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The Right to Walkability for Older Citizens in Age-Friendly Cities: "Let's Move Through the City" an Explorative Qualitative Survey

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Abstract

This article aims to explore the role of the right to walkability for older adults within the broader goal of developing age-friendly cities, with a focus on the intersection of urban policy and tactical urbanism. In light of Italy's demographic ageing and shifting urban dynamics, the study investigates how cities can support pedestrian mobility for older populations by improving walkability, understood as one of the key indicator of health, autonomy, and social inclusion. The article outlines how tactical urbanism, characterized by low-cost, temporary, and community-driven interventions, can complement institutional planning efforts and foster more accessible, inclusive public spaces. Drawing on qualitative research conducted in Bari's metropolitan area in late 2024, which included 86 interviews with people over 65, the study identifies four typologies of urban walkers and highlights how the local urban environment significantly affects older adults' mobility and perceived well-being. The findings emphasize the need for participatory approaches and localized interventions that address physical, social, and psychological barriers to walkability. The article concludes by advocating for integrated strategies that recognize older citizens as active participants in shaping urban space, positioning walkability as both a practical and symbolic component of inclusive urban futures.

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Keywords: Walkability; Older Citizens; Mobility System; Urban Spaces; Tactical Urbanism

Introduction

National data clearly illustrate how the ageing process is significantly affecting Italy's demographic structure, in line with trends observed at other territorial scales (…). Billari (2023) deeply analyses the shift in the population age distribution, noting how the traditional pyramid has been transformed into the so-called "ship", with no indicators suggesting a reversal of this trend. Italian society, therefore, is and will continue to be affected in the coming decades by an ageing population, which will require the national government, along with administrations at various territorial levels, to confront this process. Cities, specifically, where a growing share of over-65 individuals are choosing to reside, will be fundamentally called upon to play a proactive role in designing effective anticipatory policies to address what can be defined as one of the major Italian, European, and global megatrends (Bellicampi et al., 2024). The orientations of European institutions are increasingly moving toward shortening the institutional chain, by passing intermediate administrative levels and addressing municipalities directly for the tasks of planning and financial management of resources.

The task that local administrations will be required to undertake, often in the absence of dedicated personnel and adequate knowledge resources, is further complicated by the qualitative change that is gradually affecting both the social representations of the so-called "third age" and the ageing process itself, as well as the self-representations of elderly individuals. In parallel with the continued presence oftraditional representations and the presence of over-65 individuals living in inadequate self-sufficient conditions[1], there is an increasing share of newly emerging older adults displays markedly different characteristics. These new elderly people are bearers of needs and desires that go beyond the classic socio-health concerns typically associated with this

[1] The Istat 2021 Report *"«Le condizioni di salute della popolazione anziana in Italia», r*ecords approximately 3.86 million non-self-sufficient older adults, meaning those who experience severe difficulties in basic functional, motor, and sensory activities (such as vision and hearing), as well as in memory and concentration, requiring assistance beyond mere healthcare support. On average, 28.4% of the elderly population is unable to independently perform fundamental daily activities such as walking, climbing or descending stairs, eating, dressing, washing, cooking, and taking medication. As age increases, the proportion of older adults with severe functional limitations rises progressively: among individuals aged 65-74, it stands at 14.6%; it doubles to 32.5% among those aged 75-84, and quadruples to 63.8% among those over 85 years old. These figures are expected to grow, further intensifying the issue of the responses that the public social and healthcare welfare system is and will be required to provide for this specific segment of the elderly population (Cfr, Ranci 2001; Jesoula, Pavolini, 2022; Pavolini 2004).

specific demographic group. They are asserting what can be seen as an all-encompassing "right to the city" (Lefebvre, 1968), understood as the right to fully live in and inhabit the city and the entire urban space. This right encapsulates a range of other "soft rights", which benefit from varying levels of legal protection and are sometimes not directly regulated, but are nonetheless increasingly recognized as fundamental to ensuring high levels of quality of life (Sen, Nussbaum, 1993). Among these, rights to health, housing, public space, greenery, sociality, culture, and beauty, the right to mobility is absolutely central. Mobility should be understood in its broadest sense: as the right to fully experience urban space regardless of one's specific place of residence. It is an essential component of the right to well-being that elderly individuals are claiming with increasing awareness (Carrera, 2025). Within the broader framework of public mobility, defined in terms of quality, accessibility of transport, and adequacy of routes, pedestrian mobility plays a central role. Walkability, understood as the set of conditions that characterize an urban space and facilitate pedestrian activity, is influenced not only by the physical and cultural characteristics of individuals but also by those of urban space and territorial policies (Venerandi et al., 2024; Ariffin et al. 2021; Dovey & Pafka 2020; Ewing & Handy 2009). These, in turn, are shaped by urban planning and territorial design, as well as by more targeted, bottom-up interventions generated locally through tactical urbanism initiatives.

This exploration on the issue of mobility among older adults combines a theoretical framework with findings from an empirical study conducted during the final months of 2024. The research, carried out in the metropolitan area of Bari, involved in-depth interviews with individuals aged 65 and over, aiming to understand walking behaviours, motivations, and perceived barriers. The study provides a grounded insight into how urban environments shape the everyday mobility experiences of older populations.

Walkability as an Indicator of Age, Friendliness in Cities

Urban walkability, or the walkability of a city, can be defined as the capacity of an urban environment to facilitate pedestrian movement (Colleoni et al. 2024; 2017). It is a multidimensional concept that goes beyond the mere presence of pedestrian infrastructure, simultaneously promoting individual health, social interaction, and environmental sustainability. Walkability encompasses a range of both material and immaterial factors, including accessibility, safety, connectivity, and the attractiveness of streets and public spaces . Urban walkability represents a key indicator of quality of life in contemporary cities. It refers to the extent to which an urban environment is conducive to walking, including factors such as safety, accessibility, the presence of pedestrian infrastructure, the quality of public spaces, the density of destinations within walking distance, and the overall attractiveness of the

urban context. A city with high walkability encourages pedestrian mobility not only as a mode of transportation but also as a means of social interaction, psychophysical well-being, and environmental sustainability (Abdulla Baobeid & Al-Ghamdi, 2021; Westenhöfer et al. 2023).

In the current context, where cities are increasingly called upon to respond to pressing environmental, social, and health challenges, the promotion of walkability becomes a central urban strategy. Intervening in public space to improve the walking experience entails rethinking the priorities of urban planning, reducing the centrality of private automobiles, and enhancing soft mobility. However, structural transformations of cities require long timelines and substantial resources.

Walkability is increasingly emerging as a crucial parameter for evaluating the degree of accessibility and inclusiveness of cities, especially in relation to the concept of age-friendliness, that is the capacity of urban environments to adequately meet the needs of older people. In a demographic context marked by a progressive ageing of the population, urban planning must address the challenge of designing spaces that are not only safe and functional but also capable of promoting autonomy, socialization, and the psychophysical well-being of older citizens. From this perspective, walkability becomes a privileged indicator for assessing the urban quality of life for elderly people. Because of its capacity to provide a tangible measure of how walkable, welcoming, and stimulating a city is for those who move at different rhythms and have different needs compared to other age groups.

The features that make a city "walkable" for older people are numerous and interconnected. The presence of wide, continuous, and obstacle-free sidewalks, adequate horizontal and vertical signage, traffic light timings calibrated to the actual motor abilities of users, benches distributed along walking paths, uniform and diffuse lighting, easily accessible public services, and green areas are just some of the elements that contribute to creating an urban environment conducive to walking in an older age (Ariffin et al., 2021). In addition, the absence of architectural barriers, the proximity of urban functions (shops, clinics, community centers, public transport), and a general sense of safety are fundamental aspects in encouraging older adults to maintain their pedestrian mobility habits (Carrera, 2025). Walking, in fact, is not only a means of movement but also a healthy activity, an opportunity for informal socialization, and a factor in preventing isolation and sedentary lifestyles (Carrera, 2020).

Walkability as an indicator of age-friendliness also assumes a strong symbolic and political significance: a city that invests in walkability for older people is a city that acknowledges and values the presence of the elderly in collective life, and promotes a vision of active and participatory ageing. Urban policies aimed at improving walkability levels not only facilitate the inclusion

of older adults but also generate cross-cutting benefits for the entire population, as they promote a more liveable, equitable, and sustainable environment. In this sense, age-sensitive urban design should not be conceived as a sectoral strategy, but rather as an integral part of a universal approach to accessibility and the quality of public space, where the needs of the most vulnerable become a guiding criterion for shaping a more equitable urban environment for everyone.

Tactical Urbanism for Urban Walkability

In the effort to ensure age-friendly cities that incorporate mobility policies as a key dimension for enhancing the quality of life of older adults, it is necessary to recognize that such goals cannot rely solely on large scale, long term urban planning projects capable of producing major structural transformations. It is essential that this level is integrated with tactical initiatives, small scale actions, replicated over time and spread across the territory, that can generate concrete and widespread impact (Lydon & Garcia, 2015).

Tactical urbanism falls within the broader phenomenon of Temporary Urbanism, a heterogeneous set of practices that share the temporary use of land and infrastructure, in contrast to the stable or long term uses typical of traditional urban planning. In Western urban culture the concept of stability is deeply rooted, so much so that architectural styles and models of urban development dating from the nineteenth century have been predominantly based on permanent uses of space and structures (Bishop & Williams, 2012). But, in recent decades, what we are witnessing is not a paradigm shift, but rather an integration of traditional urban planning practices with temporary interventions that emerge in the international context of architecture, informal urbanism, and local policy frameworks.

The term "tactical" was first introduced by Michel de Certeau in 1980 in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, where he distinguished between strategy and tactic. Strategic actions are implemented by institutions, which plan urban space from a functionalist, top-down perspective. Tactical actions, by contrast, belong to the citizenry, who experience the city at street level and respond to institutional strategies by appropriating and reinterpreting the designed space. Tactical urbanism can be characterized by five key elements: a) interventions are temporary, with limited duration; b) social actors play a crucial role in decision-making, implementation, and monitoring processes; c) actions are based on low cost, low tech solutions, often involving DIY practices; d) interventions operate on a small scale, fostering micro-transformations whose cumulative effect depends on the aggregation of individual actions; e) initiatives adopt a proactive stance in identifying and responding to regulatory, bureaucratic, or spatial shortcomings of the urban environment.

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The result is the implementation of strategies capable of affecting both the material and immaterial qualities of the city. The significance of such outcomes rests on the understanding that urban spaces are not mere backdrops for social relations, but possess an "active passivity", as defined by Thrift (2006), structured as outcomes of normative models and, at the same time, structuring as enabling conditions for behaviours, choices, and even the normalization of value systems underlying those very choices.

However, it is important to acknowledge that these interventions operate at a small scale, and while their effectiveness may be amplified through the accumulation of multiple initiatives, their overall impact remains limited when disconnected from broader planning frameworks. Spatial and temporal constraints, along with the inability to directly influence land, regulation use, permitted functions, and spatial proportions, may constrain their scope of action. Consequently, tactical urbanism can complement and collaborate with traditional public space planning processes but cannot substitute institutional policies or collaborative governance processes that ensure high standards of quality of life and establish quantitative and qualitative criteria for public services.

With specific regard to the conditions necessary for ensuring walkability in urban spaces, tactical urbanism can play a central role by enabling targeted, flexible, often low-cost and temporary interventions. This potential is reinforced by the fact that such interventions frequently emerge from bottom-up processes, participatory pathways that draw upon and valorise the lived urban experience of residents, their spatial practices, needs, and visions of the city.

In this context, tactical urbanism emerges as a powerful operational tool. It represents an experimental and cost-effective approach to urban transformation. Through temporary interventions, often implemented with simple and reversible materials, it allows for the testing of design solutions, the engagement of local communities, and the acceleration of the cultural change necessary to consolidate a more sustainable vision of the city. Tactical urbanism initiatives, such as the temporary widening of sidewalks, partial pedestrianization of streets, creation of parklets, or installation of lightweight urban furniture, can serve as catalysts for rapidly improving walkability, demonstrating in tangible terms the benefits of a more inclusive and liveable public space. Furthermore, tactical urbanism has strong communicative and participatory value: it fosters direct citizen involvement in the design and management of urban space, encouraging greater collective awareness of the importance of pedestrian space quality. By doing so, it contributes not only to the material improvement of walkability conditions but also to the development of social capital oriented toward place stewardship and the promotion of public health.

In this sense, urban walkability and tactical urbanism can be seen as mutually reinforcing: the former as a strategic goal for sustainable cities, the latter as an agile and inclusive tool for achieving it. Together, they outline a new paradigm of contemporary urbanism grounded in proximity, slowness, and universal accessibility of urban space. Urban walkability is an ideal field for the application of this intervention model *in* and *on* urban space; its quality emerges as the result of both institutional policy decisions and participatory, bottom-up projects.

Applications of Tactical Urbanism to Urban Senior Walkability

The progressive ageing of the urban population has sparked a profound and urgent reflection on the role of the city as an inclusive space. In this context, *urban walkability* assumes strategic importance in promoting autonomy, health, social interaction, and well-being among older adults.

Several noteworthy projects have been implemented with the aim of generating a significant impact in terms of accessibility and liveability for older people, which, as observed, ultimately foster a more age-friendly quality of life for all city users and residents.

Among the more targeted initiatives, the "Safe Streets for Seniors" program stands out. This initiative, promoted by the New York City Department of Transportation, aims to improve safety in neighbourhoods with a high concentration of older adults[2]. Through measures such as extended crossing times at intersections, the introduction of protected pedestrian islands, and improved signage, the program directly addresses the physical and temporal barriers that older people encounter in urban spaces. It represents a pragmatic, risk-reduction oriented approach, demonstrating how minor infrastructural adjustments can have a substantial impact on the quality of life for the over 65 years population.

Other noteworthy projects, while designed for the general population, clearly specifically benefit older adults. Barcelona's "Superilles" (Superblocks) project, for instance, has transformed the urban fabric by creating micro-neighbourhoods where vehicular traffic is heavily restricted, thereby reclaiming public space for citizens (Honey-Rosés, 2023). The initiative aims to improve pedestrian safety, reduce pollution, and encourage social interaction. Despite prevalent ageist biases, it is clear that older adults benefit greatly from quieter environments, shaded pathways, ample seating, and welcoming public spaces. Reduced traffic also facilitates mobility for

[2] United States Federal Highway Administration. (2017, June 28). New York City Department of Transportation – Safe Streets for Seniors Program. Rosap.ntl.bts.gov.; New York City Department of Transportation. (2022). Vision Zero Senior Pedestrian Safety Study. NYC DOT; Tsay, S.-p. (2010, February). Safe Routes for Seniors: Improving Walkability for Seniors in New York City. Active Living Research Annual Conference.

individuals with physical limitations. This model promotes a "human-scale" city, replicable in a variety of urban contexts.

Portland's "20-Minute Neighborhood" concept seeks to ensure that all residents can access essential daily services within a 20-minute walk from their homes (Simon, 2022; De Mersseman et al. 2009). This approach integrates mobility, service planning, and residential density. For older adults, it implies reduced dependence on cars and increased opportunities to remain active and independent within their neighbourhoods. The vision is holistic, aimed at long-term quality of life, yet requires integrated planning among urban design, transportation, and social services.

Tokyo, one of the cities with the highest proportion of older residents, has adopted the principle of *universal design*, guiding all urban planning decisions with accessibility and inclusivity criteria. The systemic adoption of universal design reflects a proactive, cultural approach to accessibility[3]. The elimination of architectural barriers, the use of non-slip paving and high-contrast signage, and the widespread availability of accessible services make the city usable by everyone, especially the elderly. Inclusivity is no longer seen as a sector-specific need, but as a foundational principle of urban planning.

In Italy, Milan's "Piazze Aperte" (Open Squares) project has transformed traffic-heavy streets into new, accessible, multifunctional pedestrian squares[4]. These spaces foster social interaction, light physical activity, and intergenerational encounters. For older adults, they represent not just transit zones, but vibrant living spaces. The simplicity of the interventions (coloured asphalt, movable furniture, temporary greenery) makes the model easily replicable at low cost.

In the San Lorenzo district of Rome, one of the main squares was revitalized through participatory interventions. Tables and seating were added, alongside colourful decorations, transforming an anonymous space into a lively gathering place for residents and students alike[5]. The redevelopment,

[3] Act on Buildings Accessible and Usable by the Elderly and Physically Handicapped (Heartful Building Law), 1994 is the Japanese law that requires new constructions to ensure easy access for the elderly and people with disabilities: step-free entrances, accessible bathrooms, wide corridors, and ramps. TDLC & World Bank – "Rethinking Silver: Lessons from Japan's Age-Ready Cities" (2022) is an International analysis that features Tokyo as a model for inclusive infrastructure and urban policies adapted to population aging.

[4] "Piano Quartieri" (Neighborhood Plan) and the Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan (PUMS), *Piazze Aperte* originated as an initiative within the *Piano Quartieri* (coordinated by AMAT in collaboration with Bloomberg and the Global Designing Cities Initiative) and is part of the PUMS strategy to expand and enhance the safety of pedestrian and cycling areas.

[5] The Municipality of Rome, through *Urbanistica Roma*, launched a public participatory process in 2020 for the San Lorenzo district, which included the redevelopment of the square with urban furniture - such as tables, seating, and decorative elements - to improve livability

driven by participatory initiatives and the installation of urban furniture, has enhanced the square's usability and safety, particularly for older residents.

These projects highlight a structural aspect common to all small and medium-scale interventions: the practicality and usability of spaces shaped around the needs of specific citizen groups ultimately depend on the quality of maintenance and the involvement of the local community, which heavily influence their effectiveness. It is not merely a matter of creating spaces adapted to older people (or other groups), but of building and sustaining conditions over time that ensure their actual usability, operating within a framework of concrete and widely shared opportunities.

Although diverse in form, these examples collectively demonstrate that promoting urban walkability for older adults requires an integrated approach combining physical design, social awareness, and community participation. Cities that prioritize the needs of the elderly by investing in accessible and welcoming public spaces not only enhance the health and safety of a vulnerable population segment but also contribute to the creation of better urban environments for all.

These examples show how this model of urban regeneration can take many different forms while still producing effective results and significant impacts. Crucially, just as we cannot speak of a city *for* older adults, but rather a city *designed with older adults in mind*, public space regeneration initiatives that respond to the needs of older individuals ultimately create environments that benefit all, or at least a large portion, of urban residents.

"Let's Move Through the City": An Explorative Qualitative Survey[6]

As part of the national project *"Age, It. Ageing Well in an Ageing Society"*, the research initiative *"Muoviamoci in città"* (*"Let's Move Through the City"*) was conducted. Between September and December 2024, 86 interviews were carried out with citizens over the age over65, of all genders, residing in various municipalities within the metropolitan area of Bari.

For the purposes of this study, a purposive sample was selected which, while not aiming for statistical representativeness, included participants of both sexes, with varying levels of education and different socio-economic statuses. The aim was to capture the opinions, attitudes, and behaviours of a

and safety. The participatory process began with a public meeting officially described as a "participatory pathway." According to official reports from the *Risorse per Roma* initiative, San Lorenzo (specifically via dei Lucani) has been included in the *Urban Regeneration Program* since 2020. This confirms that the intervention was framed within a structured institutional process of civic participation and urban regeneration.

[6] The project *"Let's Move Through the City"* is part of the research activities of the Spoke * within the framework of the national project *"Age-It. Ageing Well in an Ageing Society,"* funded by the PNRR – Extended Partnerships measure under Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan.

heterogeneous group of older adults, now widely recognised in the scientific literature as an internally diverse cluster.

The aim of this exploratory study was to investigate the walking mobility choices of older adults. To this end, a qualitative methodology was adopted, based on semi-structured interviews focusing on three thematic cores:

a) the weekly frequency and spatial range of their pedestrian mobility;
b) the motivations underlying such behaviours;
c) the interventions participants considered most effective for improving urban walkability.

The use of a qualitative approach, and in particular the adoption of semi-structured interviews, was a methodological choice well-suited to investigating not only observable behaviours but also the underlying decision-making processes and motivations, without constraining respondents with rigid answer formats. Semi-structured interviews, in fact, combine the flexibility of open dialogue with a structured thematic guide, allowing the researcher to deeply explore the meaning individuals attribute to their own experiences. This tool makes it possible to capture not only explicit data but also latent dimensions, decision-making processes, perceptions, and the value systems that guide actions. In contrast to quantitative approaches, which tend to standardize human experience (Guanhua et al., 2024; Edward et al., 2024), the semi-structured interview values subjectivity, context, and complexity, making it particularly suitable for the nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of social phenomena (Martire, Parra Saiani, Cataldi 2023; Denzin & Lincoln 2018; Silverman 2017; Kvale & Brinkmann 2015)

The combination of the first two factors within the first thematic area (a: weekly frequency and spatial range of pedestrian mobility) allowed for the development of a sort of "mobility index", albeit with the limitations inherent to qualitative data collection. The second thematic core (b: motivations for mobility choices) revealed a fundamental binary distinction between the value of walking in terms of its impact on health and well-being, and as an opportunity for social interaction.

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By mapping the expressed motivations into two predominant models and cross-referencing them with high or low mobility index scores, it was possible to develop a typology of four kinds of urban walkers[7] (Figure 1):

- *The Immobilized*,
- *The Isolated*,
- *The Active*, and
- *The Community Walkers*.

Figure 1 : Walking motivations of senior urban walkers….

Source : Original data processing

The "Immobilized" Type is represented by individuals who attribute a high value to walking in terms of physical well-being but report that they rarely leave their homes. For some of these individuals, the reasons cited are linked to their health status and low level of functional autonomy, but for nearly all of them, contextual factors carry particular weight. Living in peripheral areas, in particular, appears to have significant influence, as it often corresponds to a low-quality environment, poor pavement conditions, inadequate pedestrian crossings, lack of nearby shops and public places for social interaction, which results in rarely frequented streets and an increased

[7] This, like any other typology, is subject to the limitation clearly articulated by Max Weber. *Ideal types* are conceptual constructs developed by the observer to analyze and interpret social reality. They are not accurate descriptions or reproductions of empirical reality, but rather analytical tools that isolate and accentuate certain characteristic features of a phenomenon in order to better understand it. Each ideal type is a "pure" abstraction: a coherent logical model used to compare concrete cases, highlighting similarities, differences, and deviations. Weber conceived them as heuristic devices, useful for navigating social complexity - not as "real types" found in everyday life. The ideal type, therefore, is a methodological construct that allows us to bring order to empirical variety, in order to grasp its meaning and causal relationships.

sense of perceived insecurity. Many among them are women who, even when belonging to younger cohorts, often report feeling hindered not so much by their level of autonomy but by the emptiness of the streets around them and the lack of motivation to go out. Especially noteworthy is the testimony of one interviewee who describes a kind of vicious circle in which she feels entrapped:

> «I should walk, I know it's good for my health. But when I was left alone, I didn't know where to go anymore, and by staying at home my legs and blood pressure got worse. Now I stagger, my legs are swollen, and I really can't go out anymore. Sometimes it feels like suffocating.»
>
> «I live in a neighbourhood that's the typical suburban area. It feels like it belongs to cars. For me, who no longer drives, it means staying home all the time. (…) There are no shops, not even the basic ones nearby. I always have to order groceries by phone, or wait for my son to drive me to the supermarket. (…). It's sad. I know walking is good, but it's sad to walk in a void, with empty streets. Sometimes I go out and walk, but only for my legs. Because the doctor, and even my son, insist.»

The "Isolated" Type includes those who attribute to walking a greater value in terms of social interaction, but whose pedestrian mobility index is very low. As with the previous type, they face a series of environmental obstacles, and the low degree of walkability in their residential areas reflects in a strong sense of loneliness and a high level of relational poverty, limited to little more than contact with immediate family.

> «I'm always home. Where would I go? I know I should walk, but there's nothing here, and the kids out there are scary. I walk a bit in the morning, but you have to be careful not to fall, there are potholes even on the sidewalks. (…) I used to live in Carrassi [a neighborhood in Bari] and I'd go to the market every day, go out, meet people, and the shopkeepers I've known for years. But since I can't live alone anymore, I moved here to my daughter's place. But they have a car and go to work, go out with friends. How can I go out? First of all, there should be more safety and more people on the streets. But here everything is empty, and that makes me feel lonely.»
>
> «The city, the city. Who even sees it anymore. I'm home almost all day. I already have my aches, but where would I go if I went out?! Shops are all closing and the streets are getting more dangerous, especially with all those people

> [referring to individuals from other ethnic backgrounds, mainly North African countries]. They're everywhere, what if they push me? What if they try to steal something? This street used to be different, it was full of life, shops that attracted people. Now they're closing, and the streets are empty. (…) And there's nowhere nearby to meet people. Sometimes I go to church or to a friend's house. (…) My children both live in Milan, and I'm always alone. (…) If there were at least shops nearby, I'd at least chat a bit with others while going for a walk, it's a chance to meet and be with others. Streets could be like living rooms.»

The "Active" Type includes respondents, mainly in the younger age group (65–75), who experience walking as a necessary opportunity for daily well-being. They state that their health conditions benefit from their choice to walk almost daily, not only to carry out errands or commitments but simply "to feel better." They are mostly men and emphasize that living near parks and gardens, or in urban areas with high walkability, makes their choices easier.

> «I walk almost every day. I have to say, I live in a nice area. Maybe it's a bit noisy, but there are shops where I can buy what I need, even a cinema. I could also take the car because my building has a private garage, but I rarely use it since everything I need is nearby. Of course, I take the car for trips or on Saturdays to drive my wife to the shopping center (…) but I prefer walking, it keeps me healthy. Downtown the sidewalks are always well maintained, there's lighting even in the evening, and shops attract people. Even later, the streets around my home are full of people. Walking is easy and important.»
>
> «I live near the villa, and I make sure to go for a walk every day. Staying in shape is important, especially at our age. My wife doesn't want to come with me, partly because she's lazy and partly because she's embarrassed. She stays home, and I do my hour of brisk walking. (…) Living here is definitely convenient. We used to live further out, and it was a bit different there, I had to take the car every day to come here, and it's not the same, and in fact I walked much less.»

Finally, there are the Community walkers. These are individuals with high levels of mobility who, unlike the previous type, view walking primarily as an opportunity for social interaction. For them, walking means visiting small local shops and encountering other people, reaching parks and green

spaces experienced as hubs of social life. Urban and village spaces are seen as occasions for interaction and, for some, as opportunities to counteract the risks of loneliness.

> «Walking is a chance to meet people. I've always lived here and I know many people. Every time I go out, even just for groceries, it takes me at least two hours because I meet one person, then another, and we talk. Luckily, the sidewalks where I live are in good condition, even if they're narrow, but it's still possible to walk. I go out in the evening too, but honestly, once the shops close, I make sure to already be home. (…) From that point on, it's like being in another city. Empty streets are scary, I feel unsafe. So I only go out by car, which is a problem in my town because parking is difficult. We take turns with my friends, one drives and then we all go together. It would be nice to walk even in the evenings like when we were younger. Back then, people would watch you from the windows and that might have felt annoying, but you knew you were protected. It's not like that anymore.»
>
> «In the village, we meet up with friends, mostly women, but also some men, almost every evening and we go for a walk. Sometimes we meet in the square and then wander around the town center. The streets there are well lit, the bars and restaurants stay open late, and it's true that young people make noise, but it's nice. That noise keeps you company and reminds you you're walking among people. (…) And walking you meet, greet, connect. Nowadays with all the tourists, sometimes you smile and they ask you something. Sometimes we don't understand each other, but it's fun anyway.»

Individuals corresponding to the different types of urban walkers show significant differences in their levels of autonomy and physical conditions necessary for walking. Nevertheless, the analysis of the interview transcripts clearly reveals that one important variable is the quality of the local environment. The urban quality of the space closest to the residential area appears to play a crucial role in supporting walking habits and enabling conditions for perceived well-being and social interaction among older adults. Even those who report a high level of autonomy clearly emphasize the importance of living in areas rich in services, starting with local shops and social spaces.

With respect to this issue, the territorial variable, despite the limitations of a purposive qualitative sample, appears to be decisive. For all respondents, in fact, the quality of the urban environment near their home significantly

influences their perceived well-being. This holds true both for those who report living in areas with shops, social spaces, pharmacies, parks, and gardens, and for those who instead complain of living in areas that are poor or completely lacking in such amenities. The former are more likely to have the opportunity to walk daily, limit their use of private vehicles, often abandoned due to difficulties with driving, and experience regular social interaction as part of their overall well-being. The latter, on the other hand, experience the poor quality of their immediate environment as a constraint on social interaction and even on their sense of autonomy, as they become dependent on vehicles and, for some, on the availability of family members or caregivers to accompany them.

The quality of the local environment is closely tied to the walkability of space. Even when proximity services are present, if the physical conditions make walking difficult, these services become what Sen (1992) would call missed opportunities. In the face of poor walkability in urban areas, the city contracts and becomes smaller for older adults, and the right to quality living is effectively denied. In some cases, this has led to a kind of dramatic development: a forced confinement within one's home, exposing individuals to the risk of relational poverty and domestic isolation.

Without claiming generalizability, it is primarily older adults living in the peripheral areas of the city under study who appear most at risk. Villages, on the other hand, according to respondents, still offer at least partially better living conditions and a form of proximity-based sociability supported by neighbourhood communities that help protect the relational quality of life.

Nevertheless, the territorial variable has proven to be complex, cutting across the sample in ways that go well beyond the administrative distinction between town and city. Several interviewees, in fact, reported difficulties in moving freely within their neighbourhood and, in a broader sense, across the urban area, based on a set of complex factors related to both the material and immaterial quality of space, even in smaller towns.

A high degree of importance is attributed to the presence or absence of physical barriers: the quality of sidewalks, ramps and stairways with excessive slopes, uneven surfaces, pedestrian crossings that are too fast (referring here to the short duration of traffic lights regulating pedestrian crossings), poor lighting in public spaces, and the lack of effective signage. The characteristics of infrastructure and street furniture are also fundamental: adequate benches and public restrooms, properly distributed along streets and in squares, and the general care of public spaces, starting with the removal of *incivilities*, which intensify the perception of insecurity.

It is precisely in relation to this last factor that the variable of gender, which until now appeared to be of limited relevance, has proven to be highly significant. Women, regardless of whether their primary motivations for

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walking are health-related or social, tend to walk less. They prefer daytime hours when the streets are more populated, and often avoid walking altogether if they live in peripheral areas. Therefore, while ageing itself imposes various constraints on walkability choices, being an *older woman* amplifies those constraints. Women report concerns about personal safety far more frequently than men. If being elderly is considered a risk factor for everyone, women have shown that they experience urban space with greater difficulty. In some cases, they explicitly state that they avoid going out alone except for short-distance movements during daylight hours. As with younger female cohorts, even for older women the city remains "smaller", and its temporal and spatial boundaries are shaped by a persistent geography of fear (Carrera 2016; 2022; 2024).

Observations on how to ensure this sense of safety are heterogeneous. Some point toward more *securitarian solutions*, such as increased surveillance through cameras and a stronger police presence. Others, by contrast, view the vibrancy and liveliness of streets as essential, promoted through local events, neighbourhood shops, and opportunities for social interaction that bring "many people into the streets and squares."

> «We need police and cameras, more control. Nowadays, no one is safe, anywhere. The police should be ready to intervene. Only then can one really feel protected.»
>
> «I don't need cameras. I feel safe when I'm among people. For instance, during a festival, I, and everyone else, feel relaxed. Sure, you have to watch out for thieves, but that's something different, you're not afraid. The mayor should organize more things like festivals and bring people into the streets.»
>
> «Shops are important. The small ones along the streets. When shops are open, you can walk calmly, they're watching you. Of course, you still have to be careful, but they're there, and there are always people walking. I take advantage of the shops being open to walk and visit friends. But I always go home before closing time, because then it becomes dangerous. Especially for a woman.»
>
> «I no longer feel safe in my town. It wasn't like this before, but now you can be attacked even in broad daylight, and nobody does anything. Some streets are deserted even during the day, and everyone is afraid to go there. Once a week, my son comes and takes me to the shopping mall for a walk. (…) But is it normal that the only places I can go to are either the shopping mall or the hospital, just to get out a little?

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> Everyone knows that being old is hard, and if you live in the suburbs, it's even worse."

The interviews highlight the need for a series of specific material interventions aimed at improving walking conditions. A common theme across all identified walker types is the need for widespread benches throughout the city, as well as accessible public restrooms, ideally indicated on a map, support for local retail activity, and the activation of streets through cultural and social events[8]. In this regard, the role of public administrations is recognized as central: they are called upon to rethink the exceptional nature of festivals and public celebrations, translating them into everyday opportunities, providing space and financial support to local associations.

> "I'm old now [77 years old], and it's not like it used to be when I could walk for kilometres without even getting out of breath. Now I need to sit down, take breaks, and catch my breath. Sometimes I don't go out just because of this, because except for one street, I have nowhere to stop. I have to go into a bar and buy something just to use the restroom, and when I'm alone, it's unpleasant. (…) If there were benches, we could meet up with other friends when the weather is nice. And maybe if there were trees and shade, because here, when it's hot, you just can't stay outside. There are no real parks, and the ones we do have are more concrete than green."
>
> «I'd go out at least during the day if there were more shops near where I live. Even though we're in a small town, we're now overrun by tourists. They buy houses here because they cost less and then leave. And so the locals move away, the historic shops close, and the streets are left empty.»
>
> «Walking is important, but it's not as natural as it seems. It's not like you walk out your front door and just start walking. You have to live in a nice area, the sidewalks must be safe so you don't fall, but above all, you need to feel safe. You need to know that when you go out there are people around, that you can find little shops, that you can meet neighbours and friends. (…) There are a lot of young people in my town who don't know what to do at night or don't know where they can

[8] The *Build a Better Block* project, implemented in Dallas, Texas, temporarily revitalized several deteriorated urban blocks by transforming them into dynamic, commercially active spaces through the installation of urban furniture, the organization of cultural events, and the opening of pop-up storefronts. This approach encouraged foot traffic in the area and stimulated the development of permanent urban regeneration initiatives, demonstrating how small-scale interventions can have a lasting impact on the vitality of public space.

> go. But if small grants were given to associations, even church groups, a lot of things could be done, music, shows, and I'd gladly go out. I'd be with other people, because being at home alone is awful. In my opinion, being alone shortens your life.»

The reflections shared by the elderly interviewees clearly show how much the material quality of urban space affects their well-being and quality of life. This also highlights the potential of tactical urbanism in rethinking the material environment. Small-scale, targeted, and specific interventions can transform the very elements that hinder the use of space, and can positively impact the liveability of such spaces in terms of usability and accessibility.

Tactical urbanism emerges as a strategic approach capable of positively influencing the walkability of urban and peri-urban contexts through rapid, reversible, and low-cost interventions. It allows for the temporary transformation of street spaces into pedestrian or multifunctional areas, enabling the experimentation of new urban configurations. A significant example is the creation of temporary plazas through the repurposing of oversized or underutilized roadway areas, using light interventions such as ground painting, installation of movable furniture, and placement of natural elements. These actions make the city more accessible, increase pedestrian safety, and foster social interaction in public space.

Similarly, the temporary widening of sidewalks, implemented through the technique of *curb extensions*, shortens pedestrian crossing times, increases the visibility of vulnerable users, and contributes to slowing down vehicular traffic. Other examples include the creation of temporary pedestrian paths, known as *pop-up walkways*, which, through the use of light signage and mobile devices, connect previously fragmented urban areas, thereby promoting a more accessible and continuous pedestrian network.

The installation of *parklets*, transforming car parking spaces into small, equipped public areas, offers new opportunities for rest and socialization along walking routes, making walking more comfortable and attractive. Lastly, the integration of *street painting* and urban art enhances the aesthetic value of public space, making the pedestrian experience more enjoyable and inclusive, particularly for the most vulnerable population groups.

In this sense, tactical urbanism proves to be an effective operational tool for promoting more sustainable *slow mobility* and a higher quality of urban life, especially when accompanied by participatory practices.

These interventions can even multiply their value and impact when they result from participatory processes that also include older adults, thus ensuring their full urban subjectivity. One of the strengths of tactical urbanism lies precisely in its capacity to involve the community through public

meetings, workshops, surveys, and inquiries, thereby collectively shaping the intervention plans.

Among the respondents, a widespread desire for participation also emerged; a need to be regarded not merely as recipients, but as actors in urban policy-making.

A particularly illustrative statement was made by one of the interviewees:

> «No one listens to us. No one asks what we need. No one thinks they should. Maybe they still think that being old means being alone, being accompanied by your children, or staying at home. But that's not the case anymore. Maybe once it was, but not anymore. And it's right that it no longer is.»

Despite the limitations of a qualitative study conducted on a purposive but non-representative sample, it is nonetheless interesting to observe how, regardless of age, both individual cultural factors and, above all, contextual factors can significantly influence people's walkability choices. And, since walking represents one of the strategic indicators for assessing quality of life among older adults, it becomes especially evident and important how urban policies and infrastructural decisions are not only capable of affecting levels of walkability, but, through this, also influence the quality of life as it is experienced on a daily basis. In this regard, it is essential to recognize how the characteristics and amenities of the urban space, particularly in terms of its walkability-related functionality, can compensate for differences in individuals' personal resources.

In this sense, the tools offered by tactical urbanism practices can both help create these structural conditions more easily and encourage as well as support the engagement and agency of older adults in their everyday walking practices.

What is explicitly called for is a right to a new third age and a new form of urban protagonism. It is therefore a matter of recognizing and valuing the everyday experience of older people, involving them in the definition of policies that intervene on and within urban space, thus (re)activating their social and political voice.

Concluding Remarks

Urban space planning is a highly political activity, capable of confirming, granting, or denying rights. The *"reflective planner"* (Amendola, 2009), just like the well-prepared and aware administrator (Carrera, 2022c), cannot overlook the recognition of difference and the inherently non-neutral nature of urban policies, which generate very different effects for different types of citizens. This necessitates an approach to territorial management and

governance that is capable of responding to the multiplicity and heterogeneity of needs, requirements, and desires.

It is therefore fundamental that those with technical expertise in urban processes engage in dialogue with those who live in and experience urban space in their daily lives. This awareness has increasingly become a guiding paradigm for planning and governance actions aimed at involving a broad range of individuals, not merely as recipients of decisions, but as active participants in the decision-making process. This marks the fundamental distinction identified by Giancarlo De Carlo (2015) between *"designing for"* and *"designing with"*, which affirms the need for continuous dialogue between urban decision-makers and city dwellers.

However, recognizing the foundational role and centrality of different types of citizens in participatory processes requires the awareness that such participation cannot be improvised, nor can it be assumed that every individual naturally possesses the competence to participate. To avoid becoming mere rhetoric, participation must be supported by the implementation of widespread and continuous *participatory education*, particularly involving citizens who carry diverse perspectives, so that they may acquire the political and cultural tools needed to bring their specific experiences and viewpoints into public debate (Hadley & Belfiore, 2018). Conditions must therefore be created to guarantee the right of every citizen to be heard, legitimizing diverse needs and perspectives (Carrera, 2024).

And if walkability is a fundamental element in the goal of creating more sustainable and inclusive cities, especially for older adults, it is essential to activate structured listening processes, such as distributed and institutionalized civic laboratories[9]. It is therefore essential to develop urban mobility policies that make use of QGIS data and OpenStreetMap-based mapping, in order to ensure the replicability of research and the comparability of results. Equally important, however, are qualitative research approaches that give voice to older citizens and urban residents, allowing not only for their needs to be taken into account, but for these needs to serve as a starting point in guaranteeing high levels of quality of life, also through improved walkability conditions.

Within this theoretical framework, which considers walkability as a key factor in ensuring the right to active ageing and engagement, tactical urbanism represents an opportunity to make urban spaces more responsive and attuned to the needs of older adults. Through flexible and experimental models, it is possible not only to improve pedestrian mobility conditions for elderly citizens, but also to promote a widespread culture of walking. When

[9] A useful foundation can be found in the experience of the *Women's Wise Walkshops (WWW)* Laboratory, which focused specifically on gender but was also extended beyond this dimension, consistently adopting an intersectional approach (Carrera, 2025).

these models are embedded within inclusive participatory pathways, they offer the potential to regenerate the city by placing citizen well-being, needs, and desires at the core, starting with the creation of *age-friendly cities*.

Many examples demonstrate how rapid, low-cost interventions can have an immediate impact on community well-being and serve as effective tools for creating more inclusive, age-friendly urban environments. Indeed, despite their temporary nature, such interventions can lead to permanent transformations. Once tactical solutions are tested and evaluated, cities may choose to institutionalize them as structural interventions, thereby improving the quality of life for older residents in a stable and long-lasting manner.

As previously emphasized, enhancing walkability for older adults makes urban spaces more accessible to all citizens. And while tactical urbanism may present the fundamental limitation of being disconnected from broader, long-term urban planning strategies, this potential fragility can be addressed by embedding such interventions within a wider socio-political and territorial planning framework, one that supports and sustains – also financially – interventions aligned with the vision of local administrations and communities.

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