Body capital and the geography of aging

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The 2010 US Census recorded 40.3 million residents aged 65 years and older mostly living in urban environments that were not originally designed for older adults. This potential social and spatial mismatch is made worse by the unavoidable decline of physical adaptability that could come in older age. Ultimately, within residential settings that have remained mostly unaltered for decades, diminished physical and cognitive capacity can force older adults to face undesired and, most importantly, unplanned transformations of their established routines in everyday life. The article expands on Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus and body capital to advance the need for research on the interaction between bodies and places. By highlighting theoretical arguments that express dissonance between aging populations and built environments, the paper further explores the concept of habitus. Of importance is how diminished body capital not only changes habitus, but also changes how other people see older people, contributing towards ageism. The conclusion addresses how the European ENABLE-AGE project and the World Health Organization Age-Friendly cities are developing processes to mitigate this change.

Key words: aging, habitus, body capital

Introduction

There is a relationship between an individual – or groups of individuals – and their immediate environment. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) developed the concepts of ‘habitus’ and cultural capital to explain the ways in which relationships of social inequality were reproduced through the education system. ‘Habitus’, which is borrowed from Aquinas, is similar to Husserl’s concept of ‘life-world’, describing the dispositions and habits of a person dealing with the material, corporeal and symbolic world.

Using an example of a temporary diminished body capital, this paper examines the concept of habitus in relation to diminished body capital as reflected by an increasingly aging America.

The 2010 US Census recorded 40.3 million residents aged 65 years and older, which constituted 13.0 per cent of the total American population (Howden and Mey 2010). Most older adults are now living in urban/suburban environments that were not originally designed for frail and vulnerable adults. There exists a potential social and spatial mismatch made worse by the unavoidable decline of physical adaptability that could come in older age. But the effect of diminished body capital is not simply relegated to the individual, but has repercussions on how society views them as individuals.

Temporary diminished body capital

On 20 January 2009, as Barack Obama was being sworn in as the 44th President of the United States of America, the televised historic event presented an unexpected image of the outgoing Vice-President Cheney leaving the White House in a wheelchair (Plate 1).

This was in contrast to the Vice-President of a month before. Apparently, Mr Cheney, at the age of 67, had temporarily injured his back the day before. What made it more compelling was seeing one of the most potent political figures so completely dependent.

In those brief moments, as the camera followed Cheney’s slow descent on a makeshift ramp from the doorsteps of the White House to the limo, there was clear evidence that all the authority, intellectual ability, and...
economic success the Vice-President possessed were not forces strong enough to dispel the limitations of his fragile and compromised body. His diminished body capital also seemed to have diminished him as an individual.

Considering Mr Cheney’s age at 67, what he had to endure was not an extraordinary event. The role the body plays in everyday life becomes more precarious in older age. Importantly, if the environmental conditions remain unalterable or the body is not able to physically adapt to the new situation, varying degrees of personal distress may arise. In the words of Emily Grundy: ‘The chief biological characteristic of ageing is gradual decline of the homeostatic mechanisms that bring about adaptive responses to environmental changes’ (1991, 136). For Mr Cheney, the transient nature of this imbalance – between capacity of body and the environment – exemplifies the unpreparedness of change. But for some, these changes are not transient. Classical examples of this can be found in suburbia, where older adults sustain fundamental personal changes when they lose the ability to drive and, as a result, relinquish easy access to stores, services and friends (Golant 2003).

‘Body is our medium for having a world’, stated French philosopher Merleau-Ponty (1962, 146). The body takes us to and through places according to acquired attitudes that are maintained and repeated in a semi-autonomous mode until the body’s capacity for changes or external new conditions intervene. Once again, this is especially true for urban/suburban spaces, which have been traditionally built in a top-down approach by powerful mechanisms that, referencing Michel Foucault’s Discipline and punish, try to reshape ‘human subjects from without’ (cited in Philo 2004, 123) according to economic rather than social imperatives. The physical characteristics of urban/suburban spaces thus tend to remain fixed in time while residents’ lives change by choice, necessity or ill health as a result of aging.

Body and place

The theory of the body is already a theory of perception. (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 235)

In chapter 2 of her book dedicated to the materiality and fluidity of bodies, Robyn Longhurst presents a detailed account of how the body has been placed in human geography – something she calls ‘corporeography’ (Longhurst 2001, 9). In agreement with other scholars, Longhurst recognises that geographical thought on the body has changed considerably since the 1970s when, in addition to the Cartesian tradition separating body and mind, another geographic ontology emerged. The new interpretation was rooted in humanistic geographical discourse, which emphasises subjectivity. During the late 1970s, scholars like Tuan, Buttimer, Ley, Seamon, Reph, Entrikin, Samuels and Rowles (Longhurst 2001), created an impressive volume of research that strongly advocated for a reinterpretation of spatial bodily experiences in geography. For them, this meant engaging in a geographic perspective derived mostly from the texts of Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Within different parameters of inquiry, they focused ‘not on reason but on human creativity, not on the universal but on the specifics of people’s lives’ (Longhurst 2001, 15). Their work awakened the attention of geographers on issues related to placial (Casey 1997) embodied subjectivities.

As a result, one of the focal points became the interaction between bodies and places, which was seen happening via discourses of research involving topics such as place, embodiment, mobility, immobility and overall activities of everyday life. ‘Body implicates space; space co-exists with the sentient body’, wrote Yi-Fu Tuan (1974, 218). Furthermore, if we follow phenomenology and its dictum that bodies actively construct places and are equally shaped by them, a central claim becomes the already mentioned aphorism ‘[t]he body is our general medium for having a world’ (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 146). In his Phenomenology of perception, written in 1945, Merleau-Ponty thus stated:

In so far as, when I reflect on the essence of subjectivity, I find it bound up with that of the body and that of the world, this is because my existence as subjectivity is merely one with my existence as a body and with the existence of the world, and because the subject that I am, when taken concretely, is inseparable from this body and this world. (1962, 475)
This position greatly contrasts with the ‘bodiless abstraction of rationalism’ (Calvino 1988, 22), for which mind superiority supersedes bodily knowledge and space is a homogenous expanse (Pickles 1985). On this matter Robert Sokolowski further elaborates:

The Western cultural tendency to separate body from mind, and to elevate the mental over the corporeal, has trivialized the extent to which the body is the obvious point of departure for any process of knowing, especially participant observation. (2000, 104)

Through this interpretation, the body thus becomes subject-body; a corporeality of consciousness highly engaged in our activities of everyday life, of our lifeworld.

The experience of the body is consequently linked to its spatiality, motility, sexuality, verbal articulations, temporality, relations with others, and personal freedom (Smith and Thomasson 2005). ‘I’m the space where I am’, Nöel Arnaud reminds us (cited in Bachelard 1964, 137). This is especially true if routines of everyday life are considered; those activities and customary habits taking people through life in expected ways, which, together with familiar faces, ‘implies a sense of satisfaction and contentedness’ (Gilleard et al. 2007, 595) of living in familiar surroundings. In other words, routines are what somebody builds over time and what gets more impacted by personal or environmental changes.

According to David Seamon (1979), any experience of place happens through three distinct but interconnected bodily situations: movement, rest and encounter. Whereas rest is associated with sense of place and encounter with observation, the pre-cognitive, intentional, nature of movement lodged in the body gives us motility and positions us in the reality of our everyday life experience. Furthermore, he continues, the body houses a special kind of ‘purposive sensibility’ (1979, 40), which makes the body the root of habitual movements. From manual dexterity to walking, everyday habitudinal movements arise from the body, which is a somewhat autonomous entity that can act as an intelligent subject in a pre-conscious way, thus generating automatic behaviours (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Buttimer and Seamon 1980; Seamon 1979). For instance, climbing or descending stairs repetitively leads to a level of spatial familiarity ‘that may transcend consciousness’ (Rowles and Ravdal 2002, 85). People thus let their bodies repeat day after day the same habitual manoeuvres in the same contexts. At times people find themselves at the bottom of stairs without being conscious of actually having descended them. If we apply a phenomenological explanation, we may say that the mind was not in charge, the body was. However, once the body capital diminishes and cannot cope with existing or changing environment, the habitus becomes irrelevant.

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If the body had been easier to understand, nobody would have thought that we had a mind. (Rorty 1979, 239)

In the case of older adults, two concomitant factors act upon their daily routines. One is intrinsic and includes changes linked to a combination of biological processes of aging, socioeconomic attributes, and individual and societal attitudes toward aging. The second originates from forces existing externally to all subjects. They include cultural, political and economic forces, which are local and global (Allen 2003). Among cultural forces, stereotypes linked to negative public perceptions and attitudes toward aging can generate significant negative impacts or push toward elixirs for ageless existences (McHugh 2003). Stronger in Western industrialised countries, ageism – as it was coined by Robert Butler in 1969 – incorrectly identifies aging with an overall decline of abilities and possibilities. When the perception of ‘social aging’ (Livi-Bacci 1992, 111) is widespread, there is the risk for elderly residents ‘of becoming prematurely obsolete […] and estranged from society’ (Livi-Bacci 1992, 111). Unfortunately, ‘despite numerous empirical studies and public health promotion strategies directed at ways of aging well, negative images of aging have an enduring vitality’ (Angus and Reeve 2006, 137).

Perhaps reacting to such negative perception about aging, older adults tend to downplay or completely deny negative and unavoidable occurrences linked to aging. In particular, events related to diminished body capital. When their relationships with their immediate and familiar surroundings change while their body capital is not sufficiently adapting, then their habitus becomes a problem. Indeed, in time, their protracted denial of significant environmental stressors could lead to unexpected and abrupt confrontations with unchanged landscapes, which, sometimes, are felt as unbearable strains (Michelson 1977; Lazarus and Cohen 1977). Mr Cheney had to initiate a completely different personal relationship with the settings of the White House. In other words, unplanned disruptions of habitus can have the effect of undermining personal feelings of belonging with otherwise familiar spaces and places.

The personal and subjective interpretation or the placial (Casey 1997) must also include the perception of others – as in Mr Cheney’s case, not only did he have to contend with interacting with the White House by the use of an aide helping him, but viewers saw him as less. His presence created a dissonance, which we could only balance by diminishing him as a person – he was out of place.
This out-of-place is also internalised. Following theorisations of Anne-Marie Fortier (1999) and of Neil Leach (2005) reinforces a definition of territorial belonging that is both transitory and fluid. Indeed, when personal relations with customary landscapes become unbalanced, the process of self-identification suffers to the point of generating place panic, a special form of anxiety associated with feeling out of place in one’s own house or neighbourhood (Casey 2001a). For those outside, this level of panic – this dissonance – is mitigated by concluding that the person does not belong there. In this case, the ‘knowledge by acquaintance’ (Russell 1912, as cited in Casey 1997, 34), built upon the habitudinal schemes around and through which most activities of daily life traditionally take place, might break away because the relation with the surrounding spaces deteriorates. Personal desires and expectations are no longer met, and disaffections for habitual places mount. In the end, the necessary person–environment homeostasis is disrupted (Aitken 1992) and the physical intimacy constitutive of necessary person–environment homeostasis is disrupted (Rubinstein and de Medeiros 2004) returns the equilibrium. Thus, local and subjective experiences become as much function of individualities as they are of the socio-physical characteristics of the world with which subjects are in constant engagement (Low 2003).

In all of this, the body functions as a particular and fundamental determinant in the experience of places (Laws 1993; Longhurst 2001; Graumann 2002). Indeed, glossing over the importance of corporeality does not reside well with a humanistic belief, which exalts knowledge derived from the direct study of subjectivities which are considered expressions of human intentionality. ‘Bodies mediate our contextual relation with space’, asserts Glenda Laws (1997, 49). Consequently, places are perceived and understood as an affair of the whole body and of its changing dynamics.

In the mid 1970s, Pierre Bourdieu (1977) advanced the idea that it was possible to transcend the dualism that existed (and still does) between explanations based upon the determining contribution of external overarching structures in the construction and reproduction of societies and those privileging individual and, therefore, subjective actions and experiences (Bridge 2004). Bourdieu called this posit habitus, which Nigel Thrift (2002) places between social structure and human practices. In other words, habitus is formed by subjective dispositions that are the embodiment of ‘systems of social norms, understandings and patterns of behaviour, which [...] ensure that individuals are more disposed to act in some ways than others’ (Painter 2000, 242). The fact that habitus is constituted and carried out within socially constructed spaces, which Bourdieu calls fields, implies that habitus is the ‘dynamic schematizing’ (Casey 2001b, 717) of such sociopolitical influences. Sociologically, such socially charged fields are also the spaces of competition and struggle where individuals try to achieve their goals within a frame of rule and regulations (Hillier and Rooksbys 2002).

Habitus, Bourdieu continues, constitutes the core of our self and it is ‘always enacted in a particular place and incorporates the features inherent in previous such places, all of which are linked by a habitudinal bond’ (Bourdieu 2005, 686). Habitus is not natural as character is, nor is it inborn, ‘a fate, a destiny’ (2005, 45). It is instead much like what is generally known as lifestyle: a flowing compendium of acquired characteristics acting in the lifeworld. Such subjective dispositions are not fixed in time but constantly adapt to new personal or external situations, at first through conscious strategic calculations that become ‘unconscious with time as the same or similar situations are repeatedly encountered’ (Hillier and Rooksbys 2002, 6).

According to Bourdieu, actors rely on three forms of capital to obtain the best from each field in which they navigate: economic capital (material wealth), social capital (social network) and cultural capital (knowledge and skills obtained through education). Bourdieu also asserts that individuals are, in accordance with Henry Lefebvre’s belief, social products whose nature is to maximise their social capital.

Such interpretation of everyday life has been criticised for two reasons. First, Bourdieu’s original rigid structuralist theory split society into broad and semi-homogenous structural categories (Thrift 2002) that left little importance (if any) to individuality. To this criticism, Bourdieu replied by stressing that habitus is no more than a predisposition; a predisposition, though, that is ‘at once habitual and improvisatory, rote and novel’ (Upton 2002, 720; emphasis in the original). In the struggle of everyday life, actors capable of thinking and making judgements improvise new solutions when the habitus lodged in them is confronted with a new event (Upton 2002). Second, for Bourdieu, the body was the site containing prior cultural dispositions. Bodily placements through mobility and gestures were for Bourdieu not the activities that preceded cognition, as Merleau-Ponty (1962) elucidated, but the depository of social influences that make bodies act the way they act. In other words, the original concept of habitus downplayed the notion that personal conditions of physical well-being can create subjective forms of independence or dependence from the environments lived. What this concept generates are either relatively autonomous or altogether contingent actors (Entrikin 2001).

Indeed, Bourdieu’s three capitals cannot explain the full self. A fourth form of capital able to complete the
attributed and perception of one’s position in a field should be appended to the previous three. This fourth component could be called the *body capital*, and it would introduce fine-grain subjectivity because of the great variation in bodily aptness existing among humans. In other words, following Merleau-Ponty’s teachings, the fourth determinant factor in the *game* played by people in any field should be the singular abilities or dis-abilities to behave in such environments as they are dictated by personal characteristics of body functions and by socially constructed external opinions and attitudes toward such (dis)abilities.

It is true that the combination of economic wealth, skills, knowledge and social power can successfully satisfy one’s desires. It is equally true though that the same enjoyment can be altered and transformed by the diminishing psychological and physical conditions of an aging person. Both subjectively – how the person deals with the change – and socially – how others react to this diminishing capacity. Expanding from Bourdieu’s theorisation, it is thus plausible to expect some significant individual variations in the way activities of daily life are perceived (quality) or conducted (action) when the *body we are* – our interests, goals and desires in relation to a place – and the *body we have* – our pertinent past experiences about that place as they are mediated by our present physical and mental conditions – are confronted with a reality that does not match what we desire, does not conform to what our experience of that place is, and, in the end, does not fit our capacity to handle it.

The dependent mobility underlined in Mr Cheney’s case was a lack of ‘involuntary [spatial] connaissance’ (Foster 1998) deriving from the novelty of using a wheelchair. And this is seen by others and evaluated as diminished capacity. According to de Certeau (1984), not knowing how to manage space with the newly acquired bodily condition prevented him from properly appropriating the space around him and, ergo, looking natural while in the environment. Therefore he was *unnatural* in that environment. In other words, if we follow Lefebvre’s (1991) description of the relationship between human bodies and spaces, Mr Cheney’s experience in his habitual but yet different living body was space but did not have space. That particular morning a change in his body capital had put him in a new relationship with familiar environments, which was both dependent and passive since it lacked the necessary personal unflexible practice responsible for ‘determining our competence in the act of manipulating common places’ (Foster 1998, 327). And this change was understood by viewers watching the events. Similarly, for millions of viewers worldwide, Mr Cheney appeared different than at any other times he had been seen on TV. Possibly for the first time and, ironically, through a visual medium that has played an important part in the ocularcentric (Pallasmaa 2005) decorporerealisation of space (Simonsen 2005), the mind-Cheney was revealed to be attached to a body-Cheney.

This means that, of the dual role usually played by the human body – the perceiver and the perceived (Merleau-Ponty 1962) – what was mostly visible was the latter. Paraphrasing Goffman (1990), the aching and aging body was failing to mediate between his self-identity and the traditional social identity to reveal an active struggle (Simonsen 2005) focused on a diminished body capital. Louise Holt’s (2008) construct of social capital synthesises Bourdieu’s capitals and performative theorisations of identity to augment the concept of social capital to include (among other definitions) broader sociospatial contexts and relations to the embodiment of social capital within individuals.

This definition is important because it broadens the inherent, subjective and now broader sociospatial aspect of social capital that allow for a more accurate interpretation of the spatial ramifications of an aging America. It links the subjective to the sociospatial that explains ageism and explains our surprise in coming to terms with seeing Mr Cheney in a wheelchair at the White House, his historical seat of power.

It is also directly linked to the directions of the multidisciplinary field linking aging populations and built environments. Recent writings by Hans-Werner Wahl and by Stephen Golant (Kendig 2003) have revealed a deep and fundamental connection between elderly residents and their immediate residential environments. Specifically, the quality and attributes of people-place relationships in later age is clearly linked to issues of personal well-being and social practices. In this scenario, bodily as well as social personal changes have the potential to project retired residents into new dialectics with otherwise familiar settings.

**Conclusion**

Unfortunately, block after block of residential America has been organised to perpetuate a particular status quo at the time, which prevents the flexible adaptation of environments according to the changing qualities, abilities, wishes and needs of their residents (Schafer 2000). As a result, with time, spatial and temporal patterns of human settlements may become unfit because they will no longer match ‘the customary behavior of [their] inhabitants’ (Lynch 1981, 151). These are not the *Necropolis* envisioned by Lewis Mumford (1961) or the diverse and walkable community of Camden Town, beloved of Elizabeth Wilson. These are instead the Redwood City of America, still favoured by homebuyers but criticised in books like Michael Sorkin’s *Variations on a theme park* (1992) or Philip Langdon’s *A better place to live* (1994). Residential
communities like these, where sprawling culs-de-sacs, originally designed to keep traffic, noise and strangers away from suburban families, could become barriers to social life for many seniors of today and tomorrow. If spatial form discourages pedestrian activities and does not provide usable public spaces or even marginal social places, then opportunity for social encounters is strongly limited. For this reason, in today’s America, spatial mismatch is pervasive and is experienced by those whose body functions have started declining due to age, illness, injury or a combination of all three. It also affects residents without any major physical or economic deficit who have decided to reduce their car dependency and do not live close to restaurants, shops or religious centres within a walking distance from home.

Both the ENABLE-Age project (Iwarsson et al. 2007) and the World Health Organization’s Age-Friendly Cities (Menec et al. 2011) focus on the appropriateness of house and city design. By responding to diminished body capital, these programmes aim at focusing interest on modifying the environment. The objective is to provide flexibility in the internal and external environments in order to allow for diminished body capital to develop a more appropriate habitus. The ecological premise is that there must be a fit between older adults and their environment. Because the physical and social environment cannot be treated in isolation from intrapersonal factors, such as the body capital, there is a need for a holistic and interdisciplinary approach.

Within this interpretation, new experiences of diminished body capital can be mitigated either through personal adaptations and/or physical environmental transformations. For those with reduced or limited economic, social, cultural or severely depleted body capitals, changes could happen too fast and with such dramatic intensity as to drastically disrupt acquired lifestyles. This has repercussion in how others see the person, and how they respond and place the individual in their immediate space. Indeed, in the opinion of Martha Fansworth Riche, since the driving demographic force for the future is the age-based growth of households that have largely completed child-rearing, the residential future of cities may well depend on how they appeal [and respond] to people in life’s later stages. (2001, 2)

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Maurizio Antoninetti, a professor in SDSU’s School of Public Affairs, died 10 May 2011, at the age of 54. A self-described ‘energetic consultant-teacher-activist’ he also was a husband, father, homeowner and academic. As a paraplegic Maurizio worked tirelessly on his passions of universal design and disability rights. He will be immortalized in his publications.

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