers like Dr. Mei Fang who's work focuses on co-creating inclusive age-friendly cities and communities, is especially relevant as more services are digitalized. Ensuring that technology is accessible and inclusive is necessary to reduce barriers to resources and information.

Representatives from the South Vancouver Seniors Network, West End Seniors' Network, and 411 Seniors Centre Society sat on a panel to discuss the services that are offered to seniors in their communities. Working directly with members in their community, the impact of their work can be seen in the increasing number of people that attend their programs. Post-pandemic, they note the need for seniors' to feel connected and be involved. The services and resources offered by seniors' centres are instrumental to the overall physical and mental well-being of older adults.

On day one of the conference, a public lecture was held with guest speaker Dan Levitt, B.C.'s Seniors' Advocate about The Future of Ageing in British Columbia. Levitt addressed some of the challenges that the province faces, such as the increasing pressure on the public health care system, long-term care waitlists, and affordability and income challenges.

Thank you to all of our speakers, exhibitors, sponsors, and attendees for engaging in meaningful discussions and for making this event possible. Recorded sessions from the conference can be found on our website: [https://www.sfu.ca/grc/events/friesen/2024.html](https://www.sfu.ca/grc/events/friesen/2024.html).

Pictured (l-r): Michael Routledge, Andrew Wister, Kathy Henderson.

Pictured (l-r): Angela Sealy, Indira Riadi, Prabhraj Sandu, Beverley Pitman.

Pictured: Suzanne Dupuis-Blanchard.

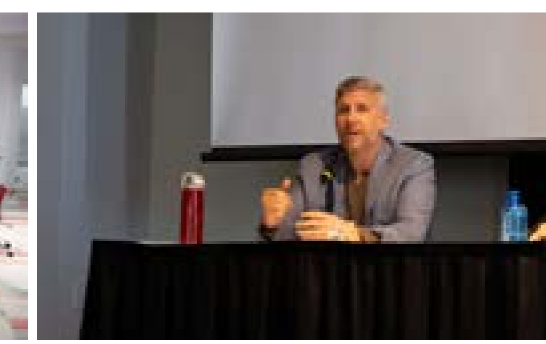
Pictured: Attendees at the Friesen Conference.


Pictured: Mei Lan Fang

Pictured (l-r): Robert Goluch, Gloria Gutman, Andrew Wister.

Pictured (l-r): Meeka Marsolais, Michael Volker, Susan Lowe, Grace Hann, Gloria Gutman.

Pictured: Attendees at the Public Lecture presented by Dan Levitt.



Pictured: John Pickering.

Pictured: Lui Franciosi.


Pictured (l-r): Pamela Martin, Leah Deslauriers, Mei Lan Fang, Gloria Gutman.

Pictured: William Azaroff.

## 2024 Science Meets Parliament Program

Theresa Pauly

Pictured: Senator Deacon (middle) and Theresa Pauly (right).

Pictured: Delegates at the 2024 Science Meets Parliament Program.

Attending the Science Meets Parliament (SMP) program was an eye-opening experience for me. As a researcher, one of my goals is to ensure that my research does not simply disappear into obscurity (that famous file-drawer!). In terms of knowledge mobilization and translation, I have been dedicated to making research accessible to the public. For instance, I serve as the national editor for a blog that translates scientific insights within health psychology into easy-to-understand blog posts, available in about 30 languages. However, it wasn't until I participated in the SMP program that I considered the importance of influencing policy. Ensuring that research reaches political decision-makers, not just the general public, should be a top priority. In this brief article, I will outline some key takeaways from this year's SMP.

***Building Connections***

We were informed that the goal of this event was not to push any particular agenda but to provide opportunities for low-stakes interactions, conversations, and sharing of common interests to start building connections between researchers and politicians. I personally met with MP Jeneroux to discuss men's mental health in midlife and old age, with Senator Deacon to talk about pressing issues with respect to long-term care, and with MP May about climate change and the importance of building community to help older adults cope with extreme heat events.

The SMP was a fantastic starting point, but long-term relationships require recurring interactions. I see tremendous value in promoting more events that bring MPs together with local scientists, not just in Ottawa but also in their constituencies. Through repeated interactions, trust can be built, enabling two-way communication that benefits both parties. Politicians gain access to expert advice on policy and regulatory decisions, while researchers receive feedback on public interest topics and learn how to make their science politically relevant and how it can be translated for real-world impact.

***Contribution to Committees***

One way to influence policy is through contributions to committees. On my day on the Hill, I attended a meeting of the Status of Women Committee, which was examining coercive behaviour and its potential criminalization. It was clear that the witnesses and experts selected to speak during these meetings could significantly influence the decisions made. Thus, I was wondering who picks those witnesses? Are researchers often invited?

Upon further research, I discovered that the committee had issued an open call for written briefs from the public (not exceeding 2 pages, ~ 1000 words). This seems like a easy but powerful way for scientists to have their voices heard in political decision-making. If such calls were communicated to relevant university departments, they could encourage their faculty members to make submissions. For example, if this call would be published in my university newsletter, I can imagine that scientists in the department of Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies would have important contributions to make. Writing up 2 pages seems fairly low stake, but with a huge potential for influencing far-reaching decisions (here: the criminalization of coercive behaviour).

***Writing for Politicians***

To effectively communicate with politicians, scientists need to learn to write in a way that politicians can understand. During a science communication session on our first day, we were shown a comparison of typical scientific writing versus optimal writing for a political audience. Scientists usually provide extensive background, methods, statistics, and a detailed discussion before putting forth a brief conclusion at the end. We were told that, in contrast, effective communication for politicians starts with the conclusion, backs it up with a bit of evidence, and then reiterates the conclusion.

In writing for politicians, scientists must also overcome their need for 100% accuracy and their reluctance to make absolute statements. Part of this is to better convey how much trust we place in scientific evidence. What if we could use a simple categorization system similar to nutrition labels (e.g., level of trust in 7 colour shades from red to green)? As scientists, we often strive for perfection and critically evaluate our own work, a trait that has contributed to our success. However, when it comes to disseminating our messages, it is crucial to "not let the perfect be the enemy of the good."

Learning to write these briefs could start early in one's academic career, potentially even in undergraduate and graduate courses. One fellow delegate mentioned incorporating policy brief writing into their course curriculum, which I think is an excellent idea. I certainly plan to adopt including policy brief exercises in my own teaching, not only to help students learn science communication but also for me to improve my own skills.

***Conclusion***

Overall, the SMP program was a tremendously valuable experience and I have learned a lot. The program is currently expanding to the federal level, with a BC version implemented this year, and I encourage everyone to apply. Beyond learning about policy-making and connecting with politicians, I also appreciated interacting with leading researchers from diverse fields across the country. Conversations with fellow delegates during breaks, over lunch, and at dinner allowed me to gain new perspectives, discuss innovative research approaches, and explore potential collaborations. These interactions also fostered a sense of community among researchers dedicated to making a societal impact. A huge thanks to everyone at the Canadian Science Policy Centre, the SMP organizing committee, and all the supporters in parliament!

Pictured: Delegates attending a meeting.

## Dan Levitt is Appointed as B.C.'s Seniors' Advocate

Sarah Qiu

Dan Levitt, adjunct professor of gerontology at Simon Fraser University (SFU) is the newly appointed B.C. Seniors' Advocate. Levitt succeeds Isobel Mackenzie as the province's second seniors' advocate beginning in April 2024.

Levitt has been in several leadership roles in relation to long-term care operations and is the current Chief Executive Officer of KinVillage, a non-profit long-term care home. Notably, Levitt has been an adjunct professor and instructor of gerontology at SFU since 2007. Through these roles, Levitt has provided insight into the many facets of senior care leadership.

With a deep passion for advocacy and elderly care, Levitt will play a crucial role in shaping seniors' care in B.C. As systemic issues that affect seniors are amplified due to B.C.'s rapid population growth, Levitt will take the lead in addressing these issues, and improve the accessibility of care for older adults in this province.

# Introducing Dr. Mei Lan Fang: Creating Age-Friendly Living Ecosystems

Mei Lan Fang

We would like to welcome Dr. Mei Lan Fang who joins the Department of Gerontology as an assistant professor. With a joint appointment with Urban Studies, Fang's background in co-creating healthy, inclusive age-friendly cities and communities, and aging in the right place make her a great addition to the department. We interviewed Fang to learn more about her and the research she is currently engaged in.

**Tell us about yourself.**

I am an Assistant Professor specializing in Urban Aging within the Urban Studies and Department of Gerontology at Simon Fraser University, Canada. Additionally, I serve as a Visiting Scholar in the School of Health Sciences at the University of Dundee, Scotland. My research focuses on advancing community-based participatory research concepts, theories, and methods to co-create healthy, inclusive, and age-friendly places and environments.

**What research are you currently working on?**

As the Co-Lead, I'm currently working on IncludeAge, a £1.7 million project funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council. This innovative study adopts a transdisciplinary approach, employing mixed methods guided by Community-Based Participatory Research principles. The project includes life course interviews, GIS story mapping, and social network analysis to explore the inclusion of mid-older individuals (40+) who are often marginalized, specifically those with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) and LGBT+ individuals. Our goal is to translate these findings to enhance the WHO Age Friendly Cities and Communities framework, ensuring that our research has practical and impactful applications for creating more inclusive environments for these populations.

**Can you describe what an age-friendly living ecosystem is?**

An age-friendly living ecosystem is a comprehensive and interdisciplinary framework aimed at providing a guiding structure for creating supportive environments for individuals of all ages. This concept encompasses a holistic perspective, considering all aspects of life such as physical, emotional, social, and virtual interactions. By involving various fields like healthcare, urban planning, social sciences, and technology, the ecosystem leverages a multi-disciplinary strategy to address the complexities associated with aging.

The ecosystem is also multi-modular, integrating different components that work together harmoniously. These include intergenerational activities, age-friendly infrastructure, virtual communities, and trans-regional initiatives. The emphasis is on creating inclusive environments that support both physical places, like parks and community centers, and virtual spaces, such as online forums, fostering interaction and engagement across generations. Trans-regional collaboration is another key element, recognizing that age-friendly environments benefit from shared knowledge and innovations across regions and even globally. This approach goes beyond traditional, linear methods confined to a single discipline or modality, advocating for a dynamic, interconnected strategy that can adapt to diverse needs and contexts.

Ultimately, the ecosystem prioritizes engaging a diverse group of people in collaborative activities. This collaborative effort is essential for moving beyond conventional single cause-effect approaches, creating a rich, inclusive community where individuals of all ages can thrive and contribute.

**What do you hope to achieve through your research?**

Through my research, I aim to co-develop practical and effective solutions with older individuals to ensure they can maintain happiness and well-being in their communities for as long as possible. By engaging directly with older people, I hope to understand their unique needs and preferences, and to create environments that support their physical, emotional, and social well-being. This involves not only enhancing physical spaces but also integrating virtual and social components that foster a sense of community and belonging.

**Outside of academia, do you have any hobbies or passion projects that you enjoy?**

I love spending time with my one-year-old son, especially playing together and sharing meals. He has a curious palate and enjoys trying new foods, which makes our mealtime adventures fun and exciting. Additionally, I have a passion for gaming and find great enjoyment in immersing myself in role-playing games on my PS5.

**From your experiences, do you have any advice for students that are navigating their career in the field of gerontology?**

Embrace the opportunities that come your way, but always stay true to your passions. Remain authentic and focused on what truly interests you. Be open to exploring new and even controversial ideas, as they can lead to growth and innovation.

## New Publication: Intergenerational Relationships and Culturally Diverse Canadian Families

Barbara Mitchell & Samantha Teichman

A recent publication from Barbara Mitchell and Samantha Teichman titled, *"Aging Parents and the Ties That Bind: Intergenerational Relationship Quality Among Culturally Diverse Canadian Families,"* explores the complex family relationships that exist across cultures.

**Abstract**

Drawing from a life course perspective, this paper examines mid/later-life parent-child relationship quality among ethnically diverse families. The focus is on the role of culture, child, and parental characteristics. Data are drawn from a study of 588 parents aged 50+ of a least one child aged 19–35 who reside in Metro Vancouver, B.C. from four Canadian cultural groups: British, Chinese, Persian/Iranian, and South Asian. Using OLS regression methods, we use two dependent variable scales: positive and negative support/interaction appraisals of the relationship. The positive relationship quality scale is associated with South Asian versus British-Canadian parents, mothers, those with greater income satisfaction, and daughters. The negative scale is inversely associated among South Asian versus British-Canadian parents, income satisfaction, parental health, and being unpartnered (vs. partnered). Interaction effects are found between gender and ethnicity. Implications for theorizing and applied recommendations for those who work with culturally diverse aging families are discussed.

**Reference**

Mitchell B.A . & Teichman S. 2024. Aging Parents and the Ties That Bind: Intergenerational Relationship Quality Among Culturally Diverse Canadian Families. The International Journal of Aging and Human Development. (online first). doi:10.1177/00914150241240120.

BARBARA MITCHELL

SAMANTHA TEICHMAN

## New Publication: Good (Virtual) Grief: The Potential of Online Communities for Bereaved Older Adults During Covid-19

Samantha Teichman & Rachel Weldrick

In this publication from Samantha Teichman and Rachel Weldrick titled, *"Good (Virtual) Grief: The Potential of Communities for Bereaved Older Adults During Covid-19,"* discusses the positive impact of using technology to address the risk of social isolation amongst older adults.

**Abstract**

During the pandemic, older adults were at risk of heightened social isolation and bereavement overload. However, engagement in online grief communities can facilitate meaningful social connections and promote healthy bereavement practices. This paper highlights the benefits of engaging in meaning-making, community building, and griefwork in later life. We engage with recent literature on virtual bereavement practices and discuss the ongoing potential for bereaved older adults to engage in online grief communities amid the new realities of Covid-19. We consider what it means to process grief in a virtual space and how this may shape approaches to death, dying, and bereavement during and after a global pandemic. We conclude with a call to action to develop accessible and affordable online engagement technologies for older adults to help mitigate a decline in well-being and promote healthy bereavement practices.

**Reference**

Teichman, S., & Weldrick, R. (2024). Good (virtual) grief: The potential of online communities for bereaved older adults during Covid-19. Bereavement, 3. https://doi.org/10.54210/bj.2024.1110

SAMANTHA TEICHMAN



RACHEL WELDRICK

# THE ROLE OF BUILT ENVIRONMENTS FOR HEALTHY AGING

Sarah Qiu

On March 18, 2024, Dr. Lisa Lim, Assistant Professor, Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, and Director of the Health Design Lab at Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST) presented a public lecture.

Lim's presentation was on "The Role of Built Environments for Healthy Aging," where she discussed how the interactions that people have with their physical environment influences their health as they age. Two healthy behaviours that are associated with healthy aging are walking and playing.

How does the built environment relate to one's health? Existing research shows that nature is correlated with better physiological health. This is associated with the term "nature is medicine."

Similarly, the physical design of environments and spaces can contribute to a person's health by encouraging physical activity. Lim discusses the importance of mixed land use when designing communities to promote physical activity. By building supermarkets, schools, malls, and recreation centers in close proximity to residential areas, people are more likely to walk to these places instead of driving there.

Lim also stressed the need for communities to have inclusive and accessible spaces to play outside of a person's home. Based on Lim's research in South Korea, her team looked at the use of leisure spaces across different age groups. They found that there were significantly more leisure spaces for the younger generation compared to the available leisure spaces for older adults. For leisure spaces that are preferred by both groups, such as cafes and malls, they tend to not be age-inclusive. For example, having really loud music playing in the background. Creating accessible age-inclsuive spaces for all generations needs to be prioritized by the public sector.

In order to promote walking and playing amongst older adults, these spaces need to be created. Having safe and accessible streets is also necessary for people to walk to these spaces. Therefore, integrating technology with the built environment is needed to help older adults walk and play more.

Pictured (l-r): Atiya Mahmood & Lisa Lim.

# Sharing Knowledge to Connect, Collaborate and Co-Create Dementia-Inclusive Spaces for Community Access, Participation, and Engagement (DemSCAPE)

Cari Randa-Beaulieu, CPG, MA, Mitacs Graduate Intern

To meet the objectives of a Mitacs and Michael Smith Health Research BC Reach award-funded knowledge mobilization extension of the Dementia-inclusive Streets and Community Access, Participation, and Engagement (DemSCAPE) study, two World Café events were hosted in year three (2024) of the project. The DemSCAPE study identified patterns in activities outside the home by people living with dementia in the community. It also explored how the environmental features of the neighbourhood influenced participants' mobility and community participation. The community engagement events brought together researchers, trainees, advocacy organization members and municipal partners in Metro Vancouver to showcase the project findings by video and photo exhibits at two public discussion sessions called World Cafés to encourage conversations, collaborative learning and new ideas.

Knowledge mobilization, awareness-raising, and education were central to the four goals of the community engagement events. Goal 1: Provide attendees an overview of why the neighbourhood built environment is important for people living with dementia, based on research and lived experience. Goal 2: Raise awareness about the needs of people living with dementia in the community and provide guidance to municipalities and organizations in adopting the findings of this research. Goal 3: Showcase the photo exhibit highlighting specific built environmental features identified by DemSCAPE participants during walking interviews as supporting or challenging out-of-home mobility and participation. Goal 4: Screen the short knowledge mobilization and advocacy video and have a discussion based on the participants' viewing experiences and personal reflections to refine a publicly available video discussion guide as a complime-ntary resource.

Municipal partnership with the Civic Innovation Lab and the City of Richmond enabled municipal planners, city staff working with older adults, community organization representatives, people living with dementia, care partners, advocates, and researchers to connect and discuss knowledge mobilization tools and resources from the DemSCAPE project and collaborators. The Civic Innovation Lab combines the expertise and resources of Simon Fraser University and the City of Burnaby to find fresh solutions to challenges and issues affecting cities. The City of Richmond has many Age-Friendly policies and practices in place and is a proud partner in dementia-inclusive research. Co-hosting a World Café with each partner municipality fostered more targeted discussions for each city's unique challenges and priorities.

Key takeaways from the World Cafés included process-based, relationship-building, and perspective-expanding opportunities for growth for participants and organizers. Mixed stakeholder group discussions were a relatively easy way to connect municipal staff and planners with people with lived experience and other community members to add value and meaning to the experience. Many attendees commented in-person to organizers and in post-event survey responses about their appreciation to hear first-hand from people with lived experience. Different stakeholders brought varied perspectives and lenses to the discussions and helped initiate connections between local service providers, researchers, health authority representatives, and organizations specific to each municipality. The events were also networking opportunities for project team members, trainees, and graduate student volunteers interested in careers in the areas of dementia, dementia-research, urban planning and design, and health services. Municipalities have a desire for continuing education and training on dementia-inclusive best practices to enhance understanding of the features of a dementia-inclusive environment and advocate for positive changes.


**"The World Cafe was just absolutely wonderful! I didn't know what to expect today, but to be together with so many people having similar ideas and wanting to improve things," said Marueen, a participant with lived experience after the event in Burnaby.**

**QR code to the video discussion guide:**

SCAN ME

# RURAL RESILIENCE IN A POST-PANDEMIC LANDSCAPE

John Pickering

The Simon Fraser University's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) Kickstarter-funded project titled "Rural Resilience in a Post-Pandemic Landscape: Exploring Social Isolation, Loneliness, and Healthcare Access Among Older Adults on Northern Vancouver Island" aims to address critical aspects of life for older adults in rural settings, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our research is not merely academic; it has real-world implications for enhancing the lives of older adults in rural communities.

Dr. Andrew Wister, the grant holder, is renowned for his extensive research on resilience in older adults, particularly focusing on social isolation and loneliness. Leading the study is Dr. John Pickering, whose expertise also lies in understanding the social isolation and loneliness of older adults. Shawna Hopper, a PhD candidate in the Department of Gerontology at SFU, serves as the research assistant, bringing a robust mix of qualitative and quantitative research skills, alongside her experience in studying the social isolation and loneliness of older adults.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted and exacerbated existing social and healthcare challenges, particularly for older adults in rural areas. Our study focuses on understanding these challenges from the perspective of the people most affected, such as the older adults living in Port Hardy. By engaging with them through in-depth interviews, we aim to gather insights into their experiences of social isolation and loneliness, and access to healthcare during and after the pandemic.

The importance of this research lies in its potential to influence future interventions and policies. By identifying the factors contributing to social isolation and loneliness, and the barriers to healthcare access, we can inform more effective strategies tailored to the unique needs of rural older adult populations. For instance, our interviews will explore not just the state of healthcare and social networks but also personal resilience and community dynamics, providing a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of our participants.

Key areas our research will impact include:

1. **Deepened Understanding of Rural Challenges**: Our findings will help elucidate the specific challenges faced by older adults in rural areas—both in terms of social engagement and healthcare. We will explore how these challenges have shifted in the post-pandemic world, which is crucial for developing targeted support mechanisms.

2. **Informed Policy Making:** By directly capturing the voices of rural older adults, our study will provide valuable data to policymakers designing interventions to mitigate social isolation and improve healthcare accessibility. This could lead to more robust support networks and healthcare services that are attuned to the needs of rural communities.

3. **Community Empowerment:** Empowering communities through knowledge is a cornerstone of our research. By understanding their experiences and needs, communities like Port Hardy can better advocate for themselves and influence changes that directly improve their quality of life. We hope this will be reflected in their continued pursuit of grants to fund their ongoing programs to support older adults in their senior centre.

4. **Foundation for Future Research:** This study will also set the stage for more extensive research projects. With a deeper understanding of the issues, subsequent studies can expand on our findings to explore additional dimensions or test specific interventions.

The generous FASS Kickstarter grant not only facilitates this crucial research but also underscores the commitment to understanding and improving the lives of one of the most vulnerable segments of our population - older adults in rural settings. Through this project, we aim to contribute meaningful insights that will lead to tangible improvements in their social and health outcomes.

# United Nations Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing

Laura Kadowaki & Kahir Lalji

Pictured (l-r): Kahir Lalji and Laura Kadowaki.

The United Nations Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing (OEWGA) held its fourteenth session in New York from May 20-24, 2024. The SFU Gerontology community was well represented at the working group, including students (Isaac Adedeji), alumni (Yongjie Yon, Kahir Lalji, Laura Kadowaki, Margaret Young), affiliates (Dan Levitt), and community partners (Leslie Gaudette).

[United Way British Columbia](#) is committed to ensuring seniors stay active, connected and engaged in their communities.

One way we are doing this is through our membership with the Canadian Coalition Against Ageism (CCAA - https://www.ilccanada.org/ccaa). The CCAA is a nation-wide social change movement to end ageism against older people while protecting and strengthening their human rights. The key priority for the CCAA is advocating for a Convention on the Rights of Older Persons.

Kahir Lalji (Provincial Director, Government Relations & Government Programs) and Laura Kadowaki (Specialist, Research & Knowledge Mobilization) represented United Way British Columbia and the Coalition at the fourteenth session of the United Nations Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing (OEWGA). OEWGA was established in 2010 and its mandate is to consider existing international human rights frameworks for older persons and identify possible gaps and how best to address them. This year was a critical session for OEWGA, as the working group was voting on whether to adopt a draft decision identifying gaps in the protection of older persons' human rights and suggesting ways to address them.

Laura Kadowaki raised awareness about the gaps in older person's rights to housing in an oral statement at OEWGA "While Canada is a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the right to housing has been enshrined in federal housing policy through the 2019 National Housing Strategy Act, there are a growing number of older persons who are precariously housed or homeless, including older persons living in cars, storage lockers, housing without heat or electricity, or camping in the bush in subzero temperatures. Government retirement income benefits are not keeping pace with the rapidly rising costs of living, making it impossible for many low-income seniors to afford housing in current rental markets."

Read our recent report entitled *Aging in Uncertainty: The Growing Housing Crisis For BC Seniors* to learn more about seniors housing precarity and our recommendations to find a solution.

At the fourteenth session of OEWGA, the working group's draft decision was approved by consensus and will now be presented to the United Nations General Assembly in fall 2024. This decision is an important step forward and will allow the next phase of advocacy work for a Convention on the Rights of Older Persons to begin. It is anticipated that further work to advance the human rights of older persons and discuss the potential of a Convention on the Rights of Older Persons will continue at the Human Rights Council in Geneva and a Forum on Older Persons in New York.

# #StopTalkingStartDrafting: Musings on the United Nations Open-Ended Working Group on Aging

Isaac Adedeji


Pictured: Isaac Adedeji attending the United Nations Open-Ended Working Group on Aging.

My heart skipped as I entered the United Nations (UN) 39-floor architecture and adjoining structures spread along Manhattan's Turtle Bay in New York City. I imagined the magnitude of the real-life impact of decisions made there. I am attending the United Nations Open-ended Working Group on Aging, the powerhouse for policies and affirmative action protecting older adults globally. With UN permanent representatives, National Human Rights Institutions, non-governmental organizations, researchers, and scholars, we advocated, deliberated, shared knowledge, and collaboratively influenced the value of a legally binding document to protect the rights of older persons globally. I traveled 10,000 kilometers and sat behind closed doors with more than 100 delegates for over 30 hours to champion change. As a policy analyst, community-engaged advocate, and not-for-profit delegate, I approached the meetings with analytical and problem-solving skills to interact and contribute to the discussions. So, my multidisciplinary background in medical sociology/anthropology, ethics, global health, and aging (aging and technology) was valuable as I contributed to the issues to understand and improve seniors' well-being.

Representing the Alzheimer's Disease Association of Nigeria (ADAN) at the New York meeting was a significant responsibility. ADAN, a not-for-profit collaborative and member of the United Nations Open-ended Working Group on Aging (OEWGA), has been at the forefront of improving community-based knowledge and management of dementia in Nigeria. ADAN established Nigeria's first community-based early dementia assessment clinic and is coordinating with civil society to pursue Nigeria's National Dementia Policy. ADAN's activities are facilitated by psychiatrists, neurologists, mental health experts, aging researchers, media experts, public health scholars, and social scientists like me, with skills in qualitative research, policy analysis, and change management. At the 14th OEWGA, I advocated for cognitively impaired older adults in Nigeria and Africa, pushing for specific clauses to protect their rights in the proposed legally binding instrument for older adults. My participation in plenary sessions, side events, daily briefings, and other meetings was driven by a commitment to promote the adoption of the OEWGA recommendations.

My attendance at the 14th OEWGA was a transformative experience, both personally and professionally. The OEWGA provided a global stage for networking and learning from organizations and leading voices in the aging policy space. I engaged with groups such as AGE Platform Europe, HelpAge International, the International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse, the Stakeholder Group on Ageing (SGA Africa), the International Longevity Center Canada, the Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People, and United Way British Columbia. These interactions were invaluable, particularly given my professional connections to Canada as a graduate of the Department of Gerontology at Simon Fraser University and with Nigeria as an advocate. The OEWGA was a timely and transformative experience, providing a necessary shift in perspective as I delved deeper into aging policy, advocacy, and implementation science. The value of SFU Gerontology's quality of training and research was exceptional at the meetings. SFU GERO faculty and graduates present are BC's Seniors' Advocate and Adjunct Professor of Gerontology, Dan Levitt; Kahir Lalji (United Way BC's Provincial Director of Government Relations and Government Programs); Laura Kadowaki (Adjunct Professor of Gerontology and United Way BC's Program and Operations Coordinator), and Yongjie Yon (Technical Officer at the World Health Organization).

The 14th OEWGA was a significant milestone in the journey to protect the rights of older adults. The unanimous decision to adopt recommendations for a legally binding instrument marked a historic moment, explicitly documenting such recommendations for the first time. This is the time to #StopTalkingStartDrafting. The next steps include sending the OEWGA recommendations to the President of the General Assembly (PGA) and the United Nations General Assembly. The journey ahead is expected to be lengthy and challenging, requiring extensive resources, mobilization, advocacy, and lobbying efforts that are much more significant than those required for the OEWGA.

As we progress, I propose an advocacy strategy based on the Universal Design Thinking (UDT) approach. The UDT is a practical action plan that invites all stakeholders to design sustainable interventions and ensure the rights of older persons are protected. This strategy is not just a theoretical concept but a practical action plan. It is built on empathy, flexibility, and co-creation, inviting all stakeholders to design sustainable interventions. It acknowledges the disparities exacerbated by conflicts, climate change, and an aging global population. Universal Design Thinking integrates intergenerational advocacy, community building, and data and technology safety, aiming to create a widely accepted legal instrument to protect the rights of older persons. As artificial intelligence drives the next generation of technology, inclusivity becomes paramount. Furthermore, the role of new media in redefining information dissemination underscores the importance of connecting with younger generations through social media.

In conclusion, the work at the OEWGA represents a crucial step toward safeguarding the rights of older adults worldwide. Adopting a legally binding instrument is a milestone and a beacon of hope for future generations. By embracing a Universal Design Thinking approach and leveraging the power of new media, we can ensure that the rights of older adults are protected and celebrated, paving the way for a more inclusive and empathetic world.

## Gerontology Alumnus Anthony Kupferschmidt Receives the 2023 SFU CERi Community-Engaged Partnership Award

Sarah Qiu

Pictured: Anthony Kupferschmidt (right) and his partner.

Congratulations to gerontology alumnus Anthony Kupferschmidt on receiving the [2023 SFU CERi Community-Engaged Partnership Award].

Kupferschmidt was the lead community partner on a Michael Smith Health Research BC funded project entitled, "Independent Senior Centres: Connecting and Supporting Older Adults in Metro Vancouver." He is accepting this award in partnership with the Langley Senior Resources Society, the senior centre where he was the Executive Director during the completion of this project.

This work emerged from Kupferschmidt's passion for supporting senior centres in BC and ensuring that older adults have the opportunity to participate meaningfully in research. It examined how independent, not-for-profit senior centres in Metro Vancouver impact the health and well-being of older adults in this province.

This project also provided insight on the challenges that senior centres face. As current research in this area is limited in BC and Canada, this project identified opportunities and potential strategies to ensure that senior centres continue to meet the needs of the diverse community of older adults that they serve. This work also included the co-development of a research agenda for senior centres.

Since graduating from Simon Fraser University's Master of Arts in Gerontology program in 2009, Kupferschmidt has been actively involved in community outreach initiatives across the not-for-profit and municipal sectors to address gaps in programs and services for older adults. Kupferschmidt continues to dedicate his time to advocating for older adults and ensuring their voices are heard in research.

Read the full report on [Independent Seniors Centres].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# Synthesis of a Scoping Review on the Influence of the Built Environment on Community Mobility of People Living with Visual Disabilities

Jason Fan & Kishore Seetharaman

**Introduction**

To better understand how the built environment shapes the community mobility of people living with visual disabilities, a scoping review was conducted under the Stakeholders' Walkability/Wheelability Audit in Neighbourhoods (SWAN) project, a sub-project under the Mobility, Accessibility, Participation (MAP) among people with disabilities partnership, to answer the following research questions:

- What aspects of the built environment affect the community mobility of persons with visual disabilities?
- How does the built environment affect the community mobility of persons with visual disabilities? This scoping review was published in Volume 12, 2024 - Issue 1 of the Urban, Planning and Transport Research Journal. The review was conducted as part of the SWAN (Stakeholders' walkability/wheelability audit in neighbourhoods) project, which is part of the larger project Mobility, Accessibility and Participation (MAP) among people with disabilities, funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC).

**Background**

In 2020, there were an estimated 1.1 billion people living with vision loss worldwide, of whom 43 million are blind (The International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness, 2023). For people with visual disabilities, navigating the pedestrian environment can be challenging due to issues of spatial perceptions, cognition, decision-making and solving. Transportation planning research suggests the inaccessibility of the built environment for people with disabilities stems from the lack of attention to the diverse experiences of disability (Levine & Karner, 2023). Addressing this gap, past literature emphasized the need to explore how people with visual disabilities interact with and navigate the built environment (Boys, 2014; Parkin & Smithies, 2012). While there exists an extensive body of research on orientation and mobility in relation to people with visual disabilities, there have been no literature reviews on the influence of the outdoor built environment on their mobility in the community. The aim of this scoping review was to explore the scope and range of extant literature on the community mobility of persons with visual disabilities, focusing specifically on the influence of the outdoor built environment.

**Methods**

Eight databases were searched, following the process outlined by Levac et al. (2010) for conducting scoping reviews and the reporting guidelines of the PRISMA extension for scoping reviews (PRISMA-ScR) checklist (Tricco et al., 2018).

**Results**

43 studies were included in the final review with 11 studies based on quantitative methods, 28 based on qualitative methods, and 4 employing mixed methods, conducted in North America, Europe, and Oceania. Most studies were exploratory in nature with a focus on identifying how different aspects of the built environment support or hinder the pedestrian experience for people with visual disabilities. Built environment features mentioned often include curbs, curb ramps, tactile warning/guiding surfaces, and accessible pedestrian signals. Key findings from the review that highlight the role of the built environment were grouped under two themes: 1) Barriers to outdoor mobility, and 2) cues for spatial perception and navigation.

***Barriers to Outdoor Mobility***

The studies reviewed examined the role of the built environment in posing physical barriers to the outdoor mobility of people with visual disabilities. Barriers reported in the studies included:

1) **Sidewalk and ground surface quality issues:** This includes cracks, bumps, undulation, unevenness, potholes, and slipperiness. Associated with depth perceptions problems which increase the risk of falling (Zhao et al., 2018, Jenkins et al., 2015).

2) **Suboptimal-level changes:** This includes small or uneven curbs, minimal separation between adjacent curb ramps, unmarked stairs (Brundle et al., 2015, Laliberte Rudman et al., 2016, Suderman & Redmond, 2015, Zeng, 2015).

3) **Waist height or eye-level objects that are harder to detect:** Studies found that it is preferred when objects do not interfere with the path of travel and are located in the street furniture zone of the sidewalk, so as to not disrupt wayfinding (Nuzzi et al., 2018, Ratelle et al., 2010, Suderman & Redmond, 2015).

4) **Suboptimal ambient conditions:** Poor lighting and inclement weather hindering the use of built environment features (Alexander et al., 2014, Kaminsky et al., 2014, Park et al., 2017).

5) **Barriers at street crossings:** This includes a lack of traffic/pedestrian signal, defunct signal, insufficient crossing time, and complex street intersection/crossing layouts (Guth et al., 2005).

6) **Fixed and mobile/temporary obstructions:** Mobile obstacles are harder to locate and remember while temporary obstructions such as sidewalk closures lead to confusion and disorientation (Zimmermann-Janschitz et al., 2017).

***Cues for Spatial Perception and Navigation***

The review suggests that people with visual disabilities receive cues from different elements of the built environment which prompt decision-making for outdoor mobility and navigation. These cues are:

1) **Tactile cues:** Multiple studies indicated that tactile cues are the most useful for outdoor mobility of blind pedestrians. A prerequisite for tactile cues to be used in mobility and navigation decisions is their detectability. Their usefulness may be compromised due to snow, moisture, or poor lighting. Studies highlighted the importance of precise placement and location of tactile cues to augment their usefulness.

2) **Kinesthetic cues:** Studies showed that changes in elevation or slope provide people with visual disabilities crucial information at key junctures in the outdoor environment, such as street crossings (Suderman & Redmond, 2015). The absence of tactile and kinesthetic cues as seen in streets designed with the 'Shared Space' approach can be disorienting due to a lack of distinction between pedestrian zones and the road (Havik et al., 2012; Magnus, 2016).

3) **Auditory cues:** Audio prompts provided by accessible pedestrian signals are a crucial source of support for the outdoor mobility and navigation of people with visual disabilities (McGrath et al., 2017; Petraglia & Boudreau, 2006). Audio cues are also used by people with visual disabilities to identify the location of community desti-

nations (Papadopoulos et al., 2020).

4) **Visual cues:** For partially sighted people, visual contrast in lighting and between environmental features was suggested as being useful (Zhao et al., 2018). Partially sighted people keep track of the number of environmental features and changes in the built environment encountered en-route to update their cognitive maps of the environment and perform wayfinding (Williams et al., 2014; Zimmermann-Janschitz et al., 2017).

## Discussion

The studies reviewed were found to heavily emphasize the cueing properties of different environmental features, underscoring the role tactile/haptic cueing plays for people with visual disabilities (Golledge, 1993). There literature was also found to focus more on how proximal built environmental features influence pedestrian experience compared to the role of larger-scale built environmental features in shaping mental representations of the outdoor environment. Future research should seek to expand the focus on different levels of spatial information to gain a fuller understanding of the cognitive maps of people with visual disabilities. Little attention was placed on the differences in mobility experience based on aetiology. Studies did not focus on the interplay of visual disability, physical, cognitive, or mental comorbidities, and built environmental factors in shaping the pedestrian experience. Furthermore, the studies reviewed did not examine differences in the influence of the built environment on the outdoor mobility of people with visual disabilities based on gender, race, socioeconomic status, or other identity markers. Applying an intersectional lens (i.e. exploring how systems of oppression shape the experience of people with disabilities) (Brinkman et al., 2023) in future research could yield more nuanced understandings of the diversity of mobility experiences of people with visual disabilities and help inform more equitable decision-making and planning for minoritized groups of people with visual disabilities.

## Implications for policy and practice

Given the knowledge gaps among built environment practitioners regarding the accessibility needs of people with disabilities, increased understanding of how the built environment influences the outdoor mobility of people with disabilities could enhance access and inclusion in cities through changes in the design and planning process (Jackson, 2018). Going beyond tactile warnings and guiding surfaces at street intersections, accessibility considerations for people with visual disabilities should also include creating a clear path of travel on sidewalks, visual and tactile demarcations around obstacles on the sidewalk, installation of accessible pedestrian signals with auditory and visual cues, and alignment of curb cuts (Smithies, 2015; Parkin & Smithies, 2012). With technological advancements changing the way navigation for people with visual disabilities is understood, datasets identifying different obstacles and accessibility information can be built to inform navigational assistive technology systems.

## Conclusion

This review suggests that the built environment shapes the outdoor mobility of people with visual disabilities in a variety of ways and has a key role to play in the maintenance of independence and safety in the context of outdoor activity and participation. With no prior literature review focused on the influence of the outdoor built environment on people with visual disabilities, this review provides a useful overview of current research on the topic with significant implications for both researchers and built environment practitioners. Through the breakdown of what constitutes the facilitative and hindering characteristics of the built environment, this review helps identify measurable attributes of the built environment in the context of outdoor accessibility for people with visual disabilities.

While the review explores different aspects of the person-environment dynamics of outdoor mobility of people with visual disabilities, future research should explore potential disparities in the influence of the outdoor built environment on the mobility of different subgroups of people with visual disabilities, differing by gender, race, socioeconomic status, and other identity markers. As the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities states, understanding how the built environment impacts the outdoor mobility of people with visual disabilities is essential to foster inclusivity in the community and honour people's rights to have free access to outdoor spaces (2006).

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# Intergenerational Bonds Inspired Visiting Student Jin Guo to Study Gerontology

Jin Guo

Jin Guo is a visiting doctoral student from the School of Public Policy and Administration at Xi'an Jiaotong University, China.

During her time at Simon Fraser University's Department of Gerontology, Jin hopes to expand her knowledge in gerontology and further develop her research skills. Learn more about what brought Jin to SFU.

**Can you tell me about yourself?**

I'm Jin Guo, and I am a visiting graduate PhD student from the School of Public Policy and Administration at Xi'an Jiaotong University, China. My research focuses on aging and health, with a particular emphasis on resilience and multimorbidity. I am also actively exploring broader research areas related to the psychological health, caregiver and well-being of older adults.

**What inspired you to study aging and gerontology?**

The inspiration driving me to study aging and gerontology stems from my personal experiences and reflections. Growing up in a large family, observing the aging process has consistently made me think about how to ensure older adults' well-being in later life. In research, older adults are subjects, however, in reality they are our family and friends, and the future versions of ourselves. In this aging society, the study of aging extends beyond academia—it's about creating a better living environment and promoting the well-being for current older adults, ourselves, and future generations. Therefore, I hope to make a meaningful impact, improving the lives of older adults and fostering well-being in our society.

**How has studying gerontology impacted your life?**

Studying gerontology has provided me with a deeper understanding of older adults, their challenges, and their sources of happiness and aspirations. Witnessing their resilience and wisdom has not only enriched my academic knowledge but has also contributed to my personal growth. Gerontology establishes a profound connection between myself and older adults.

**Are you involved in any research projects and/or community initiatives?**

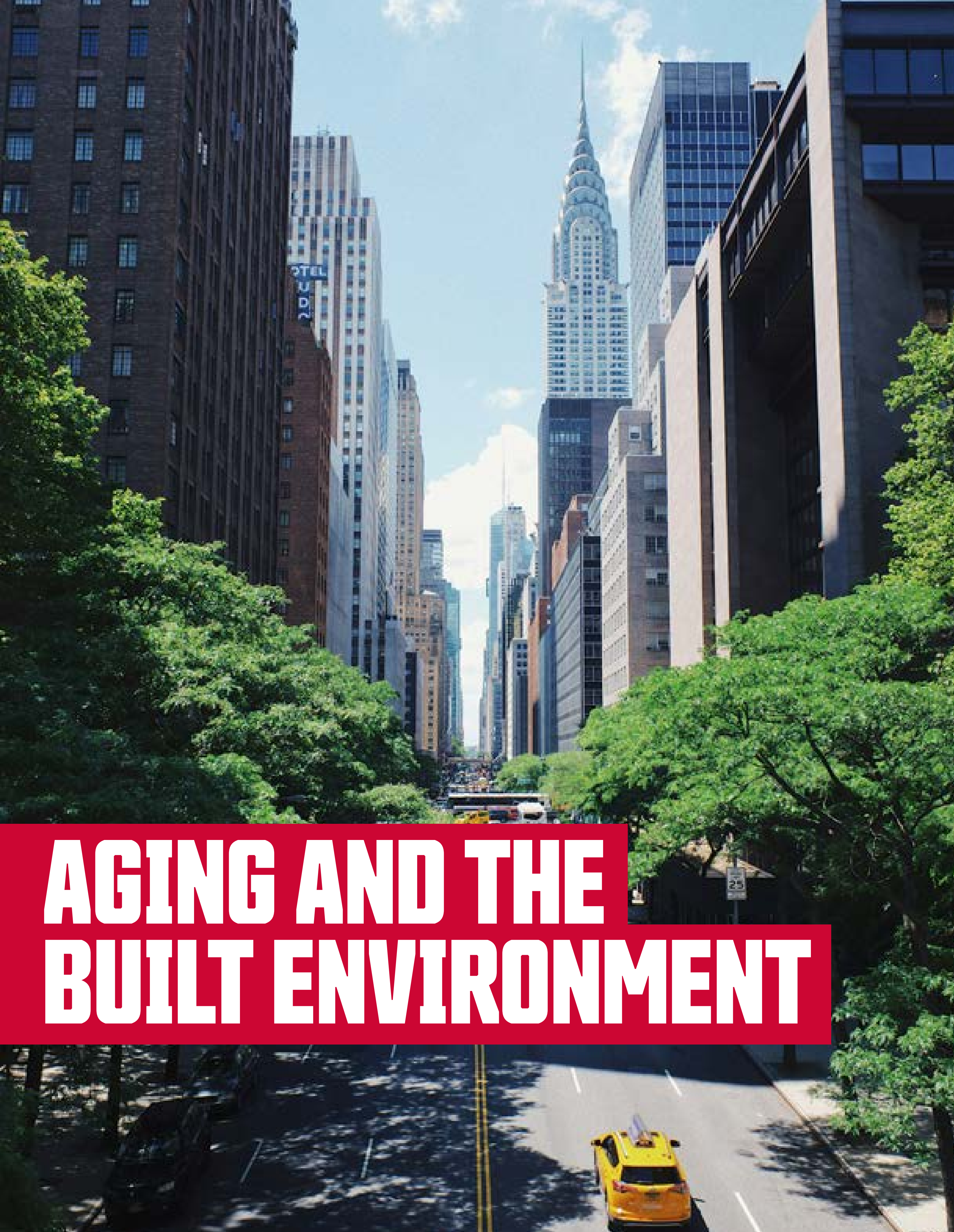
I am currently involved in a longitudinal study in Anhui Province, China, which has been ongoing for more than 20 years. Professor Andrew Wister is a crucial collaborator on our project. The study includes various aspects such as family livelihood, risk perception and vulnerability, socio-demographic characteristics and health status, intergenerational support information for children, and well-being. Professor Wister, myself and our team have also published a recent article in the Journals of Gerontology based on multimorbidity resilience and aging in China (Guo, J.; Wister, A.; Wang, J.; Li, S. (2024). https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbad196.)

**What interests do you have outside of your research?**

I enjoy cooking, not only Chinese food but also international dishes and desserts. Playing the guzheng and a bit of guitar is another passion of mine. I love spending time with my family especially my incredibly adorable cats with whom I spend most of my leisurely time with. Cherishing moments with family and friends are something I truly value. I also have a passion for travel. Spontaneous trips bring me joy. Additionally, playing electronic games with family and friends is another enjoyable pastime.

**What are your goals during your time at SFU?**

During my time at SFU, I want to broaden my understanding of gerontology, conducting more in-depth research. There are many experts in gerontology, and I look forward to having more exchanges with everyone.



# AGING AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

## Reflection: Vision Stream Data Collection

Shruti Wani

**Introduction**

The objective of the "The Stakeholder's Walkability/Wheel ability Audit in Neighborhoods (SWAN)" (Project lead: Atiya Mahmood, at Simon Fraser University) is to evaluate how the neighborhood's-built environment impacts mobility access and participation among older adults and individuals with mobility, sensory, and mild cognitive disabilities (Mahmood et al., 2020). SWAN is a micro-scale user-led audit tool. The study participants serve as co-researchers and collect the data with support from research team members. Data are collected across five domains of functionality, safety, appearance and maintenance, land use and supportive features, and social aspects (Mahmood et al., 2020).

There is limited research done to understand the impact of environmental features on older adults with vision loss (McGrath et al., 2017). The SWAN tool records the impact of environmental features for residents with mobility, sensory, and mild cognitive disabilities. Advancement in research can help urban planners in better planning of neighborhoods to include older adults with mobility, sensory, and mild cognitive disabilities.

**Personal Reflections**

I am currently a fourth-year Resource and Environmental Management student with a focus on urban planning. When I started my research assistant (RA) position in 2023, I had limited exposure to community-engaged research on the role of the built environment on pedestrian mobility and participation. I joined the Stakeholder's Walkability/Wheel ability Audit in Neighborhoods (SWAN) project to gain experience working on a community-engaged project with people living with disabilities, and to learn how urban planning and design of neighborhoods can promote inclusion and social participation of this group of pedestrians. As an RA in the SWAN project, I had the opportunity to be involved in the data collection phase for the vision stream, focusing on people living with vision impairment. The goal of this phase is to understand the barriers and facilitators that people with vision impairments face while navigating streets in the Metro Vancouver area.

The SWAN Audit Tool includes a series of observational questions about the presence and absence of built environment features on neighborhood intersections and sidewalks. The participants, with the help of the research team members, complete this audit tool. This is followed by an interview with the participants to go more in-depth into what they observed during their data collection session. In the following section, I highlight some key learnings from these data collection sessions.

**Key Learnings during Data Collection**

One of the key things that I learned was that our current neighborhoods do not fully accommodate pedestrians living vision impairments. The following are some of the key takeaways from data collection.

<u>Role of Sidewalk Width</u>

Narrow sidewalks make it difficult for those who use guide dogs or mobility assistive technologies (MAT) to walk or wheel due to inadequate space. MAT and guide dogs support persons living with disabilities to complete activities of daily living. Wider sidewalks have been shown to have higher pedestrian satisfaction compared to narrow sidewalks (Park & Kwon, 2023) and can better support persons using MAT or guide dogs.

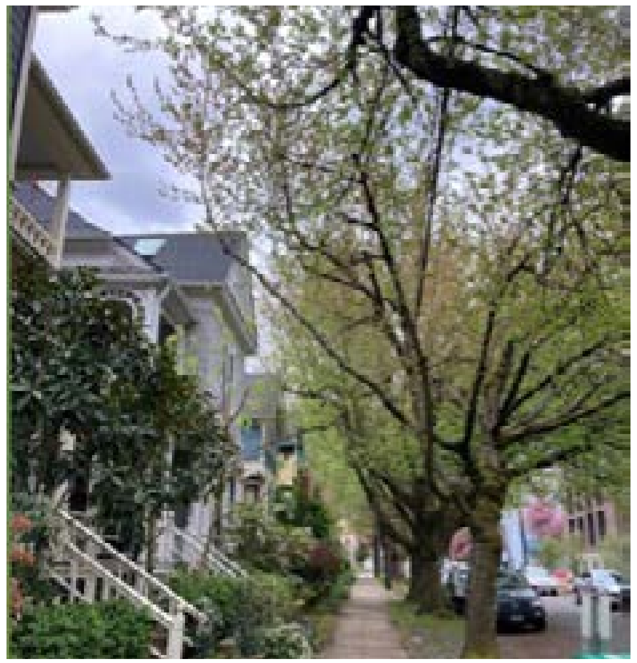


*Figure 1: Shows a narrow street. Photo by Shruti Wani in Portland, USA.*

<u>Role of Green Buffer Spaces</u>

Green spaces are used as a boundary between bicycle lanes and the walking spaces (Park & Kwon, 2023). There needs to be buffer green spaces along these sidewalks to accommodate guide dogs. Additionally, research has shown green spaces provide a better walking experience than areas without green spaces (Park & Kwon, 2023). These green spaces also help to enhance the aesthetics of a neighborhood.

<u>Marked Crosswalks</u>

Crosswalks need to be properly marked as faded crosswalks are a hazard for people living with disabilities, especially at night. Formal road crossings can significantly decrease the actual and perceived risks of pedestrian injury (Havard & Willis, 2012). Sidewalks connected to the crosswalks need to have curb cuts and tactile surfaces to support safe crossing of the street.

*Figure 2: Shows a marked crosswalk with tactile surfaces on curb cuts (a safe crosswalk). Photo by Shruti Wani in Surrey, BC.*

<u>Role of Curb Cuts and Tactile Surfaces</u>

Properly designed curb cuts are crucial for people with disabilities whether they are walking or wheeling (Mahmood et al., 2020). Tactile cues on curb cuts can help pedestrians navigate at street crossings (e.g., which way to cross) (Seetharaman et al., 2024). Without tactile surfaces, crossing streets can be unsafe for pedestrians with vision impairments. The curb cut should be wide, aligning with the crosswalk. If the crosswalks are misaligned, then pedestrians living with vision impairments might not be able to cross straight across. Tactile surfaces help to make sure pedestrians do not accidentally step out onto the road. However, some tactile surfaces can be confusing; tactile surfaces that only have bumps and do not give a sense of direction can be difficult to use for pedestrians as they do not know in which direction they should walk to cross the road. Directional tactile surfaces support a safer walking experience.

*Figure 3: Photo shows tactile surface with non-directional bumps. Photo by Shruti Wani in Richmond, BC.*

*Figure 4: Photo shows tactile surface with directional bumps. Source https://stoneworkspavers.com.au/paver/tactile-pavers/*

<u>Role of Push buttons at crosswalks</u>

Another key learning from the data collection sessions is about the pedestrian crossing buttons. Pedestrian signals which provide visual and auditory cues support pedestrians with vision impairments to navigate neighborhoods safely (Seetharaman et al., 2024). Without pedestrian signals with visual and auditory cues, pedestrians can find it difficult to determine how much time they have to safely cross the street. This type of experiential feedback from participants shows how important it is to pay attention to urban design details and involve a diversity of voices when urban environments are being designed and built.

**Conclusion**

My time as a research assistant on the SWAN project has been incredibly memorable and educational. Throughout my time I gained valuable experience in data collection and developed awareness about the diverse range of users of our pedestrian infrastructure. This project provided me with a new perspective on how built environment impacts residents and underscored the importance of considering multiple voices in urban planning. As a future urban planner, there is a lot that I have learned, and these experiences will shape my future work in designing and planning for an inclusive urban landscape.

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