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# THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN INTERGENERATIONAL CENTRE IN THE UK: HOW SEVERAL GENERATIONS USED THE CENTRE AND INTERACTED WITH(IN) THE BUILDING

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## **Abstract**

*This article tells the story of the development of the UK's first purpose-built intergenerational centre (the Centre) in London, England. More specifically, this article focuses on what happened once the Centre actually opened and participants were able to make practical use of it. Findings presented in this article are used to examine how different people use the Centre and interact in its communal spaces, and whether interactions differ with age or relationships between users. The article also considers whether the presence of particular people or groups in the Centre influences the nature and levels of interaction among the generations. The article articulates key lessons learned for other local councils and for the wider international community seeking to develop and design purpose-built intergenerational centres.*

## **Keywords**

*intergenerational spaces, intergenerational learning, environment*

## Introduction

Many changes in society, such as increased geographic mobility and improved technological advances, have led to generations frequently becoming segregated, especially young people and older adults (Hatton-Yeo & Ohsako, 2000). Naturally occurring opportunities for exchange and interaction among the generations are less prevalent in contemporary society – young people and older adults are now more likely to spend a significant amount of their time in age-segregated settings (Johnson & Bytheway, 2004). This viewpoint was reiterated in a survey of European citizens who felt there were insufficient opportunities for older and younger people to meet and work together via associations and local community initiatives (*Intergenerational Solidarity*, 2009). Yet, it has been suggested that both younger people and older adults thrive when resources are used to bring the generations together rather than separate them (*Intergenerational Shared Sites*, 2006; Jarrott & Weintraub, 2007). Intergenerational shared sites (IGSS) have therefore been promoted as a means of addressing some of the negative social implications of an increasingly age-segregated society (*Fact Sheet on Intergenerational Shared Sites*, 2005).

IGSSs present unique opportunities for frequent structured and informal activities and have the potential to establish an age-integrated community that can meet the diverse needs of its members (Hayes, 2003). IGSSs have been identified as key developments in local communities with the potential for exploring solutions to conflicts over public space, contributing to regeneration projects, enhancing active citizenship among generations, improving community cohesion, delivering aspects of neighbourhood renewal schemes, and enabling educational institutions to become more involved in their communities (Pain, 2005; Springate et al., 2008).

Whilst acknowledging that there is no agreed single definition of an IGSS, the following definition has been adopted:

Intergenerational shared sites are programs in which children and/or youth and older adults participate in ongoing services and/or programming concurrently at the same site (or on the same campus within close proximity), and where participants interact during regularly scheduled, planned intergenerational activities, as well as through informal encounters. (*Young and Old Serving Together*, 2002, p. 13)

Set against the expansion of intergenerational practice, the development of IGSS in the UK has been limited (Melville, 2013; Vegeris & Campbell-Barr, 2007). It should be noted that there may be other sites in which older adults and young people share facilities, but these facilities do not offer or actively encourage shared activities.

### Policy drivers and policy developments

Like many developed nations, the UK has an ageing population. In 2010, life expectancy in the UK reached its highest level on record for both males and females; the number of centenarians had increased fivefold since 1980. Over the last 25 years, the percentage of the population aged 65 and over increased from 15 per cent in 1985 to 17 per cent in 2010, resulting in an increase of 1.7 million people in this age group. Over the same period, the proportion of the population aged under 16 decreased from 21 to 19 per cent. By 2035, 23 per cent of the UK population is projected to be aged 65 and over compared to 18 per cent aged under 16.<sup>1</sup>

According to *Intergenerational Solidarity* (2009), this demographic evolution will be accompanied by profound social changes in terms of social protection, housing, and employment. Therefore, interest in intergenerational practices and intergenerational learning and what it can achieve has grown amongst policymakers in the UK and Europe since the 1990s (Abrahams et al., 2007; Hatton-Yeo, 2006). At a public and policy level, this interest is expressed in what is called “the generational equity debate.” This has often focused on the negative challenges of ageing, such as the need for increased expenditure on pensions, health care, and social protection systems. Such systems are dependent on the concept of intergenerational solidarity, an integral part of the European economic and social system and, therefore, a crucial factor in this debate (*Intergenerational Solidarity*, 2009).

### The development of an intergenerational Centre

Driven by increasing concerns about the generations becoming more isolated from one another and reinforced by different groups feeling that they were competing with each other for resources, for public space(s), and to have their voices heard, the London Development Agency (LDA), in partnership with the Greater London Authority, suggested that developing an intergenerational centre might be one way of combining elements of both childcare and older people’s strategies and achieving positive outcomes such as reducing ageism and negative stereotyping between the generations (*The London Development Agency*, 2009).

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Office for National Statistics, 2013.

The LDA's proposal was for the development of a capital project: for an intergenerational centre that would be "a pioneering launch pad for many more Centres across the country" (*The London Development Agency*, 2009, p. 72). By providing £1.5 million in capital funding, the LDA aimed to support the establishment of a new centre that would help break down barriers, improve educational attainment, and provide a better sense of community spirit and well-being. Out of 10 expressions of interest received from various London boroughs and following a shortlisting process, Merton was eventually selected as the borough to host the Centre. The eventual total capital investment for the new Centre was approximately £3.5 million – funded by the London Development Agency; the Department for Children, Schools and Families (Sure Start Children Centre's Programme and Play Pathfinder funding streams); and Merton Council.

### **Theoretical considerations**

The distinctive feature of intergenerational work is the combination of two people at different phases of development that will interact with each other, usually in a way involving others, in various situations and contexts, with the expectation of a relationship (VanderVen, 2011, p. 30).

The main rationale used to justify intergenerational programme initiatives has traditionally been derived from human development theory, focussing primarily on the psychosocial and educational benefits for older and younger participants (Kuehne & Kaplan, 2001). Eriksonian theory—mainly Erikson's stages of psychosocial development—has consistently been used as a way to further explore the roles intergenerational relationships can play in individual development and how people may relate to one another *intergenerationally* (Jarrott, 2011; Kuehne, 2003; VanderVen, 2011). Other researchers have made use of contact theory to explore relations between different generations (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998). According to Jarrott and Bruno (2007), applying contact theory to intergenerational practice can increase the opportunity for successful intergenerational interactions by providing insight into the success of the IGSS model.

The literature has clearly demonstrated that one of the critical issues emerging within the intergenerational field is a lack of attention to how the built environment plays a crucial role in influencing intergenerational interaction (Jarrott et al., 2008; Melville, 2013). Over the past four decades, the environmental context of ageing has come to play an important role in gerontological theory, research, and practice. Person-environment theories—and what has become known as environmental gerontology—take into

account the environmental processes that are central to individual interaction, with physical and social environments often having interdependent effects (Salari, 2002). As such, more recent research has focused on the use of different public spaces in urban areas that are shared by many generations (Holland et al., 2007; Kaplan et al., 2007).

If we seek to understand the meaning and significance behind intergenerational relationships as they develop in the context of this purpose-built intergenerational centre, then a theoretical approach is required which explores both the nature of the interaction between the different generations and the environmental factors that may influence such interactions. For the purposes of this article, I have built upon the fundamental principles of traditional contact theory by combining it with elements of environmental gerontology.

### **Methodology**

A review of the literature (Melville, 2013) highlighted several methodological challenges in intergenerational programme research and evaluation, including a limited understanding of the contexts against which intergenerational programmes in general, and intergenerational shared sites (IGSSs) in particular, are set. Despite the fact that IGSSs are meant to serve all generations, most research conducted in the field conceals the process of bringing the generations together, neglecting what actually transpired during intergenerational encounters (Jarrott et al., 2008). Without information about the level and nature of interaction among participants, it is difficult to determine the reasons why intergenerational contact has considerable or no effects (Jarrott, 2010). Therefore, this article argues that understanding the processes involved in interactions between the generations is central to understanding its outcomes.

#### *Qualitative Case Study*

According to Ritchie and Lewis (2003), case studies are used where no single perspective can provide a full account or explanation of the research issue and the primary defining feature of a case study is a “multiplicity of perspectives which are rooted in a specific context.” This study aims to capture the experiences of all participant groups simultaneously by observing the level of interaction between the generations within an intergenerational setting. The study asks “What activities are going on within the Centre?” and also “Does the Centre promote communication and foster interaction between the generations?”

Using an ethnographic approach helped provide an in-depth, holistic understanding of the Centre's culture or ethos through observations of the natural environment. Given that one key aim of this study was to explore the impact that the physical and social environment of the Centre had on participants' interactions and engagement with one another, observation was a logical method to adopt as part of the overall design. Rather than relying on people's retrospective accounts and on their ability to verbalize and reconstruct a version of interactions or settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), observation was chosen as one method of data collection, not only to count the types of interaction, but to consider how people use the space and interact with one another in this specific space.

#### *The main observation period*

The Centre's monthly calendar of events—a written schedule posted monthly in the Centre that details all of the activities taking place—was used to decide when to observe potential interactions between Centre users. At this point, the Centre had been officially open for one month (and unofficially, for approximately four months). It was decided to engage in observation on two consecutive days per week, using a rotating schedule over a 16-week period. For example, Monday and Tuesday one week followed by Tuesday and Wednesday the next week, Wednesday and Thursday the next, and so on. Whenever possible, priority was given to scheduling observations during the middle of the week because the majority of intergenerational activities and services were scheduled on those days.

A minimum of four hours was spent in the Centre on any given day, with observation times selected before, after, and during intergenerational activities and/or services. Observation was scheduled for one hour before and after each activity or service, with observation of the actual event dependent on the length of the activity (minimum of 1 hour, maximum of 2 hours).

Decisions about what to observe were based on the activities listed in the Centre's monthly calendar of events, as well as on supplementary leaflets and posters displayed in the Centre and online. Determining what constituted a potential intergenerational activity was based on the brief descriptions provided in these various documents and on discussions with Centre staff. I observed only activities and services that had the potential for intergenerational interaction. For example, if an activity was restricted to a specific age or target group (i.e. when the activity was listed "for children only," or the service was a breast-feeding clinic), or if the description stated that participants must have a child in order to attend (i.e. Family & Friends Play Session or the Child Health Clinic which noted that all attendees must have a child under the age of 5), then these activities and services were excluded from my observations.

Essentially, all generations needed to be able to have access to the activity or service in order for it to be included. Overall, I was physically present in the Centre on a weekly basis over a five-month period. Using the observation tool, I undertook a total of 130 hours of observations.

This article uses a mixed-method case study design to explore how the Centre sought to involve and engage older and younger adults in the community it serves. Findings presented below set out to examine how different people use the Centre and interact in its communal spaces, and whether interactions differ with age or according to the relationship between users (see appendix 1 – Observation Schedule for a full description of factors noted during observation).

### Findings

#### *Users of the Centre*

How people use a space and engage with one another in that space can be influenced by many factors, one of which is age. One of the primary aims of the Centre was to provide a range of services under one roof for all ages. Overall, data from the structured observations shows that more adults used the space than children and young people (see Table 1).

Table 1  
*Centre users' attendance by age<sup>2</sup>*

Adults		Children and young people		
Adults 19–59	Older adults 60+	Children 0–5	Older children 6–12	Young people 13–18
601	162	260	104	75

As Table 1 indicates, there were considerably more adults (aged approximately 19 to 59) than older adults (aged 60+) and more infants and younger children (0 to 5 years) than older children and young people using the Centre. Consequently, older adults, older children (aged approximately 6 to 12), and young people (aged approximately 13 to 18) were the least visible age groups during observation periods. Young people were rarely observed using the Centre, unless it was for a specific school activity such as a play, during or directly after school hours.

<sup>2</sup> The approximate age of Centre users observed is based solely on the researcher's observations of age.



An equally striking finding, evident in Table 1, was that older adults were also largely absent from the Centre. This is not to say that there were no older adults at all, but data from the structured observations clearly demonstrate that in comparison to other age groups, older adults were underrepresented. When older adults were present, they tended to be absent from areas used mainly by younger children and were more like to participate in specific adult activities such as dance or fitness classes. In addition, the majority of Centre users were female. Male Centre users were rarely observed coming into the Centre individually; the overwhelming majority of male Centre users were accompanying their partner and/or child.

An analysis of the relationship(s) between Centre users was generated from observation notes taken while in the Centre and data collected from the observation schedule. As Table 2 shows, the most prominent relationship between Centre users was *familial*—consisting of parent(s)/child, grandparent/grandchild, and adult couple dyads.

Table 2

*Centre users' relationships to others visiting the Centre*

Familial			Non-familial		
414			243		
Parent(s)/ Child	Couples	Grandparent/ Grandchild	Acquaintance/ Friend	Outside group	Alone
375	18	14	36	19	188

Of the Centre users who were categorised as non-familial, the overwhelming majority were visiting the Centre alone. This was followed by a smaller group of users who came to the Centre with friends or acquaintances or as a part of a larger group of people who were using the Centre privately. Furthermore, observation confirms the striking presence of staff, whose movements were consistently noted. During observations, Centre staff were consistently seen walking around the building, actively setting up and/or cleaning up from previous activities; this created a sense that they were among the main users of the Centre. At times, it seemed as though Centre staff took over the space entirely and were the only people present.

#### *Uses of the Centre*

The main aim of the intergenerational centre is to “provide a range of shared services and facilities under one roof for older people, children and young people across the borough” (Llewellyn-Thomas & Chung, 2010). Observations took place to investigate why people were coming to the Centre and how they

were using communal spaces within the Centre. Generally, observation data show that the majority of people use the Centre to participate in an activity, access a service, and use the adventure playground (see Tables 3 and 4).

Table 3  
*Centre users' reasons for using the Centre*

Activities	Services	Adventure playground	Outside group using the space	Unknown	First visit to the Centre
770	280	40	31	23	8

As Table 3 indicates, the overwhelming majority of users were observed either participating in an activity or receiving a service at the Centre. More specifically, Centre users were almost three times more likely to attend an activity than access a service. A number of secondary uses were also observed: the Centre was often used as a day-care or play space for a number of younger children who were visiting the Centre with their parents; as a space for meetings or gatherings, particularly from local groups in the community; and as a space for staff. During observations, it became apparent that the central spaces within the Centre were repeatedly used by infants and young children to play, often unsupervised by parents.

Table 4  
*Types of activities and services centre users attended*

Services	Age segregated	Potentially intergenerational
Scheduled	216	0
Drop-In	31	33

  

Activities	Age segregated	Potentially intergenerational
Scheduled	0	128
Drop-In	136	506

In terms of specific activities and services, as Table 4 shows, overall Centre users were far more likely to attend activities and services that were drop-in, rather than scheduled. When the two main uses of the Centre—to attend a drop-in or scheduled activity or service—are divided into separate categories, there is an obvious differentiation. Table 4 shows that people visiting the Centre in order to receive a service were more likely to be accessing a scheduled

service, rather than a drop-in one. Conversely, Centre users participating in an activity were more likely to be attending a drop-in activity, rather than a scheduled one.

#### *Levels and types of interaction*

Noting primary behaviour only, initial observations of the level and types of interaction were grouped into categories of *solitary*: engaging in an activity without acknowledgement of others; or *interactive* behaviour: interaction with, or acknowledgement of, another individual. Solitary behaviour was classified as either *no interaction with another person* or as a *solitary act* such as watching others. Interactive behaviours were broken down into categories that described who the Centre users were choosing to interact with: people from their own age group, other age groups, and staff.

Table 5  
*Nature of interaction between centre users*

Solitary Behaviour		Interactive Behaviour				
Solitary/No interaction	Watching others	Own age group	Staff	Family	Other age group	Researcher
94	11	403 <sup>3</sup>	204 <sup>4</sup>	110	34	24

The results show that the majority of behaviours observed in the Centre were interactive. However, most interactions occurred among people from the same age group. As Table 5 highlights, interactions with other age groups were mainly with staff in the Centre; with me in the role of a researcher, there were a limited number of specific intergenerational interactions. Intergenerational interactions ranged from unstructured encounters between people from other age groups to more planned and regular meetings. The majority of interactions observed were between individuals of a similar age, from similar age groups who either came into the Centre together or interacted once they met in the Centre immediately before or after an activity or service within the Centre.

<sup>3</sup> 305 of these interactions occurred when Centre users entered together; 98 interactions occurred when Centre users were not already together in the Centre.

<sup>4</sup> The majority of interactions between Centre users and staff were initiated by staff.

*Age and interaction*

The age range of Centre users who participated in Centre activities and services varied greatly, from a good mix of ages to a restriction to only one age group. The observation of an intergenerational activity delivered by a local theatre group demonstrated a good age range of participants: from young children and their families to older couples aged 60 and over. Nevertheless, a limited age range was observed in a number of other activities and services, as reflected in my field notes for a dance class. Similarly, a lack of young people using the Centre was also noted during a number of activities. Field notes taken after a day of observation of activities in the Centre highlight the fact that a specific age group (13 to 18 year olds) is missing from the majority of activities and services delivered by the Centre.

*Stakeholder perceptions*

Interviews with key stakeholders who contributed to the establishment of the Centre were crucial to this study. The aim of these interviews was to shed light on the processes and decision-making behind the Centre’s establishment. The quotes presented below highlight stakeholder expectations and their proposed strategies for how the Centre would promote intergenerational work and involve both older and younger people in the area it serves.

Table 6

Stakeholder perceptions	Stakeholder quotes
Previous experience in delivering inter-generational projects	<p><i>“It is a new concept to me. It’s interesting, but essentially... I think it was new to everybody.”</i></p> <p><i>“I’ve dipped in and out of things that have an intergenerational focus to it but nothing that is, ah, an environment that’s purposeful for it.”</i></p>
Challenges to thinking adequately about how to deliver intergenerational work in the Centre	<p><i>“I suspect there wasn’t that much thought about: are we here building buildings or are we really embedding a way of working that is sustainable?”</i></p> <p><i>“... it would be nice to have more time to think about the overall concept before you start rushing into the capital and build ... you got quite driven by capital, time scale ... the advice I’ve given to other places is, well, spend more time.”</i></p>
Levels of user involvement	<p><i>“... it was too laden with people that are paid to do a job, rather than people from the real community actually having an input ... what you didn’t see there were what I would call real people. You’ve got more of the people that are paid to do a job.”</i></p> <p><i>“... the partnership is just much more developed around children than they are around groups of older people ... therefore, the, the ability for us to bring people to the table is easier, because we’ve got lots of partnerships already.”</i></p>

## Discussion & recommendations

The concept of intergenerational practice is not new; it is historically embedded in the “familial and patriarchal relationships of different cultures” (Hatton-Yeo & Ohsako, 2000, p. 12). Twenty-five years ago, intergenerational practice in the UK was younger people “doing things to/for” older adults with minimal contact between the generations (Bernard, 2006). Today, intergenerational practice is based much more on exchange and reciprocity, with younger people and older adults being brought together to engage in mutually rewarding activities (Bernard, 2006). Accordingly, intergenerational practice is no longer limited to individual participants and how they benefit; it is now equally applicable to intergenerational relationships in the wider community. Intergenerational practice increasingly concerns such outcomes as the development of the capacity of communities, the diversification of volunteering, and the greater involvement of educational institutions in their communities; the development of this Centre has recognised this shift (*For All Ages*, 2011; Springate et al., 2008). As such, the unique development of this Intergenerational Centre must be considered in the context of, and against a background in which, national policy is beginning to recognise the potential benefits of intergenerational practice and learning.

As previously mentioned, naturally occurring opportunities for exchange and interaction between the generations are not as prevalent in contemporary society, with children primarily spending their days in school and/or childcare centres, younger people spending time with their friends, and many older adults in age-isolated facilities such as senior centres or retirement homes/communities (Johnson & Bytheway, 2004). It has been suggested that both younger people and older adults thrive when resources are used to bring the generations together rather than separate them (*Intergenerational Shared Sites*, 2006; Jarrott & Weintraub, 2007). This Centre, one example of an IGSS model, has been promoted as a means of addressing some of the negative social implications of an increasingly age-segregated society (*Under One Roof*, 2005). The Centre has provided a unique opportunity for frequent, structured, and informal activities and has the potential to establish an age-integrated building that can meet the diverse needs of its community members. This article has explored how people use and interact within the Centre, which may differ with age or the relationships among users. Subsequently, the possible consequences of, and explanations for, the patterns of how the Centre was used and by whom will now be considered in relation to the processes involved in the development of the Centre.

From the outset, the primary source of funding available to develop the Centre came from a children’s services budget – the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) – and not from a budget that focused on other

age groups, such as older adults and young people, or that was designated as intergenerational. Likewise, the majority of stakeholders involved in this development were based within children's services within the council, either through the DCSF or Department for Education. Only one stakeholder involved in the development of the Centre, from a list of 30, was listed as a representative for older people. Also missing from the list of stakeholders who were responsible for the development of the Centre were local community representatives and potential Centre users themselves. What is more, a particular focus on delivering better outcomes for children and their families through childcare and employment services located within the Centre was seen as critical to the overall vision of the Centre. All of these factors combined may have contributed to the Centre's focus on children and their families, to the neglect of the other age groups necessary to provide an intergenerational centre for all ages.

How the Centre and its staff communicated what the Centre is, for whom, and how it can be used, had a considerable effect on who used the centre and for what purpose. Signs (or lack thereof) and promotional materials seen throughout the Centre and in the community that communicate to potential users what the Centre is and what activities and services are offered suggested to potential users that it is not a place for all ages to meet. For example, promotional materials focused on what activities and services the Centre offered children and their families. Therefore, activities and services were not commonly promoted as intergenerational.

The current state of intergenerational practice in the Centre and the local community it aims to serve has been influenced by a number of factors, including past funding arrangements, stakeholder experience, and the projected outcomes and limitations that these factors have brought with them. The following are some recommendations for the next steps in developing intergenerational practice in the Centre further.

Research and explain what the Centre currently is, and will be, doing by completing a mapping exercise with stakeholders still involved in the Centre and the local community to identify the needs of current and potential users of the Centre in the area it aims to serve; develop a clear communication and promotion plan to endorse the Centre more thoroughly and engage new/existing partners more closely with the work the Centre is undertaking.

Encourage the wider engagement of the local community, particularly older adults, in the Centre by building new or reinforcing current partnerships with organizations focused on the needs and voices of older adults.

Encourage staff training and development by working with Centre staff to ensure that the aims and objectives of the Centre to be an intergenerational space for all generations to use are clear and agreed upon; provide initial staff training as well as on-going supplementary training that involves an

introduction to the field of intergenerational practice; and create additional time and space for Centre staff to think more creatively and provide more innovative ideas for working intergenerationally.

While my research has suggested that a purpose-built intergenerational centre may be one model that could help to foster interaction between the generations, in the current economic climate there is unlikely to be sufficient funding for constructing new purpose-built or co-located intergenerational sites. From the limited evidence available, I would question whether replicating such a model is necessary given the opportunities to utilize existing spaces (e.g. public libraries, local community centres, and churches) that already promote opportunities for mutual exchanges among the generations. Such a strategy would be more efficient in terms of time, personnel, and use of (limited) existing resources. This model or concept could also be considered as not just a physically constructed site, but our thinking could extend to outside spaces such as parks, town centres, and playgrounds.

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**Appendix 1 – Observation Schedule**

Date:	Time:	Where (observer located in Centre):	What (activity/service):
<b>WHO</b> Age Gender Ethnicity Disability Relationship(s) between users			
<b>WHY</b> Reason for visiting the Centre  <b>HOW</b> How is space used Patterns/directions of movement How furniture is used (map points of interest)			
<b>BEHAVIOUR</b> Individual behaviour  Interactions with: - staff - own age group - other age group(s)  <i>Verbal/Nonverbal behaviour</i>  Intergenerational?  Positive/Negative Affect			

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