

Residential Settings: Effects of Home and Neighborhood on the Quality of Life for Old People

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ABSTRACT.—The author discusses the role of home and neighborhood in the lives of old people and explores the impact of the physical and social organization of these spaces on an old person's perception of his immediate environment and his subsequent activity patterns. Home and neighborhood reinforce an old person's sense of identity and mediate between the old person and the larger society. Information about the meaning of home and neighborhood in the lives of old people contributes to the data available to those making the decisions that affect the distribution of social and physical resources in our cities.

THE ROLES OF HOME and neighborhood in the lives of people 65 years or older were studied in two very different urban environments in Syracuse, New York. The two environments will be called *Inner City* and *Northside*. The discussion is based on 60 interviews of approximately 2 hours length and work throughout the past 2 years with an old-people's advocacy group.

PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY AREAS

The Inner-City study area, historically a working-class neighborhood, is located close to the high-rent central business district, near the transportation hub of Syracuse. The Inner City is heterogeneous in character, with bars, restaurants, a large number of garage and collision-repair shops, and small corner grocery and variety stores (fig. 1). Many of the garage and collision repair shops are tucked away in the backyards of old houses. In addition to the small corner grocery stores, two large supermarkets are located at opposite ends of the area. A number of unkempt lots scattered throughout the area have become graveyards for wrecked cars and discarded appliances. Large industrial structures are located close to a variety of housing — small

workingmen's cottages, tenement buildings, large single-family homes converted to apartments or boarding houses, and a low-income housing project.

The Northside area is a residential area located on the periphery of the city close to suburban shopping centers. It is a homogeneous residential area characterized by small single-family frame homes surrounded by spacious yards meticulously manicured (fig. 2). The homes are located on quiet streets off two major urban arteries, which provide easy access to other sections of the city. In addition, there are two local shopping centers.

A demographic profile of the Inner City and Northside study areas is summarized below:

- The mean age (72 years) is the same in both areas.
- The ethnic character of the Northside is predominantly German, with a considerable number of Italian and Irish families. Within the Inner City the sample is ethnically more mixed, with no dominant ethnic group.
- Catholicism is the preponderant religion of those in the total sample.
- Most of those residing on the Northside live with their spouses. Most of those in the Inner City are widowed.

Figure 1.—Map of Inner City land use.

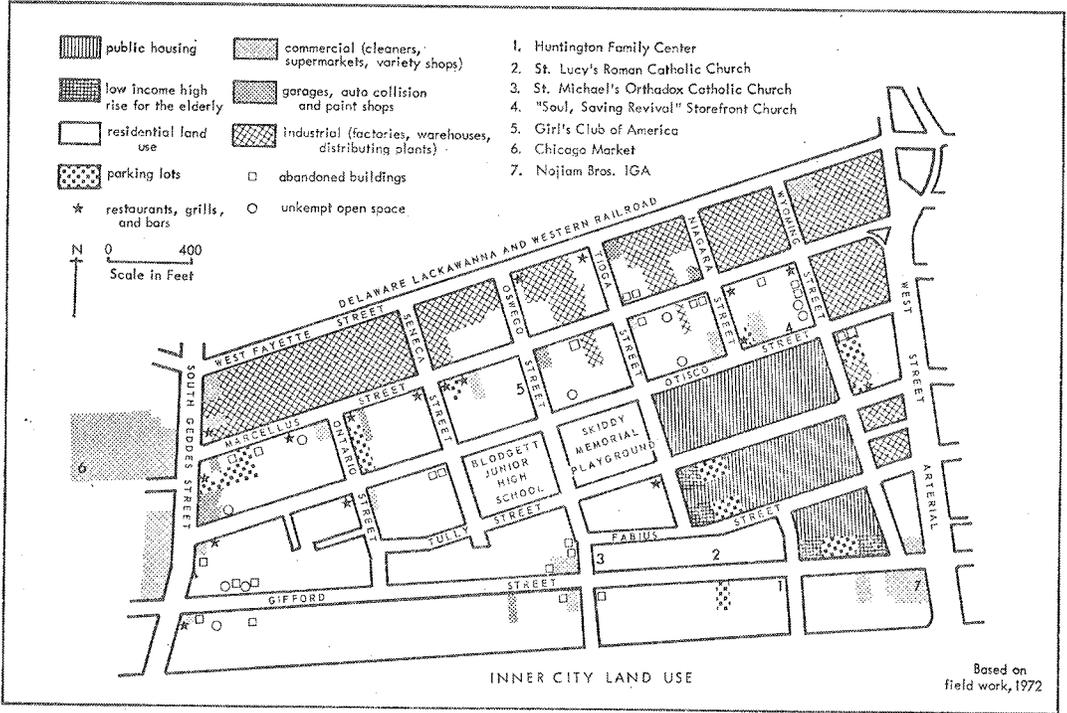
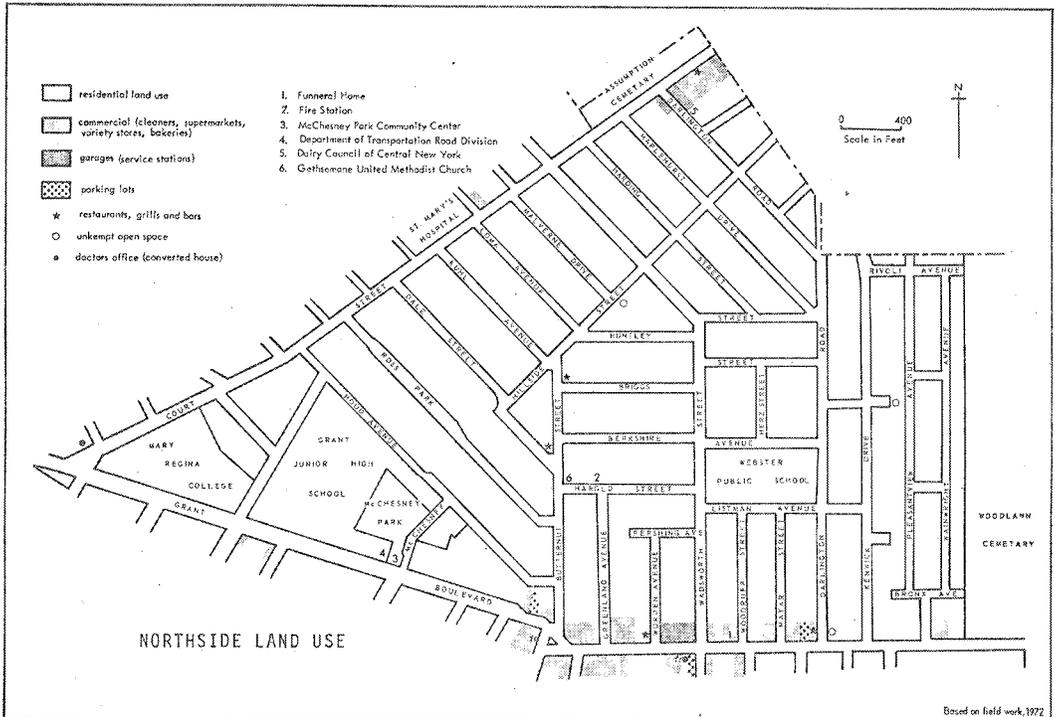


Figure 2.—Map of Northside land use.



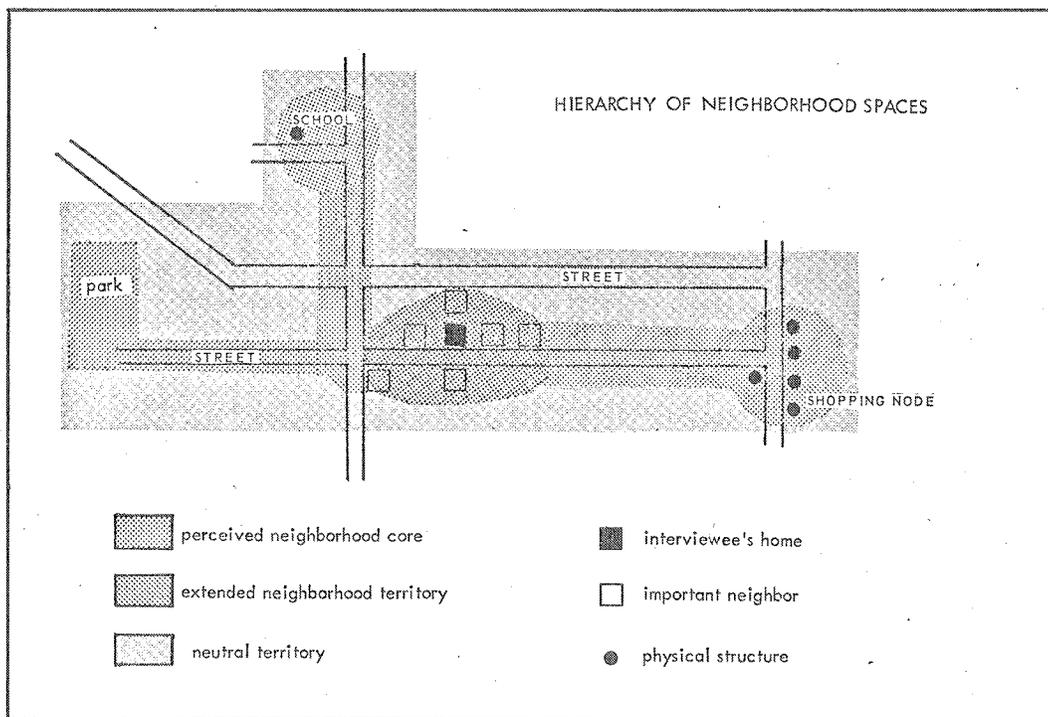
- Far more old people on the Northside have children than those living in the Inner City.
- More Inner City residents have physical disabilities.
- Years of schooling tend to be greater on the Northside, where approximately half of the residents have attended high school.
- Men in the sample population are retired blue collar workers. Most of the women in both areas who worked did so out of economic necessity.
- Residents of the two areas differed in financial status. Eighty percent of the Inner City elderly reported incomes below \$3,000 as compared to 28 percent for the Northside. Most of those with incomes below \$3,000 were single or widowed, and almost all of them were women. Most individuals in this income category have an annual income of approximately \$1,500.

CONCEPTS OF NEIGHBORHOOD SPACE

The concept of neighborhood space is composed of two inherent ideas: proximate physical space and prescribed social interaction. An impression of the meaning of neighborhood to older respondents emerged from my interviews, the informal discussion, and field observations. The elderly perceived their neighborhood in terms of a hierarchy of spaces: home space, neighborhood core, extended neighborhood territory, and neutral territory on the periphery of the neighborhood (fig. 3). The concept of neighborhood is idiosyncratic in that each person has a different perception of his neighborhood space. Most often neighborhood space is perceived as both face sides of an average city block. Social communication and interaction occur in the neighborhood core that is close to the home.

In single-family residential sections

Figure 3.—Hierarchy of neighborhood spaces.



such as the Northside, the neighborhood core incorporates the people living next door, those directly across the street, and perhaps a few residing several houses away on the same street. Where fences and trees do not inhibit interaction with neighbors on the border of one's own backyard, this backyard territory is perceived as part of the neighborhood core. Services such as schools that the elderly's children attended, churches, small grocery stores, restaurants, and variety shops are encompassed in the extended neighborhood territory. The older person reaches these facilities by traversing a path from his home space through familiar and friendly territory to his place of destination. The elderly individual may stroll with confidence and ease both through his extended neighborhood territory and the neutral territory on the periphery of his neighborhood.

Similar concepts describe neighborhood space in the Inner City. Here factories, warehouses, parking lots, and public housing are interspersed throughout the environment. Usually these structures are not considered a part of an individual's neighborhood. For example, a number of individuals excluded from their perception of neighborhood those factories located across the street from their homes.

The presence of age-segregated high-rise housing in the Inner City makes analysis of this area complex. The elderly in public housing tend to define their neighborhood in terms of their building. Their home space is the apartment, and their neighborhood core consists mainly of those apartments on the same floor and the common lounge. An elderly woman suggested that the building is a complete spatially contained environment where the elderly "are well taken care of . . . in the building we have everything."

The interviews suggested a number of reasons for this definition. Many of those in the public housing were new to

the area and were uncomfortable outside the building. Age-segregated housing provides a multiplicity of services from laundry machines, Wednesday night bingo, to across-the-hall neighbors. This has made interaction with the neighborhood outside the building unnecessary. In addition, a number of those in the housing have poor health and were classified as severely restricted or housebound. Their limited mobility prescribes that their domain of interaction be inside the building.

HOME SPACE

Home space is an individual's personal territory. It is a bounded space, a place of privacy, a place to be oneself, a place where an individual can imprint his life experience and regulate his social interaction. It is that place where memory, special objects, and loved ones are physically or at least psychologically near.

Older people on the Northside were proud of their homes and wished to remain in them. The family throughout time embellishes the home with photographs, handicrafts, and other meaningful objects. Having a place where one's children and grandchildren can return provides some incentive to continue residing in the family home. Seventy-seven percent of the Northside respondents were satisfied with the present design of their home space. The only criticism articulated was a desire that everything be located on one level. As a person gets older, it becomes more difficult to climb up or down stairs. Although some believed that their home is too large for their current needs, others have used this space for their hobbies.

Work in gardens keeps older people outside and occupies much of their leisure time. Gardening also has a social dimension. While working in their gardens, people see their neighbors and can converse with them without being obligated to entertain them.

Only 21 percent of the Inner City respondents own their homes. Comments from this group suggested that they value their home space — the privacy, the garden — in the same manner as those on the Northside. However, notably absent from their remarks is the desire to maintain the home to accommodate family visits. An interview with a widow who lives alone illustrated the complexity of home ownership and home space in the Inner City. She had just sold her home, a large structure the front half of which is a vacant store front. This structure is a remnant of past days, where she, together with her now deceased husband, operated a small variety store. Her meticulously cared for apartment is in the back of the building. She talks freely about her reasons for selling and her present apprehensions. Her annual income of \$2,500 left little money for taxes and the cost of house maintenance. Moreover, she describes her physical condition as “unsteady . . . I seem to want to do nothing . . . I have to expect this because of old age . . . it’s hard for me to understand for I used to work so hard . . . I had such ambition.” She stated her fears: “I dread looking for a new apartment . . . here is so near the drugstore and grocery store . . . I am afraid to move because I leave my memories . . .”

Her home, along with that of many others, is an artifact that symbolizes the link between present and past time and experience. Although most respondents want to remain in their own homes as long as possible, there is a threshold when they can no longer meet the demands resulting from diminishing financial and physical resources. At this point, the older person must look for a new residence to transform into a home.

Though most (79 percent) of the Inner City elderly are renters, they take pride in maintaining and organizing their apartments to express their own personalities. Financial limitations have restricted their housing choice to the

Inner City. Nonetheless the interviewees, both in the neighborhood and in the age-segregated housing, cherish the privacy offered by their own apartments or home space. Many of the Inner City residents mentioned the lack of an outside space to garden or sit out in and talk with their neighbors.

PERCEPTIONS OF NEIGHBORHOODS BY OLD RESIDENTS

On the Northside, the general consensus was that the neighborhood was ideal for senior citizens. It is conveniently located, and small stores are within easy walking distance. In addition, it is near a large suburban shopping center. The response of one elderly couple describes the sentiments of many Northside residents. It is a “good place to live, quiet and clean with large lawns for garden work that appeals to senior citizens.”

In the Inner City, the sentiments expressed were, most often, the antithesis of those expressed on the Northside. When asked if this neighborhood was a good place for senior citizens to live, one elderly man’s simple statement, “No, it’s not good for old people . . . it is dirty, noisy, and dangerous,” reflects the thoughts of many. While they may not like their neighborhood, the majority find it conveniently located with easy access to basic services such as dry-cleaning, grocery and variety stores, banks, and a post office.

A crucial component of the elderly’s relationship to their neighborhood is their perception of their environment, which translates into both constraints and opportunities that influence the quality of their life. Forty-three percent of the Northside’s interviewees and 83 percent of the Inner City’s were afraid to leave their homes after dark. Regardless of area, single and widowed respondents were not at all inclined to be outside after dark.

Very often the residents of the Northside felt insecure about activities that

removed them from their homes at night, although few could cite any actual incident that had occurred within their neighborhood. There were those on the Northside who perceived the situation as more dangerous. One widow had so internalized her fear that she does not "dare sit out on the porch at night . . . I bolt the attic door and basement door at night . . . I am all closed up tight and don't even look out." There is little doubt that the mass media have increased the awareness of the Northside elderly concerning their personal vulnerability to the point where they, particularly widows, have altered both their perception of their environment and their behavior patterns.

The unequivocal response of the Inner City elderly was simply expressed by the statement, "You don't dare go out at night." Regret about this constraint was accompanied by the concession that in this neighborhood "years ago it was never like this — people could walk anywhere." Many of the elderly, through their neighborhood acquaintanceship networks, know of individuals who have been the victim of robberies, muggings, and rape. The presence of personal violence in their experiential world, along with the mass media emphasis on violence, engender and maintain a level of fear that ultimately inhibits any interaction outside of the home after dark.

But mobility at night is not the only time caution is exercised. The elderly, particularly women, are very concerned about themselves as easy daytime targets for purse-snatchers. A few had decided not to carry a purse when going out. Data from the Syracuse Police Department illustrating the distribution of burglaries, robberies, and public intoxication arrests in Syracuse suggest that the fears of Inner City residents are well founded.

In the Inner City, competition with other groups for the use of spaces and paths has usually meant that the elderly have retreated. For example, the loca-

tion of the public housing for the elderly next to public housing for low-income families places two different groups — white elderly and black children — in spatial proximity. Competition for the use of public spaces, in this case sidewalks, ensues. As one elderly man exclaimed, "You can't walk around here; and if you try, the next thing that happens, some kid knocks you over with his bike." He, along with many others, moves slowly with care and is unable to easily get out of the way of a rapidly approaching bicycle.

The situation is exacerbated by verbal abuse from children and teenagers. Old people are the victims of name-calling and other verbal insults. Moreover, fear that the verbal assault may culminate in a physical act inhibits many elderly from criticizing or chastising the youth. They are aware that others, particularly old people, have been the victims of malicious damage such as rocks being thrown through windows.

All the public housing residents appreciate the material comforts and security afforded by residence in the building. Neat, efficient apartments, a garbage incinerator chute on each floor, and laundry facilities in the basement were the most popular benefits lauded. While proudly showing her apartment, one woman exclaimed "There are no leaks or roaches here . . . I waited three years to get an apartment . . . where else could I go? Where could I get an apartment like this for sixty-five dollars a month . . . it has a bathroom, good heat, three clothes presses."

Everyone was aware they could not possibly purchase similar accommodations on the open housing market. Though none wished to leave the housing, occasionally residents expressed a desire to relocate to newly constructed housing in more familiar neighborhoods.

It is not to be construed from these comments that public housing is the best solution to the housing needs of older people. Quite to the contrary, the move

to public housing was the only alternative for these elderly. Once in the housing, a new definition of self and a reconstitution of one's social world occurs. It is my impression that the older people were grateful to have decent housing at a cost of 25 percent of their monthly income. This housing was viewed by the old respondents as a municipal gift rather than a right.

However, there is a pervasive fear that clouds life in the public housing. Because many residents lacked information about their rights as tenants in public housing, they feared that future investigations into their personal finances might lead to an increase in rent or a termination of lease. People were worried about fluctuating income ceilings and their possible effect on them. Furthermore, they were cautious in their criticism of housing authority policies, as few knew what the repercussion might be. No one mentioned the existence of any mechanism for tenants to discuss their problems with the housing officials. As one woman concluded, "the housing authority don't care what we want."

Northside residents were more satisfied with the noise level and cleanliness and condition of sidewalks than were Inner City residents (table I).

Noise pollution means that those in

the Inner City awake early in the morning to the noise of food processors dispatching their trucks. Throughout the day and night, traffic noise from horns, screeching tires, and big trucks is omnipresent, because streets in this area are principal routes for the dispersion of goods throughout the city. The local bars are social nodes for others during the night hours; but for the elderly, the noise and general rowdiness prevent sleep and increase insecurity.

Environmental cleanliness distinguishes the Northside. A major disadvantage of the Inner City's mixed land use was illustrated by one man's statement: "Papers blow into my yard from the magazine plant across the street, and by the time I pick them up the yard is covered again." For the elderly, the decline in cleanliness and corresponding visual blight is shown not only by unkempt yards, unpainted houses, junk cars, and appliances, but also by garbage and containers strewn along the sidewalks.

The elderly are one of the few groups in our automobile society that use and need sidewalks. On a pleasant day, sidewalks are the paths accommodating those walking for pleasure and exercise. Furthermore, the majority of the elderly use public transportation, and to do so must use sidewalks to get to a bus stop.

Table I.—Satisfaction with neighborhood environmental quality

Characteristics	Northside			Inner City			** a
	n*	Satisfied		n	Satisfied		
	No.	No.	Pct.	No.	No.	Pct.	
Clean air	30	19	63.3	30	18	60.0	0.60
Number of trees	30	23	76.7	30	20	66.7	.20
Open space	30	27	90.0	30	22	73.3	.20
Curb height	26	22	84.6	30	20	66.7	.40
Noise level	30	17	56.7	30	8	26.7	.05
Snow shoveled	29	9	31.0	30	10	31.3	.95
Cleanliness	30	27	90.0	30	16	53.5	.01
Bus stop location	30	26	86.7	30	21	70.0	.02
Sidewalk condition	28	14	50.0	30	7	23.3	.10

*Number of people responding to each question.

**The chi square coefficient is used to determine whether the difference between areas was statistically significant. The 0.05 level was used to determine statistical significance.

Consequently, when sidewalks are missing, uneven, and severely cracked, older people have difficulty.

On the Northside, the major source of dissatisfaction was the absence of sidewalks along many of blocks, which forces people to fend for themselves on the roads. On the other hand, complaints from residents of the Inner City focused on deteriorating sidewalks. A number of individuals, afraid they might fall, refused to go out walking.

Poor sidewalk maintenance is worse in the winter. Only one-third of the interviewees were satisfied with snow removal from sidewalks in their neighborhoods. Most felt that they had no safe place to walk and often found themselves remaining indoors until some of the snow melted. For many, the winter means long and lonely days stretching into lonelier nights. Most important, access to public transportation becomes difficult. The snow removed from the streets is piled on the street corners, where it freezes into huge icy mounds that people must crawl over to reach the bus.

The majority of interviewees in both areas were satisfied with the location of bus stops. However, those on the Northside were more satisfied than those in the Inner City. Research in each area indicated that bus stops are distributed with regularity throughout each area. The disparity in response might be explained partly by the concept of psychological distance. The greater vulnerability of the elderly in the Inner City engenders anxiety and alters an individual's perception of the distance to the bus stop.

In both areas, the respondents did not say that they should have a right to clean air, trees, and open space. The concept of a public right to basic physical amenities is subordinated to the American value that promotes the notion that access to these amenities is assured through private ownership. Those without sufficient resources to

purchase access to these basic physical amenities must go without.

NEIGHBORING

Neighboring has been broadly defined "as any interaction with people defined as neighbors". Those interviewed had no difficulty distinguishing between neighbors and family or friends. While neighbors can become friends or family can be neighbors, the spatially controlled term neighbor is applied to anyone who shares an individual's immediate urban space. In both the Northside and Inner City, almost everyone chats informally with neighbors; however, few attend neighborhood meetings or go to dinner or a movie with a neighbor. A considerable number of Northside elderly chat over coffee in a neighbor's home, but few engage in this social activity in the Inner City. When asked if they generally know when their neighbors are home, 93 percent of those on the Northside said yes, compared to 37 percent in the Inner City. Most important, all Northside residents and 77 percent of the Inner City elderly feel that they could depend on their neighbors for help. During an emergency their neighbors would call a doctor, their children, an ambulance, or take them to a hospital. No one expects a neighbor to help care for them during an illness.

On the Northside, all entered the area as home owners, and it was understood that all should maintain their homes and yards to prevent depreciation in property values. Over the years, this commitment has worked to minimize hostilities due to proximity. The subtle consensus that a good neighbor is one who maintains his property puts pressure on all neighbors to fulfill this unwritten obligation. A sense of belonging reinforces those who fulfill this concept of good neighbor.

This philosophy is complemented by courteous interaction where "neighbors keep track of one another . . . when you need them, they are there." Yet time changes these patterns. According to an

old woman, most of the elderly on her block have died or moved to special facilities. Their homes have been purchased by younger families who "are less friendly so I stay to myself". Furthermore, Northside neighboring has a seasonal dimension. People see and chat with their neighbors more often during the summer months, which brings people outside into their gardens.

The character of the Inner City is different from that of the Northside. As a result, it is not surprising that there are different patterns of neighboring. The transience of a renter population and the morphology of this urban area discourage those aspects of neighboring engendered by familiarity such as chatting with a neighbor in his home, knowing if your neighbor is home, and feeling you can rely on your neighbor for help.

A number of processes were operating that had contributed to the breakdown of neighborliness and neighborhood discipline. Most of the elderly considered the neighborhood to be in a state of decline from its previous status as a prosperous working class area. An elderly widow mentioned that across the street she no longer "knows anyone because people move in and out and no one takes care of the property". "The neighborhood is becoming run down", according to one elderly gentleman, since not only were "houses deteriorating" but also "many places were closed down — small businesses come and go and companies located next to the area were closed". Other racial groups are locating in the area, particularly Blacks, Puerto Ricans, and native Americans. The influx of these new neighbors has created hostility and fear.

In many cases, neighboring in the Inner City is in the form of a service where those less able are helped to get to basic services such as grocery stores. Twenty-eight percent of the Inner City elderly are completely dependent on neighbors and friends for assistance during an illness. Neighbors perform

tasks such as reading mail to the blind or doing laundry for someone ill. Occasionally, expenses are shared. For example, a gentleman wanted to read both Syracuse daily newspapers but could afford only one of them; so he purchases one, his neighbor the other, and they exchange them.

All of the elderly living in the age-segregated public housing said that they could depend on their neighbors for help. For those in public housing this sentiment engendered a sense of security — there was someone to help them if they needed it. If an individual does not come to pick up his mail or visit the common lounge, someone will eventually check up on him. Interaction with one's neighbors occurs at important nodes throughout the building, particularly at the mail boxes, floor incinerator chutes, and lounge, and on the benches outside the front door. It was explained that people usually did not interrupt individuals in their apartments since they may be resting or eating, or just want to be alone. However, there are some who resent the omnipresent gossip network and consequently have curtailed their participation in any activities within the building.

CONCLUSION

Home and neighborhood are important spaces to older people since they reinforce one's sense of identity and mediate between the old person and the larger society. Home and neighborhood also help create continuity and coherence within the self.

However, the ultimate condition of old people in our society has little to do with their immediate physical and social space. Old people are the victims of a socioeconomic system that has no place for them. They no longer participate in the work force and consequently are not rewarded with material benefits. They are beyond the arbitrarily defined working years and are thought to be of little economic value and, as a result, of little

social value. A social mythology cultivating youthfulness and deploring aging allows Americans to ignore those who have contributed to the productivity of this nation throughout their working lives. Reduced to poverty, old people have no resources to explore opportu-

ities and choose alternatives that would facilitate their adjustment to old age. It is difficult for most to purchase the necessities of life such as adequate food, clothing, shelter, health care, transportation, and recreation.
