

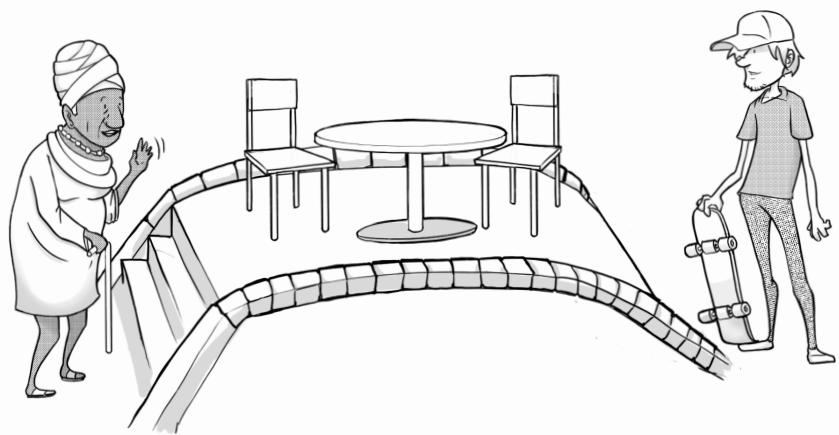
# Superdiversity and aging cities

How can we design livable cities as urban society is becoming older and more diverse?





Findings from a research project of the Department of Social and Cultural Geography,  
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin





Dear readers,

we have prepared this brochure to present findings of the research project "Superdiversity and aging cities" of the Department of Social and Cultural Geography, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.



The interplay of the aging of society and societal diversity was the subject of the research project, which ran from 2017 to 2020.

We learned about the diverse life situations of older people in Berlin, shed light on current challenges, and developed recommendations for action on the basis of interviews with experts from institutions working with seniors, focus groups with older people, and a questionnaire survey with more than 500 respondents. This brochure presents these findings.

Our research questions concern many people's everyday lives in addition to scientific debates. Older people, their families and friends, but also qualified staff working in nursing and with seniors as well as municipal employees are faced with new challenges. We would like our findings to help people understand the current situation, to provide food for thought, and to promote dialogue.

We hope you enjoy reading the brochure!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ilse Helbrecht".

Ilse Helbrecht

Professor of Cultural and Social Geography, Department of Social and Cultural Geography, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

# **Background: Urban society is becoming older and more diverse**

How can cities respond to aging and growing diversity, which are occurring at the same time? How should cities be designed so that older people feel comfortable there? How should cities be designed so that older people feel comfortable there—including older people regardless of their background, sexual orientation, physical limitations, or financial situation?

Disproportionate aging, demographic change, the young elderly—these terms suggest that the age structure of society is changing and that the number of older people is growing compared to younger ones. At the same time, terms like “colorful society,” “multiculti,” or “rainbow society” express a new diversity. Yet how are the two concepts interlinked? Is this a colorful demographic change?

To date, people think about societal aging and growing diversity separately. Older people are stereotypically located on board cruise ships or playing cards at a seniors’ club in the afternoon.

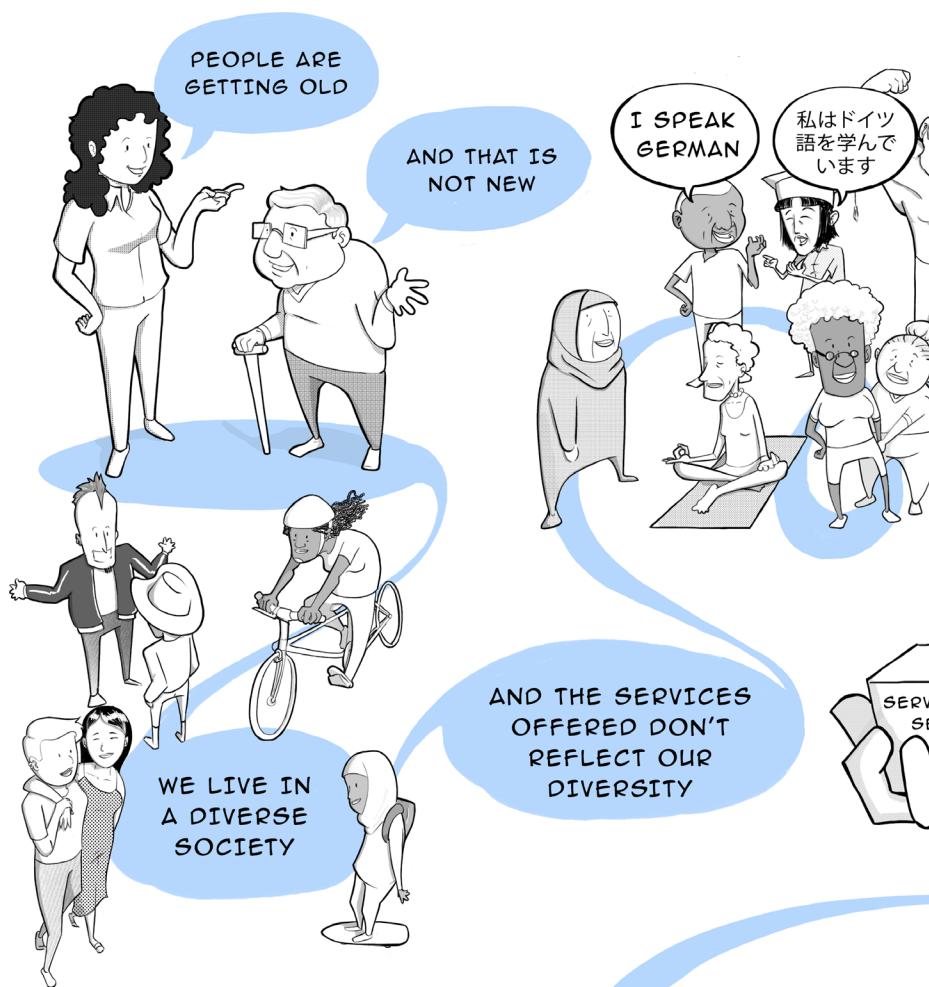
Diversity, in contrast, is mostly associated with younger people: youthful migrants, homosexual couples, and individualists with sophisticated work-life balance concepts.

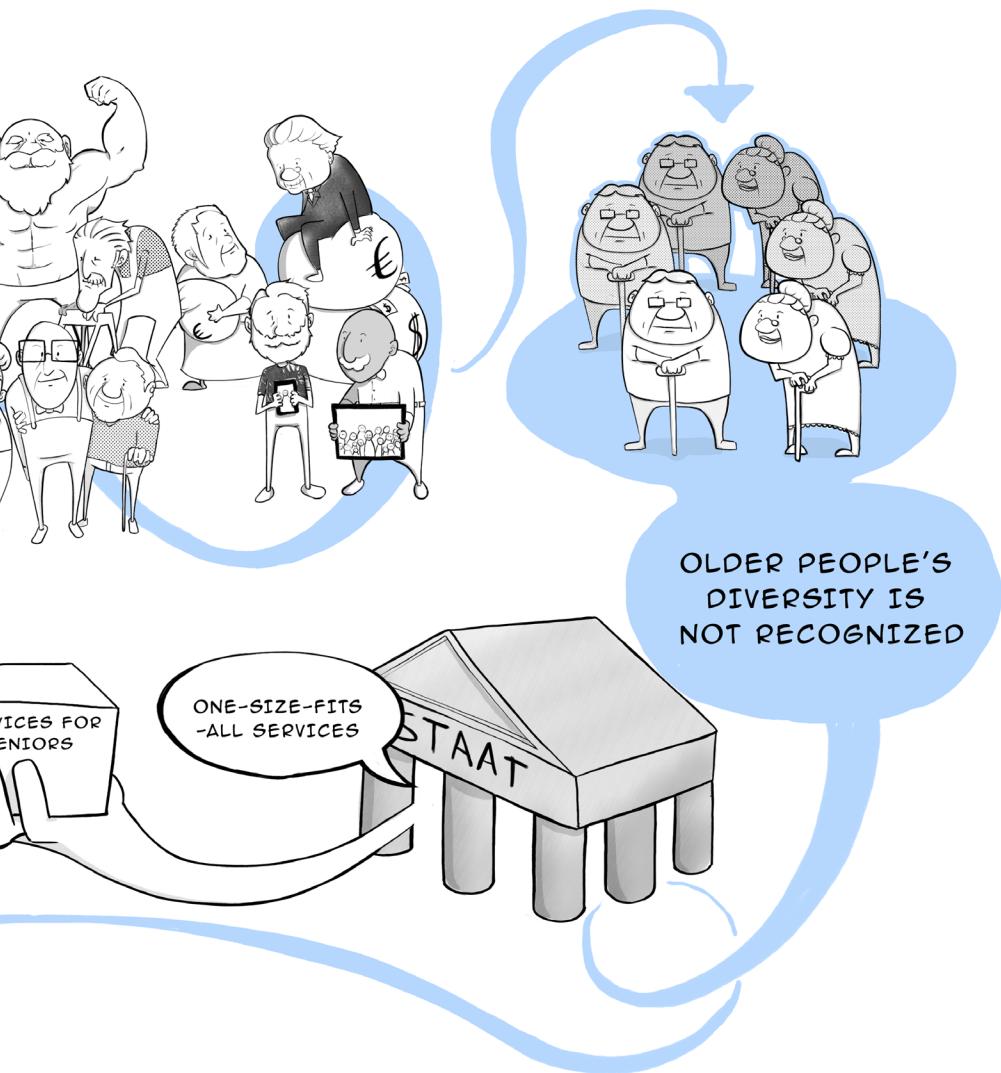
Reality shows, however, that diversity and older age go hand in hand as well: people from many nations spend their sunset years in Germany. More older people today are living openly as same-sex partners. Older people enjoy more freedoms today than ever before and live their lives as they wish. Yet at the same time, inequalities are becoming more severe:

many retirees have trouble making ends meet. Some people are unable to access the support services offered because they lack either language skills or knowledge.

Moreover, loneliness is a growing problem for the older generation.

How can cities respond to this change and enable older people of various backgrounds and in different life situations to participate in society?





HOW SHOULD CITIES BE DESIGNED SO  
THAT OLDER PEOPLE FROM DIFFERENT  
BACKGROUNDSS FEEL COMFORTABLE THERE?

# **Images of old age: Old age means many different things**

Political programs and support activities for older people are mostly oriented toward two stereotypical images of old age. This does not do justice to the large number of different images of old age and overlooks life situations and problems in an aging society. If all older people are to have a place in society, the diversity of models of life in old age should be made visible and taken seriously.

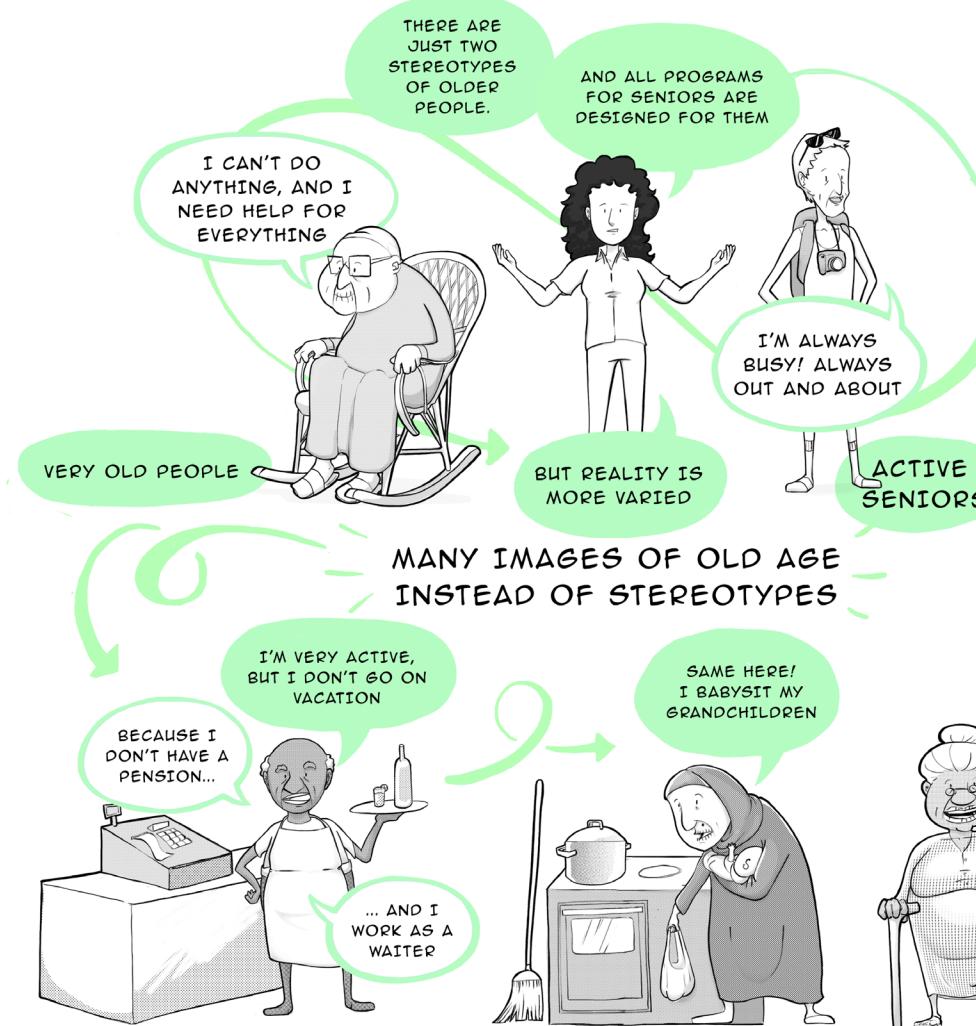
Both the media and political debates tend to focus on two types of older people: the young elderly and the very old. Whereas the young elderly are active, volunteer for various societal causes (or are expected to do so), and enjoy retirement, very old age is characterized by declining physical and mental capabilities, frailty, and need for care.

Most support systems and recreational activities for older people are geared toward these two stereotypes. Little space for alternative ideas remains.

Yet our research shows that older people's own images of old age often lie between these extremes and do not fit either of the stereotypes. That the lines between "active old age" and "very old age" are blurring is apparent from the following roles:

older people with poor financial security certainly do lead active lives. Their dire financial situation compels them to work instead of enjoying their "well-deserved retirement." Older migrants in particular often continue to work in family businesses even in very old age. The role of grandmother represents a different life model. Specifically for older women from the Arab world, this social role may be determinative in old age. For many of them, life takes place mostly within the family and their own homes. In our research, we found a third image of old age embodied by a woman over 90 who needs help with shopping and personal care. Nonetheless, she realizes that a neighbor is having difficulty coping with her partner's death. She reaches out to her neighbor and looks after her, for example by speaking with her on the phone every morning.

These examples show that the ideas about life in old age are as colorful and diverse as the older people themselves.



PEOPLE'S IDEAS  
ABOUT LIFE IN OLD AGE  
ARE AS COLORFUL AND  
DIVERSE

AS THE  
OLDER PEOPLE  
THEMSELVES

... BUT I  
SUPPORT MY  
NEIGHBOR.

I SPEND MOST  
OF MY TIME AT  
HOME AND RELY  
ON HELP FOR  
DAILY NEEDS...

BECAUSE POLITICAL  
PROGRAMS ARE  
LARGELY GUIDED BY TWO  
STEREOTYPES...

...THEY DO NOT ADDRESS  
MANY SENIORS' LIFE  
SITUATIONS AND  
PROBLEMS

# **Social networks: Alternatives to support from one's family in old age**

Increasing numbers of older people do not live near their children and other family members, or they have no family at all. As a result, support from the family is less common in old age. Friends and neighbors can then become an important resource for support in old age. Cities and neighborhoods can actively promote these new opportunities for support by enabling encounters between cultures, social strata, and generations.

The family is considered to be the most important resource for support in old age. In a diverse society, support systems for old age are constantly changing, however: older people without children, older people in same-sex relationships, older people whose children work in other cities and countries, or older migrants whose relatives live abroad—all of them rely on support networks outside the family.

How do these networks function?

Friends become particularly important in older age when it comes to everyday activities and emotional support. But neighbors are important as well. Spatial proximity enables neighbors to interact with one another in a down-to-earth way and do each other favors.

Our research shows that neighbors are especially important for older people who have no family, or no family nearby. In addition, younger and older people can benefit from each other, for example in apartment buildings. What makes neighbors an important resource in support networks is the fact that neighbors are there, that people trust the people next door.

There are ways to support these neighborhood-level networks. When people help each other, they experience this as positive and enriching, and it strengthens their bonds to their neighborhoods. Neighborhood cafés, public libraries, parks with benches, and similar amenities can strengthen neighborly contacts. Designing pleasant residential surroundings can significantly contribute to neighbors compensating for the absence of family and forming new social networks.

THE FAMILY IS  
CONSIDERED TO BE  
THE MOST IMPORTANT  
RESOURCE FOR  
SUPPORT IN OLD AGE

WHAT IF THERE IS  
NO FAMILY?

BECUSE AN OLDER  
PERSON DOES NOT  
HAVE ANY CHILDREN



## NEIGHBORS BECOME FAMILY

I'M HERE  
FOR YOU!

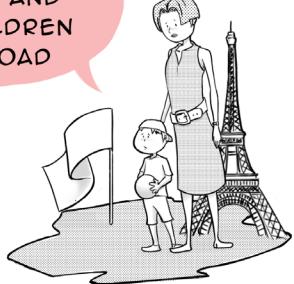
DO YOU NEED  
ANYTHING?

GOOD  
MORNING!

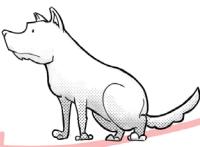
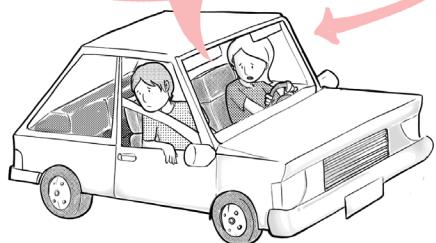
GOOD  
NIGHT!



BECUSE THEIR  
CHILDREN AND  
GRANDCHILDREN  
LIVE ABROAD

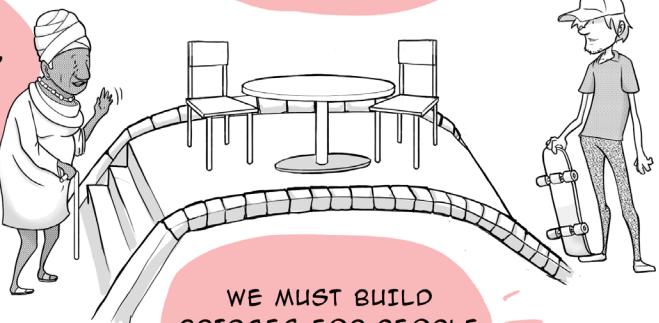


OR THE FAMILIES  
WORK IN A  
DIFFERENT CITY



WE MUST DESIGN  
PLEASANT RESIDENTIAL  
SURROUNDINGS

THAT IS WHY WE MUST  
FACILITATE ENCOUNTERS  
BETWEEN PEOPLE AND  
GENERATIONS



WE MUST BUILD  
BRIDGES FOR PEOPLE  
TO MAKE CONTACTS

# **Institutions: Diversity in old age doesn't exist?**

To date, institutions for supporting and caring for the elderly do little to integrate the multi-layered nature of older people's diversity into their work. This creates problems, for example increasing prejudices, the poor visibility of small groups, or blurring problems at interfaces between groups. Acknowledging the diversity of the older generation is a first step toward doing justice to the needs of older people with different backgrounds.

Different needs arise from older people's diversity. Whether a person is a man or a woman, lives alone or in a same-sex or heterosexual partnership makes a difference. Residency status and cultural lifestyles may also play a role; they affect older migrants' everyday lives in particular.

To date, diversity in old age has hardly been taken up at all in nursing homes or information centers for older people. In any case, these institutions are overburdened, understaffed, and poorly funded. That makes it difficult to engage with individuals' complicated backgrounds. As a result, diversity in old age is mostly conceived of in terms of specific groups. If diversity plays a role at all, institutions focus on individual groups, for example a particular group of migrants or low-income older people.

Concentrating on a particular group without taking other factors into account brings about problems: it may reinforce prejudices, for example if everyone from the Arab world is thought to be Muslim.

In addition, focusing on a large group may make small groups invisible. In our research, respondents described that institutions have indeed realized that older migrants live in Berlin. However, they generally consider them to be Turkish. Older people with African or Polish backgrounds, for example, feel that they are not taken into consideration. Moreover, if people concentrate on one group, they often overlook that problems may arise where groups interface. For instance, differences in education, cultural standards, or financial means play a decisive role across groups in terms of people making livable old age a reality.

THERE ARE  
DIVERSE FORMS  
OF DIVERSITY,  
TOO

I'M FROM  
VIETNAM

I'M FROM  
CHINA

THE INSTITUTIONS ARE  
OVERBURDENED AND  
POORLY FUNDED

ASIANS

ONE-SIZE  
-FITS-ALL  
SERVICES

REINFORCING  
PREJUDICES

I DON'T  
EAT PORK

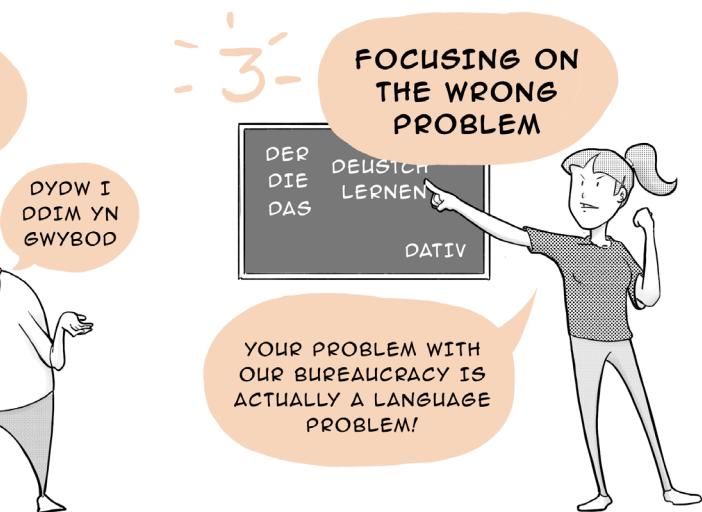
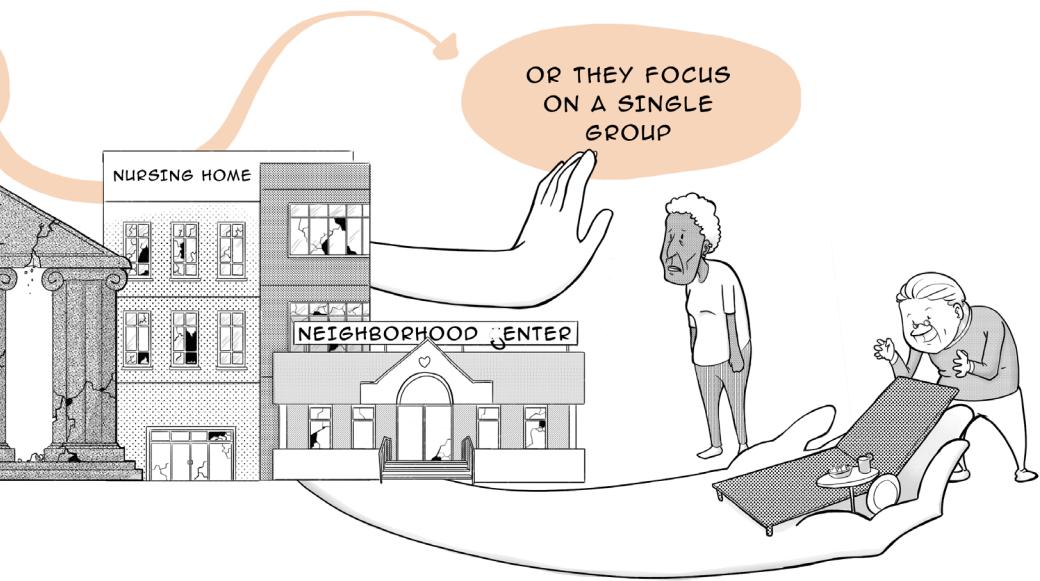
NONSENSE!

SMALL GROUPS  
BECOME EVEN  
LESS VISIBLE

E AGORA,  
O QUE EU  
FAÇO?

WE SPEAK  
GERMAN AND  
ARABIC





# **Housing: Housing shortage, lock-in effect, and desire for community**

One of the reasons for the increasing housing shortage in cities is the demographic transformation. The problems on the housing market make it difficult for older people to relocate, so even if they would like to move to smaller, cheaper apartments, many remain alone in ones that are too big.

Privatization, gentrification, and the influx of new residents to cities have made apartments, and in particular reasonably priced ones, highly sought-after—not least in Berlin. This creates problems for older people, the majority of whom would like to live in their own apartments as long as possible:

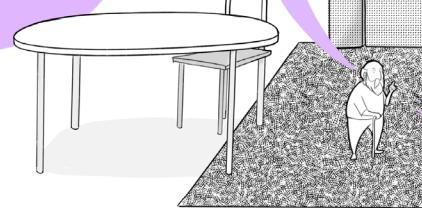
for one thing, many older people live in large apartments they previously shared with their children and partners—even if they live alone today. A large apartment can be a burden for an older person. Relocating is not easy, though, and many older people fear they will not be able to manage the process. Moreover, countless memories have their apartment their home, and leaving home is difficult. As a result, many older people live in apartments that are actually too big for them while young families are desperately looking for larger apartments.

For another, it is difficult for older people to find new housing they can afford. They have usually been living in their apartments for a long time, which is why their rents are relatively reasonable. Renting a smaller apartment, in the best case an accessible one, is often more expensive than remaining in the large apartment. This is called the lock-in effect. Lower-income families then make do, living together in close quarters. In our research, ten percent of respondents lived with their children or grandchildren.

Since hardly anyone desires to age in a retirement home and it has become very seldom for older people to live with their families, they are developing new forms of communal living, for example with friends and acquaintances. Finding suitable housing for such projects is a challenge in light of rising rents and scarce housing, so many innovative ideas for aging in a community cannot be put in practice.

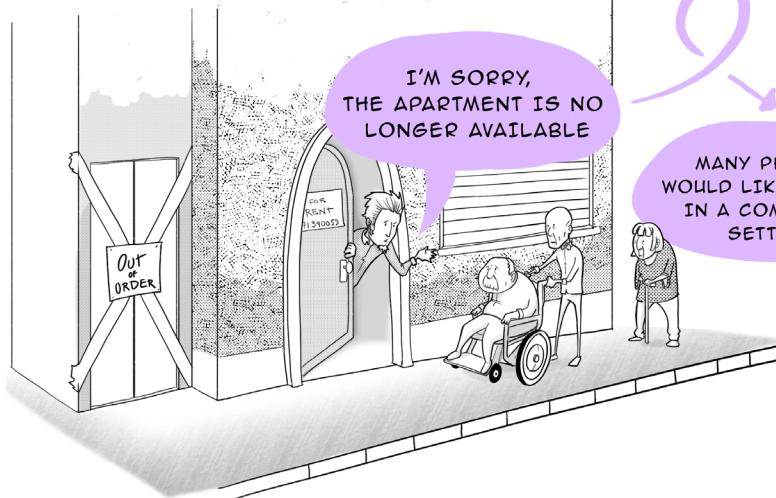


APARTMENTS IN URBAN AREAS ARE SCARCE. THIS CREATES SPECIFIC PROBLEMS FOR OLDER PEOPLE:

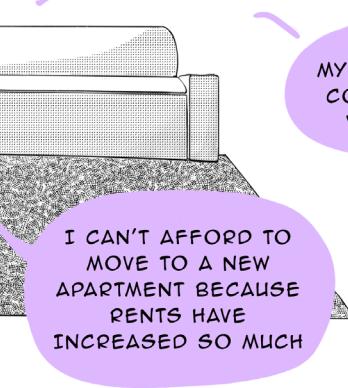


I'VE LIVED HERE ALL MY LIFE

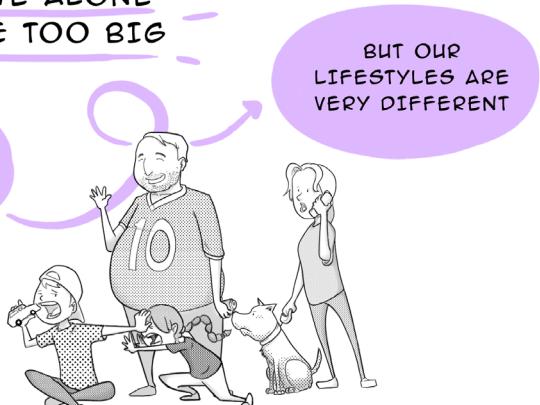
THERE ARE VERY FEW  
ACCESSIBLE APARTMENTS



## MANY OLDER PEOPLE LIVE ALONE IN APARTMENTS THAT ARE TOO BIG



MY CHILDREN  
COULD LIVE  
WITH ME



I CAN'T AFFORD TO  
MOVE TO A NEW  
APARTMENT BECAUSE  
RENTS HAVE  
INCREASED SO MUCH



# **Recommendations for policy and urban planning**

Our research has identified four areas in which cities can respond to older people's increasing diversity:

(1) acknowledgment of older people's multi-layered diversity by the political community, (2) support for alternative forms of housing for the elderly, (3) provision of attractive public spaces and meeting places, (4) understanding digitalization as an opportunity for the elderly, too.

How can cities contribute to enabling a good life in old age for people with different backgrounds and life journeys? Our research comes to four conclusions:

**Firstly**, it is important for the political community and society in general to acknowledge that the older generation is diverse, and in complex and overlapping ways. "The typical older man," "the typical older woman," "typical older migrants," or "typical older people in same-sex partnerships" do not exist; instead, each person features a mix of these characteristics.

The life of an older woman with a Turkish background who has a doctorate and a good income, but no family, is very different from that of a Greek guest worker who worked on an assembly line and now lives with his children and grandchildren. So perhaps the woman with a Turkish background is more similar to that of her colleague who does not have an immigrant background. Urban institutions should keep this diversity in mind when they design their services and support programs.

**Secondly**, cities should support new forms of housing for the elderly. Hardly any seniors would like to live in a retirement home, and it is very rare for families to live under the same roof or in the same neighborhood. Yet many people would like to live in a communal setting as they age. Sharing housing with friends as well as multigenerational houses with people in other phases of life are becoming more popular.

Cities should take up these desires for housing in old age and support them, for example by cooperating with municipal housing companies.

**Thirdly**, it is important for cities to provide public spaces where people can meet. It can no longer be taken for granted today that families take care of their older members. Friends, acquaintances, or neighbors can take the place of families.

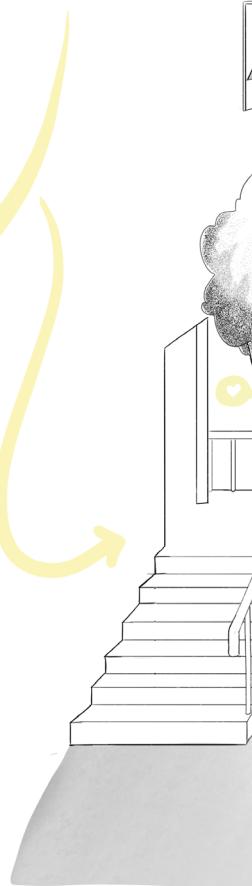
However, it takes both time for these relationships to develop and settings where people can meet in the first place. Places like neighborhood cafés, community gardens, parks, and libraries set the scene for people to encounter and get to know each other.

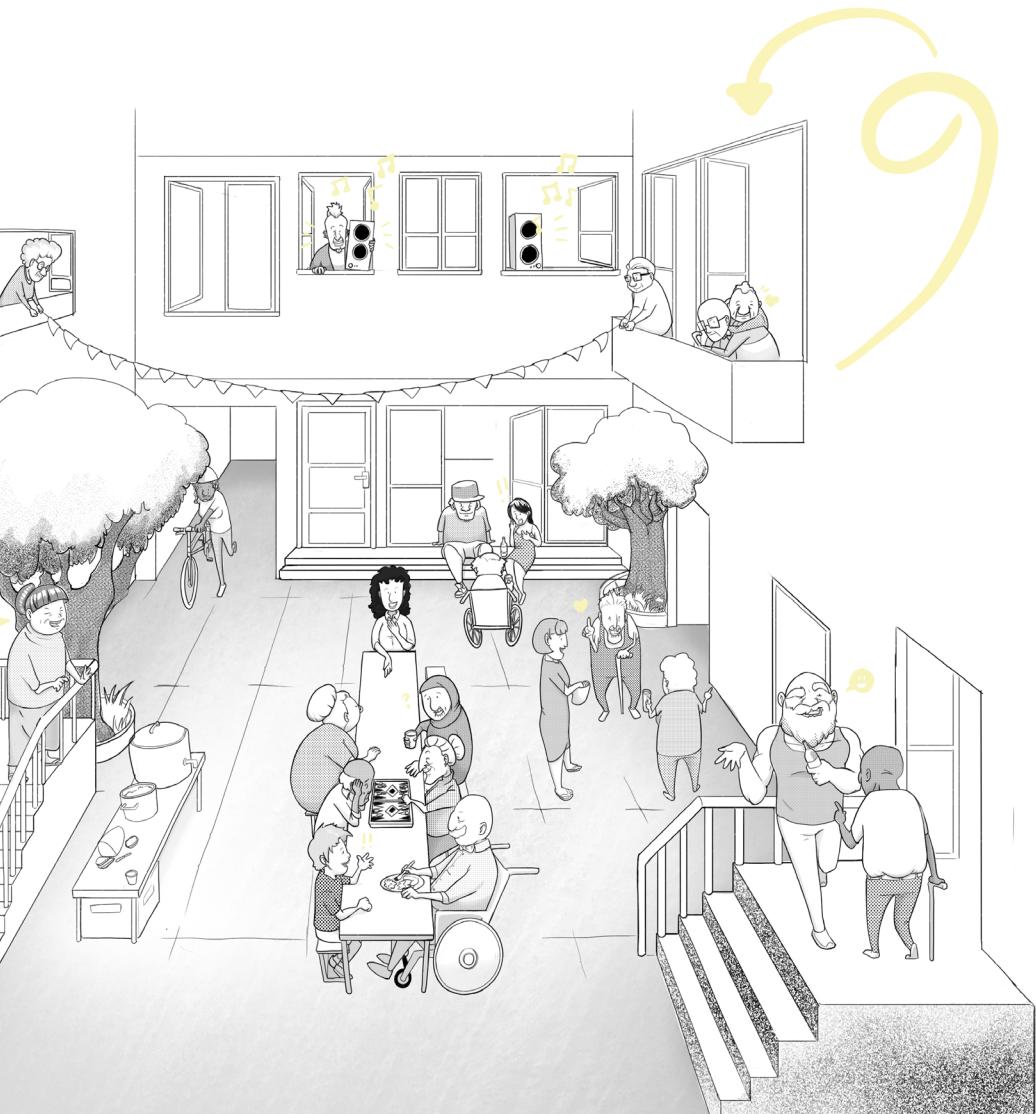
Support systems that can replace family members' care may grow out of these relationships.

**Fourthly**, the opportunities of digitalization should be kept in mind, also with respect to older people. Even today, many older people are proficient at using digital media, and this will become more common in the future. Then, it will be possible to develop social networks and support in old age not only through direct contact in people's neighborhoods, but also through digital platforms that organize neighborhood assistance, walking groups, movie nights, and other neighborhood activities. It may even be easier for some elderly people to initiate contacts from home, for example if they have physical limitations.

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**WIR SIND BUNT,**  
**WIR SIND VIELE**  
**UND DAS IST GUT SO**





Further publications on the research project:

Enssle, F. & Kabisch, N. (2020): Urban green spaces for the social interaction, health and well-being of older people—An integrated view of urban ecosystem services and socio-environmental justice. Environmental Science and Policy (109), 36-44, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2020.04.008>.

Enssle, F. & Helbrecht, I. (2020): Understanding diversity in later life through images of old age. Ageing & Society, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X20000379>.

Haacke, H. C., Enssle, F., Haase, D., Helbrecht, I., & Lakes, T. (2019). Why Do(n't) People Move When They Get Older? Estimating the Willingness to Relocate in Diverse Ageing Cities. Urban Planning, 4(2), 53-69. <https://doi.org/10.18452/20097>

Enssle, F. ,& Helbrecht, I. (2018). Ungleichheit, Intersektionalität und Alter(n)—für eine räumliche Methodologie in der Ungleichheitsforschung. Geographica Helvetica, 73(3), 227-239. <https://doi.org/10.5194/gh-73-227-2018>.

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