Reorienting Vitality for Ageing Cities

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Reorienting Vitality for Ageing Cities

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Abstract

Measures of urban vitality as criteria for evaluating cities have limits when considering the lives of older citizens. Preference for 'activity' as a measure of vitality, increasingly through intensity of technology use, can be insensitive to both the slowing of certain activities or abilities with age, and neglect the ways in which technology, space, and agency co-constitute the experience of ageing. There is also insufficient attention among scholars of urban vitality on how vitality might ignore inequality and democracy. This paper will demonstrate how the concept of vitality, enhanced by both the humanism of critical gerontology and post-humanist perspective, can curtail the instrumental uses of vitality in evaluating cites and redeploy the concept to ensure spatial justice and democracy.

Introduction

The proportion of older people in the world is increasing at an alarming pace (World Health Organization, 2019; United Nations, 2019) with a significant proportion of these older persons living in cities (WHO, 2007a). Rapid urbanization coupled with demographic ageing has led multi-lateral organizations, national governments and private sector actors to influence urban policy in the interests of older residents of cities (WHO, 2007a, 2007b, 2018). An entrenched fact of urban policymaking has been the dominance of market-driven paradigms, which adversely and disproportionately impacts the lives of older persons (Estes, 2014; Polivka & Luo 2019; Lolich, 2019; Zhu & Zhu, 2021). However, these approaches are often fraught and not as inclusive as they initially appear. This paper evaluates whether the 'vital cities' discourse can meaningfully defend the interests of older persons in cities where market interests are prioritized.

Urban vitality is defined as a quality that "animates certain city areas, almost continuously" (Maas, 1984, p. 19). A city is vital to "the extent to which a place feels alive or lively" (Montgomery, 1998, p. 97). The vitality of cities is assumed to "equate to activity" and is identified with "conviviality and liveliness, [and] with animated streets and spaces" (Adams and Tiesdell, 2007, p. 672).

Using the lenses of critical gerontology and post-humanism (Baars and Phillipson, 2013; Andrews and Duff, 2019) the paper reveals three limitations in this use—(1) It relies on measurements of activity solely through intensity of technology use provides an incomplete, overly consumerist, and reductionist picture that neglects the co-constitution of technology, space and the experiences of ageing. (2) Also, vitality is

constrained by the inherent neglect of inequality in the Jacobsian perspective (Zukin, 2009). We further argue (3) the more recent detachment of vitality from its roots in democratic institutions (Jacobs, 1961; Schubert, 2019) has reduced it to a stripped-down version of vibrant (economic) activity, including in undemocratic political settings (see for example Long and Huang, 2019; Zhang et al, 2021; Hui et al., 2021).

The associations of vitality with a reductionist understanding of old age combined with its neglect of inequality and its affiliation with authoritarian governance portends a fraught future for older persons—particularly for those belonging to minorities. Unequal urban spaces are steadily ageing demographically and are also sites for the acceleration of inequalities and democratic backsliding (Barnett, 2014; Haggard and Kaufman, 2021; O'Dwyer and Stenberg, 2021). The paper argues for the broadening of vitality measures beyond the intensity of technology use, and adding new measures such as spatial equality and possibilities of democratic protests in order to reclaim vitality and ensure the inclusion of older persons' interests.

Before delving into a discussion on vitality, this paper will discuss the link between ageing and inequality, as well as the critical gerontologists and post-humanist paradigms.

Spatial Inequalities and Ageing

Neoliberalism is "a politically guided intensification of market rule and commodification" (Brenner, Peck, and Theodore, 2010. p.184). Rejecting the welfare state, the ideology assumes that 'open, competitive and unregulated markets, liberated from state intervention and the actions of social collectivities, represent the optimal mechanism to socio-economic development" (Theodore, Peck, and Brenner, 2011. p. 15). It involves the individualization and control of citizens "through the spatial practices that engage market forces" (Ong, 2006, p. 6) that can be used by a variety of regimes. Neoliberal urbanism, aggravates social inequalities which "influences the distribution of social advantages and disadvantages" (Greenfield, 2018, p. S43) which in turn impacts adversely on older persons, the impact often compounded by membership in categories defined by race, gender, caste, religion, and citizenship status (Tilly, 1998; Centre for Ageing Better, 2021).

The dismantling of the welfare state, driven by neoliberalism, began in the 1980s and led to the emergence of critical perspectives on ageing, which highlighted the unique and higher intensity of exclusions for older persons compared to other sections of society (Walker, 1981; Estes, 1986). Contemporary evaluations of the dire conditions of care for older persons trace its causes to marketization of welfare (Estes, 2014; Grenier and Phillipson, 2018). Polivka and Luo (2019) saw neoliberal tenets internalized in the United States with the increasing preference for private insurers in long-term care which places older persons at risk. Government disinvestment in care homes is worsening the conditions of older persons through loss of quality in care provision, exploitation of workers, and the neglect of loneliness (Lolich, 2019).

Beyond disinvestment and privatisation, neoliberal policies have impacted spatial patterns in cities (Harvey, 1990). That is "cities have become strategically central sites in the uneven, crisis-laden advance of neoliberal restructuring projects" (Peck, Theodore, Brenner, 2009, p. 49). In turn, these spatial patterns and spatial inequalities have a

palpable impact on the lives of older persons and their ability to age either actively or any other way they may choose. Where in a city one lives plays a significant role in determining life expectancy and disability-free life expectancy (Norman et al. 2022). In the context of the Global South, the dilution of the state's involvement and expanding neoliberal planning has led to older persons having to find individual solutions and build resilience where there was once community and state support—demands on women's labour increases (Vera-Sanso, 2012) with consequences for care work which is inordinately borne by women (Adeniyi-Ogunyankin, 2012). Market-driven inequalities result in older persons living in economically-deprived parts of cities being systematically denied access to spaces for healthy living (Adlakha et al, 2021; Tuhkanen, et al, 2022).

The pandemic has served as an x-ray of inequalities particularly in countries with extreme inequalities that rely on privatized care (Navarro, 2020; United Nations, 2020; Bogdanova and Grigoryeva, 2021). As Buffel et al (2021) demonstrate, individual and spatial inequalities intersect using the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The exclusions of older persons are compounded through membership in other vulnerable categories like class, ability, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, and also their location in deprived areas of the city (ibid.). Where urban politics is dominated by the interests of wealthier and numerically predominant groups, building the marginalization and exclusion of some other groups into spatial policies does not diminish regime popularity; it may even enhance it (Bescherer and Reichle, 2022).

Two Paradigms: Critical Gerontology and Post-Humanism

Critical Gerontology—The Humanist Perspective

Critical gerontology emerged as a distinct field concurrent with globalization and the weakening of social protections for older persons which accompanied the advent of neoliberalism (Baars, et al, 2006; Baars and Phillipson, 2013; Minkler and Estes, 1991). Critical gerontologists pointed to a number of practical goals around inclusive social policy, including social participation, recognition, responsiveness, justice (Walker, 2006), and defending the ability of older persons to control the speed and direction of socio-economic changes especially when it pertained to them (Beck et al, 2001; Walker, 2011). Drawing significantly a humanist perspective, they addressed both the structural influences on political economy (Estes and Phillipson, 2002; Walker, 1981, 2008) and transformations that globalization makes to meanings of old age (Baars and Phillipson, 2013; Doheny and Jones, 2021). What follows is a thumbnail sketch of a sophisticated area of scholarship (see introduction in Bernard and Scharf, 2007; Doheny and Jones, 2021 for detailed reviews).

Ageing is, from the perspective of critical gerontology, "conditioned by one's location in the social structure and the economic and political factors that affect it" (Estes et al, 1982, p. 155). Central to this perspective is attention to the "factors that cumulatively determine different life-course trajectories and old age outcomes, and inequalities in both, but also ... social policies that reflect the true dynamic nature of ageing" (Walker, 2018, p.254). The chronological, biomedical-reductionist view of ageing—which assumes that the disengagement of older persons is a natural process—was refuted as a convenient "principle of social organization and social control" put forward to absolve

market-friendly policy choices of any responsibility for reducing the precarity of old age (Baars et al. 2006. p. 3; Estes, 2001).The theoretical foundation for critiques and the alternatives suggested to social policy for ageing (Walker, 2018) drew insights from sociological theories on globalization, with attention to individualization of risk (Beck, 2002; Giddens, 1990). This shows that critical gerontologists are committed to critical research as well as action (Minkler and Holstein, 2008). This more adequate understanding of ageing requires attention to the "power, ideology, and stratification and the expanding global reach" of the forces of neoliberal globalization that are transforming meaningful surroundings (Baars et al. 2006, p.5).

Also foundational to the field is the view that ageing is socially constructed and therefore continuously undergoes transformations (Estes, 1979, p.14, quoted in Baars et al, 2006, p.6). Social connectedness and recognition are therefore crucial, since the "experience of old age is dependent in large part upon how others react to the aged" (ibid). The study of ageing cannot be reduced to economic inequalities; norms, ideologies, social structures, and processes of meaning-making are also important as they provide stability to meanings (Estes, 2001, p.43; Dannefer, 2006, p.110).

Countering the individualization of lives demanded by modernization, they constitute the "meaningful and supportive" social networks that older persons may lack (Machielse and Hortulanus, 2013). Such structures would require an inclusive social policy that entailed the creation of "protected social spaces, which are orientated to the common welfare and which cannot be trusted to the blind power of the market" (Deppe, 2009, p.36, quoted in Baars and Phillipson, 2013, p.36).

Social engagement, ostensibly well-intentioned, can also curtail the freedom of older persons, particularly women, to choose from alternate modes of ageing—including choosing solitude and/or doing nothing—and could neglect cultures that associate the dignity of ageing with rest, spirituality and tranquillity (Minkler and Holstein, 2008; Ranzijn, 2010; Jones, 2021). For instance, totalizing grand discourses that portray activities such as civic engagement as always good for *all* older people reduce the options for "quieter choices" (Mikler and Holstein, 2008, p.197; see also Martinson and Halpern, 2011; van Dyk, 2014).

The Post-Humanist Perspective

As the label suggests, the post human turn in ageing studies has 'decentred and deprivileged 'the human', looking to the non-human and 'more-than-human' aspects of ageing (Andrews and Duff, 2019, p.46). Older persons are not considered fully autonomous as in humanist approaches. Rather, identities are a "continuity between person and environment" (Cutchin, 2001, p.33). In contemporary societies, the ubiquity of social media through which older persons increasingly express their identities, surveillance and assistive technologies meant to reduce age-related risks, technological implants to counter ageing, availability of large data on age for policymaking, and using technology to target older persons for consumerism are the new phenomena that make the humanist view of autonomous older persons incomplete and therefore untenable (Andrews and Duff, 2019).

The decentring of the human in post-humanist perspectives also derives from partial rejection of the view of ageing processes as socially constructed and as amenable to

representation (Thrift, 2004). Authors using the post-humanist approach argue that experiences of ageing are influenced by contingent ordering of 'relational material assemblages' that are constantly changing in constitution and, consequently, have the potential to be enabling or restricting for ageing persons (Andrews and Duff, 2019, 48-49). This helps us understand ageing and older persons as both contextual outcomes—where a variety of aspects impact this process and older persons—and as a "chronological or biological point" (Andrews and Duff, 2019, 48) of the life-course.

The conceptual use of assemblages by the post-humanists allows the paradigm to relate independent human and non-human entities to one another in a way that these entities change and are changed by each other while still retaining a degree of agency. These humans and non-human entities undergo transformations through "the intensity of one's material/human environment and the intensity of one's involvement in it" (Andrews and Duff, 2019, p. 49). Because life is "largely lived in the non-cognitive world" (Thrift, 2004, p.81), the post-humanist focus is on the "unspoken, immediacy of ageing" which focuses on the pre-personal (Andrews and Duff, 2019, p. 49). Theoretically, this allows research to study the process of ageing at different scales and with different levels of granularity (of entities and their interconnections).

Spaces in which ageing is enacted are also rarely static, and are continuously "constituted through the relationalities between bodies and objects, their positions, distances, movements, [and] interactions" (Andrews et al. 2013, p.1351). This view has seeped into the field of socio-gerontechnology which challenges the view that technology is neutral to the physical and social changes that ageing brings about, pointing to the co-constitutive role of technology and older persons (Peine and Neven, 2021).

To conclude, the critical and post-humanist perspectives provide a multi-focal lens to study experiences of older persons living in urban spaces. While the former equates dignity to autonomy, the latter stresses the distributed nature of agency where 'more-than-human' material objects like technology co-constitute the autonomy of older persons. However, these two perspectives need not be mutually exclusive. It is unnecessary to sacrifice the progressive potential of critical gerontology to acknowledge the influence of digital existence on the experiences of ageing in cities (Gernier et al., 2019). This paper similarly combines the critical framework rooted in humanism with the recognition of 'more-than-human' factors to reveal the limitation of vitality as a goal for urban policy.

The Vital City

Urban vitality is defined as a quality that "animates certain city areas, almost continuously" (Maas, 1984, p. 19). A city is vital to "the extent to which a place feels alive or lively" (Montgomery, 1998, p. 97). Urban vitality is assumed to "equate to activity" and is identified with "conviviality and liveliness, [and] with animated streets and spaces" (Adams and Tiesdell, 2007, p. 672). The evaluation of cities using vitality is inspired by Jane Jacob's classic critique of planning in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (Jacobs, 1961; Schubert, 2019).

In sharp criticism of technocratic planning at the time, Jacobs argued for diversity in use of space, buildings interspaced with streets, a mix of old and new buildings, density

and diversity of city dwellers. She notes: "Genuine, rich diversity of the built environment is always the product of many, many different minds, and at its richest is also the product of different periods of time with their different aims and fashions" (Jacobs, 2016, p.215). Attempting to control cities through design is "to make the mistake of attempting to substitute art for life" (Jacobs, 1961, p.373). Extensions of vitality by contemporary scholars include features such as randomness, spontaneity, openness to outsiders, and social cohesion (Sennett, 2012).

This meaning of vitality is compatible with later work by Kevin Lynch in *The Good City Form* which defined vitality as the degree of support for the "the biological requirements and capabilities of human beings" (Lynch, 1984, p.118; Seifert, 2014). The metaphors of living (and dying) and biological performance that underlie the idea of 'vitality' have obvious implications for ageing—a process of decline in activity. Analogous to the health of human beings, the vitality of cities is measured by the intensity of activity (see below). This link between urban vitality and ageing is seldom examined. If one is not careful, vitality measured in this way risks excluding older persons with diminishing capacity for activity. Of late, the concept of vitality, though ostensibly rooted in Jacobsean perspective, have become unmoored from its liberal ethic to become apolitical and attributed even to cities under unequal and authoritarian regimes.

Three aspects of contemporary urban vitality scholarship are selected for analysis that reflects the critiques noted above, with implications for its usefulness as a concept to guide urban policies aimed at defending the interests of older persons. Such an examination might help us enhance the concept of vitality to be more inclusive and responsive, aspects we will discuss in the next section.

Vitality as Activity and the Impact on Measurement

Many of the recent measures of vitality continue to build on Jane Jacobs' perspectives particularly the commitment to "physical determinism", the view that space shapes human behaviour (Gans, 1994, p.33). Such studies often use the presence of permanently active spaces ('24/7 cities'), walkability (Sung et al, 2013; Tan and Classen, 2007; Yue et al., 2019), and potential for social cohesion to measure vitality (Mouratidis and Poortinga, 2020). Access to technology, for instance Wi-Fi spots and aerial images of nightlights are also used as indicators of vitality (Kim, 2018; Zhang, et al, 2022). Empirical information on mobility and activity is now used to measure activity and hence urban vitality—gained through wearable tracking devices, geo-positional mapping of mobile phones, taxi-route data, etc. (Gómez-Varo, Delclos-Alio & Murales-Guasch, 2022).

A popular measure used to confirm a positive correlation between vitality and the well-being of older persons is mobility (Marquet, & Miralles-Guasch, 2015; Akinci, et al. 2022). Studies that explicitly use the term vitality merge seamlessly into a larger field of study that impacts the built environment and mobility of older persons (Kerr, et al, 2012; Hirsch, et al, 2016; Meijering and Weitkamp, 2016; Ottoni et al, 2016). These studies are compatible with Jacobsian perspectives but do not necessarily use vitality as the conceptual anchor. In these studies, however, the need to combine GPS and other location-focused information with more qualitative information—such as narratives—has been recognized (Meijering and Weitkamp, 2016; Sturge, et al, 2022).

As Richard Sennett (2012) has warned, while infused with technology, cities "may do nothing to help people think for themselves or communicate well with one another", a condition that can be inimical to a cities democratic fabric. Jacobs, too, placed "emphasis on bits and pieces [as]... of the essence: this is what a city is, bits and pieces that supplement each other" (Jacobs, 1961, p.390). Social cohesion, a key indicator for vitality, may be damaged rather than enhanced by technology and its ability to further the "veil of silence" cast over public places, creating "solitude in the mass" (Sennett, 2016, p.33).

Vigorously active and diverse information, a key feature of vitality, need not lead to social cohesion if the activity reduces the possibility of meaningful interactions (Mouratidis and Poortinga, 2020). Hectic and crowded, i.e., vital, cities can also make older persons feel insecure and result in a preference for inactivity rather than risk injuries (Akinci, et al. 2022). Digital technologies that provide real-time health information can transform the valuation of one's health negatively (Bauer and Olsen, 2009). Similar processes at play when older-persons fitted with GPS sensors are measured for activity may not register in the collected information.

As will be discussed below, expanding this recognition to include the co-constitutive role of technology and space in constructing the experiences of older persons is necessary for creating a more accurate measure for vitality in terms of its benefits for an ageing society.

Urban Vitality, Inequality, and Democracy

It was recently pointed out that gentrification and the resulting spatial inequalities are becoming endemic in many cities that score high on vitality scales (Connolly, 2019; Garcia-Lamarca, et al., 2021). The impacts of spatial inequality on vulnerable sections, particularly older persons, were highlighted above. It thus needs to be noted that this neglect of inequality in vitality studies can be traced to the Jacobsian recognition of poverty, but neglect of its structural drivers. This perspective considered poverty as just another contributor to diversity and placed unwarranted trust in market actors to solve urban problems (Zukin, 2009, Gans, 1994). However, the second dimension of contemporary uses of vitality displays a complete detachment of the concept from its roots in the Jacobsian worldview.

Vitality in its classical form assumes a liberal democracy; and, the vitality of cities, as understood by Jacobs, assumed shared, democratic goals. Jacobs was committed to "the right to criticize the government" and was "against all kinds of government controls" (Schubert, 2019, p.5). Cities, however, are also sites that contemporary anti-democratic movements exploit to entrench their power (Saitta, 2022; Rivero et al., 2022; Schakel & Romanova, 2022). Control over urban institutions is a statecraft deployed by anti-democratic forces to entrench power (Rogenhofer and Panievsky, 2020; Rossi, 2018; Garrido, 2021; Joy and Vogel, 2022).

Indicators of vitality, including vibrant activity, mixed uses of streets, diversity in buildings and walkability, are built on a vision that sought to promote bottom-up democratic planning within liberal democracy, like participation and rights-based approaches, (Schubert, 2019; Fabian et al., 2019; Perrone, 2019). In contrast, the measures of vitality noted above like night-time lights (Zang, et al., 2022) and the

frequency of interactions (Long et al., 2019) neglect the political contexts within which the cities are located.

Such a deployment of vitality—one that emerged from the rejection of state planning—to demonstrate positive features of cities in authoritarian regimes is quite remarkable. Recent calls for a reframing of the political as urban that involves focus on cities as the locus of political claim making (Joy and Vogel, 2022; Keyes et al. 2022) should take into account that, with demographic ageing, the defence of democracy will also rely increasingly on the political activism of older citizens. This neglect or disregard for context raises an important question: can urban vitality reflect the consequences for or the meaningful resistance by older citizens to the dismantling of democratic institutions across countries, in countries with long-established democratic institutions countries as diverse as the United States, Turkey, Israel, Brazil, India and the Philippines (Haggard and Kaufmann, 2021, Heller, 2020)?

This paper does not claim that all the research on vitality deploys an instrumental perspective on technology use or is devoid of commitments to redistribution and democracy. Making such a claim would require a more structured survey of empirical research on the topic. However, any acceptability within scholarship for the attribution of vitality to unequal cities controlled by authoritarian governments is a significant deviation from the progressive goals of the concept and requires attention.

The next section will discuss three ways to reorient the study of vitality—(1) using measures informed by the dynamics of co-constitution of technology, space, and agency, (2) re-embedding vitality into the service of material equality, and (3) democracy.

Discussion: Reviving Urban Vitality

Technology-Space-Agency

From both humanist and post-humanist perspectives, interpretations of vitality based on intensity of technology use are likely to be incomplete or faulty. While technology can play an important role, a techno-utopian approach to addressing policy concerns of ageing fails to consider how technology might be exclusionary and intrusive (Peine et al., 2021; Righi, et al., 2017; Reuter et al., 2021). The experiences of ageing are constituted by influence of these three factors—technology, space, and agency (Urban, 2021). Recognizing the relation between technology and ageing, in particular the influence of technology on the meaning of ageing and how demographic composition of users (like the age category of users) has transformed technology itself, can make the measurements of vitality richer. The question then is how this co-constitution of experience can be measured.

Vigorous activity and social engagement can become burdensome to older persons and also be incompatible with equitable ageing. GPS technologies may provide objective information on physical activity (and hence vitality) but do not capture the "stress-inducing or adverse physical features" of a space (Torku et al., 2021). This means that drawing conclusions on vitality based on technology use cannot be complete if the interactions between spaces and older persons are being ignored (Beneito-Monagut and Begueria, 2021; Righi et al., 2017). One could ask whether an intense use of social media in the middle of vibrant and walkable streets also indicates seclusion and insecurity

among older persons. This is particularly the case when the diversity of meanings associated with activity in multi-ethnic cities is ignored.

Emerging methods like "combined participatory geospatial and qualitative research methods" can capture the dynamic nature of interactions between older persons and space (Hand et al., 2018). For instance, GPS information are often combined with methods like the "go along" interview in which phenomenological insights on the actual lived experiences of older persons and their dynamics of interpersonal relations can be observed (Capriano, 2010). These methods demonstrate a range of nuances in the interactions of older persons with space and technology, including that older persons are not merely reacting to the neighbourhood or technology but often shape their neighbourhood environments (Hand et al., 2018) and are susceptible to surveillance when negotiating spaces using technology (Brittain et al., 2010). These are crucial inputs to the understanding of vitality.

In contrast to the static perspective of activity adopted in empirical studies of vitality, mobility should be viewed as "variable, fluid, multi-scalar, context-sensitive, and political (Gernier, et al., 2019, p.3). The study of mobility, in turn, should use methods sensitive to "diverse experiences of movement and stillness more fully than quantitative methods" (ibid. p.9). In-depth interviews and biographies to elicit narratives of the experiences of older persons negotiating technology and space and historical transformations over time can provide a richer evaluation of the process of ageing as discussed under the section on post-humanism. This would lead to a more nuanced understanding of vitality itself (Reissman, 2008; Andrews et al., 2006).

Equalizing Vitality

The second critique of vitality raised in this paper is the neglect of cities as sites of inequalities. In cities across the world, widening inequalities and spread of illiberalisms are bound to aggravate the precariousness of older persons (Grenier and Phillipson, 2018), as discussed in some detail in the section on spatial inequalities and ageing. Perspectives informed by critical gerontology have exposed incongruities within initiatives like the Age-friendly Cities and Communities programme (AFCC) in the context of economic austerity (Buffel and Phillipson, 2018).

AFCC seeks to promote 'active ageing by optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age' (WHO, 2007b, p.12). Critical perspectives have alerted policymakers to the possibility that ostensibly well-intentioned slogans like 'active ageing' can favour treating older persons as sources of wealth extraction and place unjust demands for activity on ageing bodies (Walker, 2015; Moulaert and Biggs, 2013), and well-intentioned programmes can result in exclusions of less privileged among older citizens (Joy, 2021; Yeh, 2021). Infusions of technologies driven by top-down neoliberal urban agendas are known to aggravate social inequalities (Townsend, 2013; McFarlane and Söderström, 2017). The reliance on digital mediums ostensibly for ensuring inclusive public consultations to set AFCC agendas have resulted in exclusions of lesser privileged groups of older persons (Lafontaine and Sawchuk, 2021; Reuter et al, 2021).

The recognition of how "late life contains vulnerabilities of the human condition" (Gernier and Phillipson, 2018, p.17) and structural inequalities that aggravate them

should inform the evaluations of vitality in cities. Adopting a humanist perspective, scholars of vitality could also ask what purpose is served when lofty goals of including older persons are followed by slashed budgets and privatized welfare systems: "a combination of widening inequalities within urban environments and the impact of austerity on local government budgets has raised questions about future progress in age-friendly and related activities" (Buffel and Phillipson, 2018, p.174). Visualizing cities as "sites of interlocking and conflicting commercial, social, and political interests" (Buffel et al 2012, p.601) will reveal the tenuous and contested nature of vitality, in sharp contrast to the static assumptions that underlie contemporary work on vitality.

In other words, the democratic dimensions of vitality can be defended by transforming attention to political agendas that drive spatial processes, particularly as we will see in the next section, those that diminish the availability of spaces for participation, dissent, and contestation.

Democratizing Vitality

Just as these indicators of activity can distort its meanings, they can mask political authoritarianism and discrimination. Physical obstructions and digital spaces are no longer seen as separate distinct components of urban infrastructure—they are the essential 'more-than-human' components of the assemblages that regulate where older persons can engage in political activity, and which authoritarian regimes have effectively used to control dissent (Cassegård, 2014; Willems, 2019; Brashier & Sachter, 2020; Carver & Mackinnon, 2020; Koch, 2022). The extent of exposure to technology over the course of a life will influence the capacities of older persons in democratic processes that are increasingly mediated by technology (Andrews and Duff, 2019).

Open spaces as a "breeding ground for mutual respect, political solidarity, [and] civil discourse" are essential for cities in a functioning democracy (Walzer, 1986, p.472; Rogers, 2005). While private spaces need not necessarily deny political activity (Kirby, 2008), in situations where the interests of big businesses and anti-democratic forces are becoming inseparable, it is unlikely that the privatization of public spaces will be conducive for democracy (Low, 2017). Provision of basic welfare and urban spaces, like parks and accessible public transport (Gómez-Varo et al, 2022) for older persons may boost a city's vitality scores, yet are policies that authoritarian regimes may also embrace.

Research on urban vitality needs to focus on the *type* of public interactions made possible, and more importantly, identify the equal distribution of resources and possibilities of physical dissent by older persons as a measure of its vitality. The combination of physical and digital components that constitute a city space should enhance or lower a city's vitality score—those that facilitate political action to enhance and those that repress to reduce the vitality score for a city.

Conclusion

The exclusionary nature of the current definitions of vitality becomes undeniable when refracted through the perspective of critical gerontology and post-humanist perspectives. If vitality is to be a useful and inclusive lens through which to consider ageing in cities, it is necessary to question and subsequently sever its ties with neoliberal

urbanism on the one hand, and anti-democratic forces on the other. Further, it has to consider seriously the more-than-human aspects that influence vitality and simultaneously might be impacted by how vitality is conceptualised.

This paper has argued that humanist (critical gerontologist) and post-humanist approaches deepen our understanding of urban vitality. This employs insights from decades of confrontations with neoliberal rationality and can expand the understanding of urban vitality to take into account the multi-faceted interests of older persons. It also includes a reconsideration of the relationship between technology, space and agency, and a shift in determining how vitality is measured, elaborated on in the previous section through a discussion on combined participatory geospatial and qualitative research methods, and the go along method. This, in turn, impacts what constitutes vitality to begin with, the importance of activity in measuring vitality, how technology can be used to innovatively measure vitality, and how older persons should finally be the ones to determine what constitutes vitality.

Without this deepening, the unique vulnerabilities of older persons are likely to be ignored in urban policy agendas. Understood as vibrant activity and social interaction, on the one hand, but with its apolitical interpretation on the other, the possibility of urban vitality as a desirable goal for urban policy is questionable. The humanist and post-humanist approaches further offer perspectives for research and policy alike on how vitality can be studied, measured, and applied to make this approach inclusive and meaningful for older persons and the cities they inhabit.

For sure, the variegated impacts of neoliberalism and its consequences for ageing are bound to vary (Brenner, Peck, and Theodore, 2009). However, that need not distract us from giving attention to universal structural transformations caused by or leading to increasing inequalities. While changes in policy and public funding have exacerbated age-based vulnerabilities, policies that prioritise reducing spatial discrimination and that adopt a "spatial justice lens" (Greenfield 2018, p.S41, Yarker and Buffel, 2022; Yeh, 2022) have the ability to empower older persons in cities across the world.

This paper does not seek to patronize or stereotype older persons as incapable or disinterested in a vigorous life. However, acknowledging the diversities in attitudes and abilities for activities, biological ageing renders the human body increasingly less able to handle activity, a universally experienced human condition. Rather than ignore, urban policies should focus on creating inclusive spaces are sensitive to the frailties of ageing and simultaneously maintain older persons' dignity.

The humanist approaches force a rethink on the association between vitality and activity by pointing out how activity discourses themselves can become oppressive by placing demands that older people may be unable or uninterested to meet. The post-humanist approaches, in addition, take into account an important facet of contemporary lives—the digital existence that pose challenges to the view of autonomy. Together these approaches enable a new vision of social transformation—at a slower pace and with a measured insertion of technology more compatible with ageing societies. This paper has attempted to demonstrate, however, that this social transformation will remain incomplete so long as urban neoliberalism fuses with authoritarian urban policy agendas to restrict spaces for dissent and contestation (Koch, 2022).

Global concerns with the deterioration of democratic practices have had very little influence on the WHO's discourse of age-friendly cities. WHO's reliance on a variety of autocracies and democracies for both resources and legitimacy has once again constrained the United Nations from considering the perspective of human rights (Hafner-Burton and Tutsui, 2005; Toosi, 2019). This makes AFCC less likely to become a discourse to defend democracy.

However urban vitality has no such constraints. With a combination of the humanism and post-humanism paradigms, it can realize its potential to reinvigorate its democratic credentials and transform into an urban policy agenda that is simultaneously sensitive to the needs of older persons, attentive to inequalities and defends the guardrails of democracy by incorporating the ability to dissent. Such an urban agenda would reconsider who is involved in the process of defining and measuring vitality, how vitality is measured, and what interventions—physical or technological—are introduced to deepen urban vitality.

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