Age-friendly outdoor spaces in a purpose-built retirement village

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Introduction
The UK has experienced a growth in the number of purpose-built retirement communities in recent years. These environments are boundaryed physical places designed specifically to meet the needs of older people living there and to foster the development of sustainable communities. Denham Garden Village (DGV) is a purpose-built retirement community in Buckinghamshire. The village comprises 326 mixed-tenure apartments, bungalows and houses. Facilities include a shop, café bar, GP surgery, gym and swimming pool. Outdoor spaces include a village green, memorial garden and 30 acres of woodland.

This poster explores how outdoor spaces at DGV feature in residents’ everyday lives. Findings are drawn from field notes from the Longitudinal study of Ageing in a Retirement Community (LARC – www.keele.ac.uk/larc) and twenty qualitative interviews conducted with DGV residents as part of a linked PhD studentship. All resident names used are pseudonyms.

Parking
Facilities such as the gym, swimming pool, and café bar at DGV are open to members of the public. Many residents expressed concerns over the adequacy of parking facilities in the village. Limited parking space often leads to non-resident visitors parking outside designated parking areas, on pavements, and in areas designed as ‘shared spaces’ with no kerbs:

“There seem to be cars everywhere... when you walk out... and you go up to the doctors, they park on the path... we went there last week one day, and we had to literally walk in the road because there was two cars, they really parked the whole of the pavement so you couldn't get either way.” (Matriony Newman)

“There’s far too little car parking. That's one of the big issues that we've got... they didn't anticipate... people coming here to live with one, two cars, which a lot of people have.” (Rose Cross)

Tensions between residents and ‘outsiders’
Residents have conflicting views about the use of outdoor spaces at DGV by members of the public:

“I think there are an awful lot of younger local residents who've joined the health club... The young men tear around on their motorcycles... a lot of the people who live near the health club do complain about the noise that goes on... I think that if you move into a retirement village it should be a retirement village.” (Clive Lane)

“From our point of view it's nice to see people from outside... younger people too, because that was the idea of it, we weren't just an old people's home.” (Joan Kelly)

“I love seeing youngsters here, but you know, you get other people that say, oh, we don't want outsiders in the village, and we don't want children here... and that's a little bit sad.” (Judy Willis)

Gardens, patios and balconies
Some residents were very satisfied with their own gardens, patio areas or balconies:

“We've got a beautiful view... last night we had eight people around for a barbeque... just burgers and sausages, but we sat out there from one o'clock till eight, nine o'clock with them all.” (Susan King)

However, other residents felt that they lacked sufficient outdoor space, or that outdoor areas had not been designed to maximise useful space or to offer sufficient privacy:

“The other mistake was that... they decided to put in swing doors on people that have balconies. It took away half the balcony. It's ludicrous. Why didn't they put in sliding doors?” (Ed Heath)

“I don't sit that much in the balcony because I feel I'm sitting in the street.” (Heleen Willis)

Getting out of the village
The neighbourhood and local shops outside DGV are not easily accessible to residents. In some cases this is due to issues with the design or maintenance of pavements:

Catherine Webb’s son lives just a few minutes down the road (outside DGV). Before moving to DGV she had thought she would be able to visit him using her mobility scooter, but she feels it is too dangerous to do this because the ‘kerbs are not made for it’ outside the village.

Molly Hughes tripped on some uneven paving just up the road from the entrance to DGV. She has since been told that another DGV resident had a similar experience the week before and broke his shoulder.

The distance between DGV and the local shops and amenities outside is too far for other residents – an issue exacerbated by limited access to public transport:

“We're on an island. We're surrounded by a motorway. You can't go anywhere unless you've got a vehicle... you have to rely on that little bus which comes in for the last time about three o'clock in the afternoon.” (Freda Parker)

“It's difficult to get outside here [DGV] really... I don't go down to Denham [local] shops because I can't walk very far, I couldn't get down there so I don't go down there.” (Nancy Jones)

Green spaces
Some residents saw the proximity and accessibility of the outdoor spaces in the village, such as the woodland, as having a positive impact on their everyday lives:

“I do walk here quite a lot, actually, every day, because we've got convenient wood... less than a few minutes' walk to get in.” (Clive Lane)

“We go for a little walk... I've got a walking stick and we go... really just round here now, more or less... We go through the woods and that. We try when it's nice to have a little walk out nearly every day if we can... just a bit of fresh air and exercise.” (Joan Kelly)

“Here it's so handy, it's so easy, you know, the route's nice to walk around, you've got the woods... and walking which I would never have done [before moving to DGV]... we never get up and walked anywhere.” (Susan King)

Conclusion
Designing outdoor spaces that are useable, accessible and attractive to residents and members of the local community is a complex task. Green space, such as the woodland, features often in the everyday lives of some residents. However, limited parking close to the facilities open to the public has often lead to ‘shared spaces’ and pavements being dominated by parked cars. At an individual level, some residents are satisfied with their gardens, balconies or patios, but others feel that the design does not give sufficient privacy or space. Getting beyond the boundaries of an age-friendly environment can also be a problem for individuals without cars or with limited mobility.

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