

ACCESSIBILITY IN CITIES, A CHALLENGE OF THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

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Accessibility and age-friendliness in urban environments is one of the major problems facing our cities today. But the truth is that this problem will become bigger and bigger in the future if it is not properly addressed taking into account the demographic situation that lies ahead: [in 2031, one in four people in Spain will be over 65](#).

For many older people (and people with reduced mobility), going out in the street can become a risky sport, as there are many urban elements that can cause dangerous situations: poorly maintained pavements, inconspicuous bollards, neglected tree surrounds, steep kerbs, narrow pavements, stretches of stairs with no accessible alternatives available, and so on and so forth.

All these obstacles contribute to the fact that older people see going out in the street as a situation of constant danger and stress. In fact, [the fact that the city is not adapted to older people not only poses a risk to them, but also denies them the possibility of using the street as they would like to, condemning them to stay at home](#).

Faced with this expulsion from space, older people find themselves distanced from their familiar surroundings and, consequently, from their daily social interactions, facing situations of unwanted loneliness. According to numerous scientific [studies](#), **unwanted loneliness** is a risk factor for both physical and mental health, increasing the risk of suffering from cardiovascular diseases and mental disorders, among others.



Figure 1. Appearance of the Padre Tomás de Burgui Square after the participatory process.

Source: Burgui Town Council

Beyond the obvious effects on health, **the lack of accessibility in the city leads to segregation in public space, limiting its use to a specific sector of the population and thus violating the right to the city**. It is essential to provide older people with safe and adequate spaces (both public and private) that favour their quality of life and allow them to carry out their daily activities as comfortably as possible.

Several municipalities are committed to becoming increasingly accessible and friendly environments for the elderly, such as Burgui (Navarre), which in 2019 carried out a participatory urban process with its neighbours to rethink and redesign the main square from the perspective of active ageing, within the framework of the [Burgui Amable](#) project.



Figure 2. Presentation of the FRËSKA prototype in Valencia
Source: IKEA

Last year, IKEA, Barcelona Design Week, Madrid Design Festival and World Design Capital Valencia 2022 worked on [Next Gen: Seniors. Redesigning the city of the future for the longest-lived society in history](#), a collaborative research and reflection project that focused on the ageing of society and its impact on the future of cities.

As a result of this project, [FRËSKA](#) was born, a prototype of a folding chair service for public use or, as it was defined in its presentation, *a Spanish-style "chair-sharing" service* inspired by the tradition of the Spanish elderly to go out in the street with a chair to chat with their neighbours on summer evenings.



Figure 3. "Charlas al fresco" in Algar (Cádiz)
Source: RTVE

In addition to being a symbol of the culture of Spain, the *"charlas a la fresca"* represent very well the simplicity of the right to the city for all ages, but especially for the elderly: public space as a space for safe social relations, as a shared space and as a place to stay rather than a transit space. Such is the importance of this activity that [Algar](#), a town in Cádiz, wanted to protect this tradition by making it an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

In addition, the trend of making mobile urban furniture available to the public has spread very successfully in recent years, such as [the mythical green steel chairs in the gardens of Paris](#) (which originated in the 1920s), or the hammocks in the [Gran Clariana in the Glòries park](#) in Barcelona.

These are small initiatives that have the power to make cities more accessible and friendly environments.

In short, it is essential to think and design urban environments that are adapted to the elderly, so as

to favour their quality of life and give them the opportunity to remain as long as possible in safe and trustworthy environments, thus avoiding the need to resort to residential homes due to the lack of adaptation of their environment to their needs. Similarly, the upkeep and maintenance of these environments by public institutions is crucial to ensure their quality and safety in the future.

Furthermore, **adapting cities to today's older people not only means an improvement in their quality of life, but also lays the foundation for a better quality of life for the older people of the future.** As society ages, cities need to adjust to this reality in order to continue to guarantee the right to the city at all stages of life.



Figure 4. Hammocks and mobile chairs in the Gran Clariana de Glòries (Barcelona)
Source: Barcelona City Council

Main picture: Beth Macdonald in Unsplash

